

Jungles and Traitors

OR

The Wild Animal Trappers of India

BY

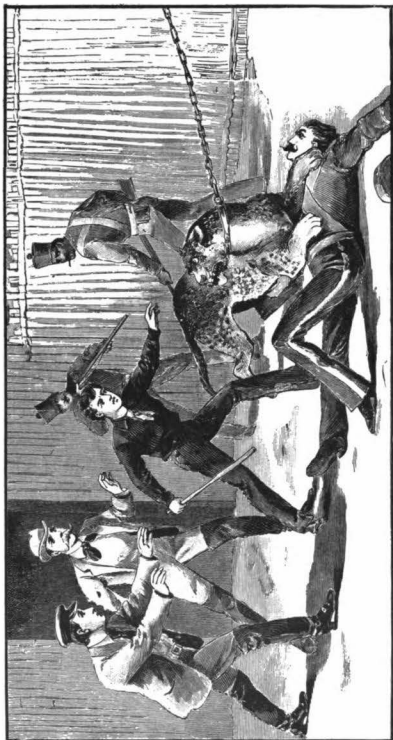
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"The Rajah's Fortress," "The Cryptogram," "Butcher of Cawnpore,"
"In Barracks and Wigwam," etc.



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"A leopard leaped upon the officer." See page 13.

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JUNGLES AND TRAITORS.

CHAPTER I.

DAN STAPLEFORD'S PENALTY.

"Dan ought to come soon."

It was a February night in the far East.

The monsoon was blowing over the province of Bengal, and its parched and clammy influence made life oppressive to the dwellers in the great city of Calcutta.

Our story opens in the native quarter—the Black town of earlier times. On a narrow, foul, and unpaved street stood a low hovel of bamboo and mud, in no wise different from hundreds of others in the neighborhood.

The occupant of the hovel was a white lad of seventeen—tall and robust for his age. He sat at a table, on which a rude lamp burned dimly. An open book lay nearby.

For hours the lad had been keeping vigil. There was a look of strained expectancy on his tanned and handsome face. His brown hair was disheveled; his hazel eyes were struggling against drowsiness.

The furniture of the room was meager—a table, several chairs, a small oriental stove, and a shelf of dishes. On the floor was coarse and dirty matting.

Finally, the lad went to the door, and glanced up and

down the dismal street. No one was visible, save a native policeman. He closed the door, and stood for a moment in hesitation.

"I may as well go to bed," he muttered. "It is the same old story. Dan has broken another promise. It was before sunset when he took the rifle away to sell. Instead of bringing the money home, he has spent it on liquor. No doubt he is lying in some foul drinking-hole now. There is not a rupee in the house. What will become of us?"

Taking the lamp, he opened a door leading to a rear apartment. It contained an English bed, a small desk, and a shelf, on which were a few books.

As the lad crossed the threshold he heard a confused uproar at a distance. His face turned pale. He roughly placed the lamp on the desk, and ran to the street door.

Here the tumult was very distinct. Hoarse, angry cries, and the patter of feet swelled louder and louder on the night air. Dirty and excited Hindoos swarmed out of the neighboring doors—men, women, and children.

Now, at the end of the street, appeared a glare of torches. The mob surged on with fierce cries.

The object of their fury was a white man, whose long legs kept him well in advance of his pursuers. He wore a faded blue coat, and dingy white trousers. He was bareheaded, and his iron-gray hair and beard streamed to the wind. His once handsome face was bloated and haggard with dissipation.

He plunged madly on mid a shower of stones and spears. Blood streamed from half a dozen wounds.

With his fist he leveled a couple of daring natives who tried to intercept him from the front.

As the fugitive came opposite where the lad stood, he swerved to one side, and staggered into the hovel. He dashed the door shut and dropped a bar across it.

"Dan! Is it really you?" cried the youth, in a tone of anguish. "What is the matter? You are wounded and bleeding."

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

His face was distorted with terror as he dragged the lad into the rear room, and closed the frail door. In a trice the bed and desk were piled against it. Out in the street the mob were swarming before the hovel. Shouts of "Din! Din!" (the Mohammedan battle-cry for the faith) rose shrill and loud.

"A weapon, lad!" clamored the man. "Surely there is one left."

His bloodshot eyes roved about the room.

Marco shook his head sadly.

"You pawned the last pistol two days ago," he replied, "and the rifle——"

"Ah! the rifle was my undoing, lad," interrupted the other. "I got thirty rupees for it from the gunsmith on Circular Road. Then thirst made me a demon. I drank and drank, until I was mad. Now this is the end of poor old Dan Stapleford. It's a just penalty. I deserve it.

Hark! They are attacking. I won't die until I spit a couple of the dogs."

As the house shook under a rain of furious blows, Stapleford tore one of the iron legs from the bed, and stood on the defensive.

"Don't talk that way, Dan," pleaded Marco, with tears in his eyes. "Surely the mob won't dare to break in. The police and the soldiers will soon arrive."

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

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

"Yes, a thousand times over, according to native laws. Hark, lad, and you shall know. I must spin the tale in a few words. I think I visited every rum shop in Calcutta to-night. I drank until I was stupid, and then started home. Of course, I lost the way, and my ill-luck led me to a Mohammedan mosque——"

He paused a moment as the shouts and poundings rose to a shrill pitch. Marco's face was blanched with terror. He could guess how the story was to end. Already he realized his friend's desperate plight.

"I blundered into a Mohammedan mosque," huskily resumed Stapleford. "When the priests came at me the drink made me a demon. I killed one of them with his own weapon. I knocked an idol over, and smashed it. Then the liquor left my brain, and I realized what I had done. I ran for life, with the mob at my heels. I was sober enough then, and I'm sober now. I'll die sober, lad."

Marco uttered a groan of agony.

"You sha'n't die!" he cried. "There must be a way of escape, Dan. Quick! before it is too late."

His voice was drowned by a rending and splitting of frail bamboo walls. The mob had broken in. A rush of feet and hoots of triumph and rage rose from the front room. Now the assailants were beating at the inner door.

"Crawl under the bed, lad," cried Stapleford. "They won't find you there."

"Never!" declared Marco.

He tore the bookshelf from the wall, and stood by his companion's side.

There was no time for futile words. Crash! crash! crash! Door and wall broke inward together, with a sickening, grinding noise. Down fell desk and bed. The glare of torches streamed into the room.

Over the *débris* leaped the maddened fanatics, brandishing flashing weapons, and yelling the watchword of Mohammed.

Stapleford's iron club split open the head of his foremost foe. He deftly dodged a big stone, and the missile struck Marco on the temple. Without a cry, the brave lad fell back on the floor, white and motionless.

A second native went down before the terrible iron club. Then a keen-edged knife whizzed forward, and sank deeply into Stapleford's breast. He gasped, and threw up his arms. In the twinkling of an eye the mob were upon him with spears and daggers, and thus ended a brave but misspent life.

Marco lay where he had fallen. Though the Mohammedans believed him dead, they would probably have mangled the body in their religious fury. But, luckily, something intervened to save the lad.

Already the affray had turned into a formidable riot. Alarm bells were ringing in the European quarter of the city. From the street came cries of "The police! The soldiers!"

Hearing the tumult, the fanatics left Stapleford's hovel as hastily as they had entered. Outside they found the narrow street crowded with hundreds of Mohammedans, Hindoos, and outcast Eurasians.

Without regard to race or caste, this mixed mob gave eager battle to the native police, who had by this time arrived, and were trying to force a way to the spot. The uproar was furious and incessant.

Finally, three companies of Sepoy troops entered the street, led by English officers. This turned the tide. As the mob sullenly retreated, a fire, kindled either by accident or intent, broke out in one of the native houses. The wind quickly fanned the flames.

When day broke, a few minutes later, the Calcutta fire department was fighting the stubborn conflagration, and the Sepoys and police were chasing the dismembered body of rioters from street to street of the native quarter.

CHAPTER II.

MARCO BEGINS A NEW LIFE.

Marco was only stunned by the blow from the stone. When he came to his senses the gray light of dawn was streaming through the ruined walls of the house.

He sat up, and rubbed his aching head. He shivered with horror to see a brown, half-naked corpse lying across the broken desk. A sorely-wounded Mohammedan was huddled in the doorway, gasping for breath, and groaning in hollow tones.

Then remembrance and the sight of Stapleford came to the lad in a flash. He threw himself upon the disfigured body of the man who had been his only friend in all the wide world. He alternately sobbed bitterly and uttered husky threats of vengeance.

Grief so stupefied Marco that he neither heard the tumult outside nor saw the smoke that was drifting into the room.

A heavy hand on his shoulder roused him. He was in the presence of an English officer and two Sepoys.

Before a word could be spoken, two new arrivals climbed over the *débris* into the room. One was either an Englishman or an American. He was tall and robust, with a bronzed face, and a heavy yellow mustache. The other was short and stout, and his German origin was

plainly revealed in his smooth, round, good-humored face. Both wore high boots and suits of gray flannel.

With an exclamation of sorrow, the taller man bent over Stapleford.

"The report was true, Hofstein," he cried. "Here lies the poor fellow, stone dead."

"A victim of his own folly," interposed the officer. "But you men are intruding. It may be my duty to arrest you. Give an account of yourselves."

"Certainly," replied the tall stranger, with alacrity. "I am Ralph Matlock, and my friend is Conrad Hofstein. We are agents for Richter, of New York, the importer of wild animals."

"Ah! something in his line?" replied the officer, nodding at the dead man.

"Exactly," said Matlock. "Our business with Stapleford was professional. We have known him for years."

"Ach, yes, and a good fellow he was," added Hofstein.

Marco looked at the men in surprise.

"Don't you remember me, lad?" asked Matlock. "I saw you six years ago, when poor Stapleford was in very different circumstances. I have been in other countries since then, and only landed here yesterday."

Marco shook his head, and burst into tears.

"Dan! Dan!" he sobbed. "You're the only one I had! The only one! You were always good to me!"

Hofstein wiped a drop of moisture from his eye, and turned aside to blow his nose.

"Have you no friends in Calcutta?" asked Matlock, "in India?"

"None anywhere," replied Marco. "I'm all alone now."

"Come, come," said the officer, not unkindly. "We must be moving. The quarter is on fire, and the flames are sweeping this way."

He was right. The roar and crackle of the conflagration could be plainly heard. The house was filling with smoke.

Marco looked around him in helpless bewilderment.

"For the present you are in my charge," added the officer. "The authorities will require your evidence. There seems to be nothing here worth saving. Did the murdered man have any papers?"

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

"The pawnshop swallowed the rest," muttered the officer, in an undertone, as he examined the broken and empty desk. He peered into the wrecked front room. Then, spying a door at the rear of the house, he threw it open, and entered a small, narrow courtyard, hemmed in by dingy walls.

"Stop!" cried Marco. "Come back!"

The warning was too late. With a clanking noise and a savage snarl, a great, tawny leopard bounded to the end of his chain, lighted upon the officer's breast, and bore him heavily to the ground.

With rare presence of mind, the man did not stir. He uttered a low appeal for help. The animal's open jaws were within several inches of his face.

The Sepoys sprang forward with cocked rifles. Before they could fire Marco threw himself in front of them.

"Keep back!" he shouted. "I'll get the leopard away."

The Sepoys ordered him aside, but Matlock and Hofstein interfered in the lad's behalf.

Marco was swift to seize his opportunity. He boldly advanced, and struck the leopard on the nose.

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

For an instant the animal hesitated. Then, growling sullenly, he crawled back against the wall.

"Well done!" cried Matlock.

"Ach, splendid!" ejaculated the German. "The lad is a born trainer."

The officer rose quickly to his feet. Save for a couple of scratches, he was unhurt.

"Kill that brute," he directed, and up went the Sepoy rifles.

"Stop! don't shoot Selim," pleaded Marco. "I forgot that I had him left. We are fond of each other. That is why Dan never sold the leopard."

The officer hesitated. The Sepoys waited stolidly.

"The lad's courage and promptness saved your life," whispered Matlock. "Besides, you have no right to shoot the leopard. He represents the dead man's property."

The officer frowned, not relishing such plain speaking. Nevertheless, he countermanded the order.

The officer took charge of Stapleford's few books. Marco had no property but the leopard. He put a leather muzzle on Selim, and unfastened his chain.

Then the little party hurried away from the blood-stained house. The officer led them, by a short cut, to the nearest barracks. As it was, quite a crowd followed, attracted by the curious spectacle of the leopard and his young master. After promising to see the lad again, Matlock and Hofstein departed.

Selim was chained in the barracks' yard. Food and snug quarters were assigned to Marco. In spite of his grief, he slept soundly through the entire day and part of the night.

At nine o'clock the next morning the civil authorities held an inquiry on the cause of Stapleford's death and the subsequent riot. Marco was taken before them. Matlock and Hofstein were among the witnesses present.

The truth was quickly established. As far as could be ascertained, the dead man had no relatives. Indeed, little was known of him.

Matlock testified that Stapleford had begun business in Calcutta twelve years before as a dealer in wild animals. He trapped them himself in the Bengal jungles, with the aid of native hunters. He would never speak about his early life. He was a brave man, and well-educated.

Marco's testimony was listened to with keen interest and attention.

He said, in reply to the questions of the magistrate:

"I have no other name but Marco. I remember very little about my early life, and even that seems like a dream. When I was small, I think I used to be in a circus with my father and sister. I am not sure. Then I remember riding in a railway train, with a man who

had black eyes and a big black mustache. We came to a great city. I think it was called New York. Then I don't remember any more until I was on a ship. The captain's name was Jarrow, and the ship was the *Mary Ann*."

"How long did you stay on this vessel?" asked the magistrate.

"I think it was four years. Captain Jarrow was very cruel. He would never tell me anything about myself, nor let me talk. Whenever the ship was in port anywhere, I was locked up until we put to sea again. At last the *Mary Ann* came to Calcutta. Captain Jarrow said he had a new master for me, and one dark night he took me ashore, and left me with Dan—Dan Stapleford. He always made me call him that."

"When did this happen?" inquired the magistrate.

"Six years ago," answered Marco. "A different life began then. Dan told me not to ask any questions, and neither of us ever talked about our past lives. He was always kind to me. He taught me to shoot, and ride, and trap wild animals. For four years I went with him on every trip to the jungles. Then he—he began to drink hard. He had to sell his cages and animals, and discharge the hunters. We moved into the native quarter, and got poorer and poorer. Only Selim was left, and Dan wouldn't sell him on my account. Then, night before last, Dan went away, and——"

Here Marco's voice broke, and his eyes filled with tears. He was compelled to stop.

The magistrate and his companions began to consider what should be done with the young waif.

The problem was unexpectedly solved. Matlock and Hofstein approached Marco, and drew him aside.

"We are sorry for you, my lad," said the former. "We like your pluck, and we want to make you an offer. You say Stapleford taught you how to trap wild animals?"

"Yes," replied Marco; "all kinds."

"Good! You are just the sort of chap we want. Say the word, and you shall join us. We have ample authority from our employer."

"Ach, yes; we mean well," added Hofstein. "You shall go with us to the jungles. Then, some day, we will sail to the United States. There it may be that you find your parents—that you uplift this mystery."

"Hofstein is right," said Matlock. "You shall keep Selim, too. We will take good care of the beast."

Marco's face brightened.

"How can I thank you?" he cried, impulsively. "It would make Dan glad to know this. I accept your offer. I will work hard and faithfully for you."

He ratified the bargain by warmly shaking hands with Matlock and Hofstein. The good-hearted fellows were no less pleased than the lad.

It required but a short time to arrange matters with the magistrate. Then Marco left the court with his new friends.

From the Sepoy barracks, where they stopped to get Selim, they went to the suburb of Kidderpore. Here, on the bank of the Hooghly River, was a large warehouse

belonging to the animal dealer. In this wild beasts were stored preparatory to shipping them. Matlock and Hofstein, with a crops of native employees, had quarters in an adjoining building.

That evening poor Stapleford was buried. Then, for the first time, Marco fully realized that a new life had opened before him.

CHAPTER III.

SEÑOR GARCIA APPEARS.

A few days later the wild beast hunters left Calcutta for a neighborhood which Marco recommended. He had frequently been there with Stapleford.

Most of the native employees remained at the warehouse, in charge of a few wild animals which had already been purchased.

The party, at the time of starting, comprised Matlock, Hofstein, Marco, and two noted Hindoo "shikarees," or hunters. The names of the latter were Baba Khan and Gooloo Singh. They were powerful, bearded men, and had been in Carl Richter's employ for many years.

The journey was a short one—by the Peninsular Railway to Madhupur, and thence to Hazaribag, the terminus of a branch line.

The party were now in the district of Chota Nagpur, presidency of Bengal. All around were mountains and dense jungles, the latter frequented by the famed Bengal tigers.

Matlock's special commission was to obtain a full-grown tiger. He hired a dozen native assistants in Hazaribag, and set the village carpenters to work building strong cages. When these were ready, and supplied with spans of oxen, he moved ten miles south, and established a camp in the jungle.

Here began the serious work. Under Matlock's supervision, the natives dug pitfalls, and covered them with brush and leaves. They constructed huge traps, shaped like a mouse trap, and acting on the same principle. These took in a radius of half-a-dozen miles around.

At the end of two weeks half of the cages were full. The pitfalls had yielded a young elephant and two buffaloes, while a panther and a leopard were taken in the traps.

As yet, no tiger had been seen, greatly to Matlock's disappointment. But he was all the more resolved to accomplish his purpose. He kept his hunters scouring the country in all directions.

In the evenings, when work was over, all gathered about the camp-fires. Marco had many a long chat with his friends, and the feeling of good-comradeship between them grew steadily.

The conversation often turned on the lad's early life. But he could remember no more than he had related before the magistrate, and even that little was fading from his mind.

About this time there happened an incident which Marco had good cause never to forget.

One day a snake hunt was organized.

Not far from camp was an open spot in the jungle, covered with rocks and tall, parched grass.

Matlock stationed his party around this. The natives were provided with long poles, to which were attached hoops and bags. The implements were exactly like huge butterfly nets.

The grass was set on fire, and immediately a swarm of ugly reptiles came hissing out.

There was great excitement and scurrying to and fro. The snakes were pursued, and skillfully bagged. Gooloo Singh unluckily dropped his net. As he stooped to recover it a huge cobra rose erect in its coils from a rock cleft.

That the Hindoo was not instantly bitten was little short of miraculous. But the reptile, possessed by some strange freak, did not strike. Its reared head was less than a foot from the man's face. Its beady eyes sparkled, its tongue darted to and fro, and its spotted hood swelled out with anger.

Gooloo Singh showed rare presence of mind. He remained in his crouching attitude, motionless as a statue. Not a muscle quivered, though his face turned an ashen color. He knew that the slightest move would mean death. His mental suffering must have been terrible.

Thus man and reptile stood for half a minute. Then Marco, who was ten feet to one side, saw the Hindoo's peril. He dared not step closer. There was only one chance.

The lad had his net in one hand. With the other he drew a revolver from his belt. He cocked the weapon, and took careful aim.

Crack! The cobra fell in a mass of writhing coils, shot clean through the head.

Gooloo Singh's muscles relaxed, and he toppled over backward. The next instant he arose, as cool and impassive as ever.

"You save my life, Sahib Marco," he said. "The cobra would have bitten me. Gooloo will not forget. He will be always your friend and slave."

"I'm much obliged for your friendship," replied Marco, "but what I did was nothing to make a fuss about. It was an easy shot."

The Hindoo shrugged his shoulders, and picked up his net. The hunt went on as though nothing had happened. But the others had seen the affair, and, when evening came, the lad's modesty was put to a severe test.

Twenty snakes were captured that day. They were at once packed in sacks of matting, and sent down to Calcutta.

During the following week Gooloo Singh stuck to Marco like a faithful hound. He was constantly on the alert to guard him against harm. He rarely let him out of his sight.

The tigers still eluded capture, and Matlock finally tired of his ill-luck. So, one morning, he started south on an expedition to a still wilder region. He took Gooloo Singh and half-a-dozen natives with him.

Marco stayed at camp to tend Hofstein, who was down with a fever.

On the forenoon of the day following Matlock's departure, a native arrived with stirring news. He came from a village ten miles to the westward.

He declared that a man-eating tiger was ravaging the neighborhood. The brute had been seen, and was a magnificent fellow, full-grown, and in the prime of life. He had killed several people, and many cattle and goats.

"I knew you were in camp here, sahibs," the man concluded, "and that you wished to take a tiger alive. So I came in haste."

Marco suggested sending a messenger after Matlock. But Hofstein was of a different mind.

"There is no time to waste," he said. "The tiger may go elsewhere. You must capture him, lad. You know what to do almost as well as Matlock. You must start at once with this fellow. Ach; it is hard luck, this fever. But I am better now. You need not fear to leave me."

At first Marco hesitated. Then, with secret exultation, he accepted the task. He chose Baba Khan and three natives to accompany him.

They started as quickly as possible, taking along a cage filled with tools and material, and drawn by four bullocks.

The guide, whose name was Ram, conducted them by a very rugged and roundabout jungle road.

The village was reached at sunset. It was in a state of terror. The people were afraid to venture outside their huts. Twenty-four hours before the tiger had carried off and devoured a poor grass-cutter.

The night was spent in the village. At daybreak Marco hired extra natives to carry tools and lumber. Ram took the party to the spot where the grass-cutter had been seized—a small jungle glade, half a mile from the village. Dried blood was visible on the grass.

Nearby was a water-course. There was little doubt that the man-eater was sleeping in the vicinity.

Under Marco's directions, a stout trap was erected as

noiselessly as possible. The lad and Baba Khan kept constant vigil with loaded rifles.

At sunset the trap was finished. Inside the open door was fastened a good-sized goat, which was sure to bleat loudly through the night.

Then Marco and his companions returned to the village.

At the first streak of dawn they were up and on their way through the jungle.

As they came in sight of the trap wild cheering burst forth.

"We have him! we have him!" cried Ram. "At last the evil man-eater is caught."

"It must be true, sahib," shouted Baba Khan. "The door is down."

Marco trembled for joy. He outdistanced the others, and was first to reach the trap. A deep, angry growl fell on his ears. He peeped through the crevices.

Yes, there was the tiger, securely caged. He was a monstrous fellow, fat as butter, and with superb stripes. A prize indeed!

Then the natives had to look and comment. Their mahogany faces reflected the lad's pleasure.

With an air of vast importance, Marco gave orders.

"Bring the cage at once," he said. "Don't let the villagers follow you, Ram. They will only scare the tiger, and make the transfer difficult. All shall see him when we come that way. Baba Khan, you and I will stay here to watch the trap."

Ram and his followers obediently vanished. Half an

hour after they returned with bullocks and cage. They had managed to persuade the people to remain at home.

The cage was taken from the trucks, and pushed against the door of the trap. It was just then that an unexpected thing happened.

Two men burst noisily from the jungle into the glade. One was a thin, scrawny native. The other was tall and muscular, with an evil, swarthy face, and features that proclaimed him to be a Portuguese. His beard was pointed, and the ends of his mustache were waxed. He wore blue flannels and hunting boots. He carried a rifle, and a leather bag was slung over his shoulder.

A brief glance told the new arrivals what was going on. The face of the Portuguese clouded with vexation. He muttered an oath through his teeth.

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

"Yes," replied the lad, proudly; "we trapped him last night."

"He is my property," angrily declared the Portuguese. "I claim him. This fellow," indicating the native, "brought news of the tiger to my camp last night. I came with him at once. We have been traveling for hours. *Carramba!* Shall I have my trouble for nothing? The man-eater is mine."

"But we had news of him two days ago," exclaimed Marco, indignantly. "We were all of yesterday building the trap. You have no claim on the tiger, Señor Garcia."

The Portuguese started.

"You know me?" he muttered. "Ah, yes; you are the

lad who was with Stapleford in Calcutta. I have seen you there. But Stapleford is dead. Have you taken up the business for yourself?"

There was a covert sneer in the last words.

With an effort, Marco choked down his anger. He calmly told of his changed circumstances, and explained how he came to be in his present situation. All the time he trembled inwardly, for he knew the Portuguese to be a most unscrupulous rascal.

Garcia listened with an evil smile.

"You deserve your good fortune," he said, "but I can offer you better. I still represent the Hamburg house, with headquarters at Madras. I have a temporary camp a few miles to the north. If you join me you shall have a princely salary. It is easily done. We take the tiger and go. What do you say?"

Marco's eyes flashed.

"No!" he declared, firmly. "I am suited where I am. I am no traitor."

The Portuguese laughed harshly, and a devilish look came on his face. He opened the leather bag, and showed it to be full of coins.

"I offer you a bonus of one hundred rupees," he said, "payable on the spot."

"I refuse!" thundered Marco. "Put up your money. I am not to be bought."

Garcia scowled. But he had more than one string to his bow. He held up a double handful of shiny coins. Shrewdly choosing out Baba Khan, he turned to him, and said:

"Twenty-five rupees for you, and five apiece for the others. It is a splendid offer, my good fellows. I want the tiger. All you need do is to drive him to my camp. The cage shall be returned to its owner. Those of you who are of this lad's party can remain with me, if you wish. I will pay you well."

The munificence of the offer dazzled the natives. Baba Khan, treacherous rascal that he was, yielded first. He held out his hands for the promised reward. His eyes glittered at every clink of the coins.

The depth of Marco's nature was never fully stirred until that moment. The perfidy of his followers and the baseness of the Portuguese roused him to an uncontrollable pitch of anger.

He sprang suddenly forward. With one hand he pushed Baba Khan so forcibly to one side that a shower of rupees fled in all directions; with the other he struck Garcia violently in the face!

"You scoundrel!" he cried. "Let my men alone!"

CHAPTER IV.

NIGHT IN THE JUNGLE.

A brief interval of utter silence followed Marco's daring attack.

As Baba Khan slowly arose, the bewildered expression on his face was ludicrous to see. Garcia wiped a few drops of blood from his nose, and swore a frightful oath. Then he lifted his rifle to strike down Marco, who was standing with flashing eyes and heaving bosom.

The lad stepped quickly to one side. He swung his own weapon over his shoulder, ready to meet the threatened attack.

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

That instant he felt his rifle jerked out of his hands. Baba Khan had treacherously crept up behind the lad.

Marco was now defenseless.

The Portuguese came on, his swarthy face hideous and distorted with passion. The desire for revenge made him ferocious. He aimed a blow at the lad.

But, by a clever twist, Marco dodged the descending rifle. He cast one glance at the perfidious natives, and instantly abandoned all hope of aid from that quarter.

There was but one chance left. He turned, and dashed at full speed across the glade.

"Stop him!" roared Garcia. "Stop him! Fifty rupees to the man who captures the boy!"

Marco heard the words, and the greedy cries that followed. They merely spurred him to greater efforts. A rifle-ball whistled overhead; then another, and another. Now he plunged into the friendly shelter of the jungle.

Fortunately, Marco's adventurous life in the past six years had trained him to scientific running. He ran on and on as rapidly as the tangled vegetation would permit. Frequently he twisted to right or left.

At intervals he heard the trampling and shouting of his pursuers, now in one direction, now in another. He was presently satisfied that they had him surrounded. So he did a wise thing. He crawled on his stomach into a clump of dense grass, and found a safe hiding-place between two stones.

Here the young fugitive lay for three or four hours. He heard his enemies scouring the neighborhood. Frequently they came near the spot. Once the Portuguese and Baba Khan passed by the clump of grass.

Marco feared the beating of his heart would betray him.

"I'm as good as dead if I fall into Garcia's clutches," he reflected. "The ruffian would kill me without mercy. His object is to prevent me from getting back to camp, and telling what has happened."

But the sounds of pursuit gradually died away. Marco waited another hour, and then ventured to leave his hiding-place.

His situation was now deplorable. He was in the midst of a dark and tangled jungle, infested by wild

beasts and serpents. He had no food and no weapons, having lost his pistol in his flight.

But the lad's inborn pluck kept him in good heart. Indeed, he was too angry and indignant to think of anything but how to turn the tables on his foes.

"We'll see who gets the tiger in the end," he muttered. "By this time Garcia and his hired traitors have made off with cage and animal. First of all, I must make a beeline for camp. I know what Matlock will do. Garcia and that sneak Baba Khan will feel pretty sore before we get through with them."

But the very first obstacle that clogged the lad's plan was how to get started on the beeline. The gloom of the jungle was like that of twilight. Overhead was an unbroken sheet of matted foliage. A gray glimmer filtered through—that was all.

However, after wandering about for twenty minutes, Marco found a good-sized tree. He climbed above the foliage, and caught a glimpse of the sun. Its position indicated several hours after midday.

The lad knew that there was no time to lose. He had his bearings now, and, climbing down from the tree, he struck off briskly.

For hours he plodded the mazy recesses of the jungle. An occasional glimpse of the sun kept him from going astray.

As darkness came on he realized that it was out of the question to reach the camp that night. The bravest of men would have quailed from the perils that encompassed the lad.

Twilight brought the beasts of the jungle out from their lairs.

The wail of a leopard was answered by a tiger's thunderous roar. A huge serpent rustled by with a hissing noise. Far ahead a troop of elephants went crashing and trumpeting on their way to a jungle pool.

Marco shivered as he stumbled on in the gloom. His only hope was to find a tree tall and stout enough to afford him a safe shelter until morning.

Some dry twigs crackled behind him. He fancied that he heard stealthy footsteps, and ran blindly and madly.

It was an awful race. Stones bruised him, and thorny bushes lacerated his hands and face. Sword-grass cut like knives into his flesh. A dozen times he fell headlong; a dozen times he rose and staggered on.

Suddenly his feet encountered something soft and yielding. He felt himself sinking, and threw up his arms with a shrill cry.

Then down he went—down through empty space. Crash! he landed heavily on his head and shoulders. His brain reeled, and consciousness left him.

Marco returned to sensibility as one who wakes from a troubled sleep. He remembered all, but he could form no idea as to how long a time had elapsed since the accident.

He pulled himself to his feet, and found no bones broken. His back was sore, and his head ached. He was keenly alive to the pangs of hunger and thirst.

The next thing was to discover where he was. His eyes quickly became accustomed to the gloom.

The problem was easily solved. He had stumbled into a native pitfall intended to catch tigers.

All around lay the brush and bamboo covering which he had brought down in his fall.

The pit was ten feet deep, and about twelve square. It contained six upright and jagged stakes. Marco wondered how he had escaped being impaled on one of these.

He made several futile attempts to climb up the smooth, perpendicular sides of his prison. Then he concluded that he was better off where he was.

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

He gathered a double armful of brush, and was about to carry it to the corner of the pit, when he heard a wheezy, shuffling noise.

He dropped his burden, and looked up. A bar of moonlight had just filtered through the jungle, and the silvery halo revealed to him a fearful sight.

On the very brink of the pit stood a monstrous tiger, as immovable as though carved in brass. His eyes, like living coals, stared into the lad's own.

For a full minute neither uttered a sound. Marco's heart was beating like a trip-hammer.

Then the tiger opened his great jaws, and gave forth a roar that seemed to shake the jungle.

Marco dashed in fright to the opposite side of the pit. The tiger instantly circled around. It was plainly ravenous with hunger, and determined to make a meal of the lad.

For ten minutes Marco dodged from side to side of the

pit, the tiger following tenaciously, roaring at every few steps.

Marco wondered how the chase would end. He was fast losing strength and courage. In vain he uttered shout after shout. His voice seemed only to increase the brute's anger.

Five minutes went by. Suddenly the tiger crouched for a spring. His long body quivered.

Marco sped to the far side of the pit. He had just time to turn to the left, when he saw a yellow mass whizz through the air.

Down came the tiger, plump on two of the jagged stakes. It was impaled in the neck and hind quarters.

From a distance, Marco looked on, both fascinated and alarmed by the sight.

For half-a-minute the brute struggled in the throes of an awful death agony. Its roars echoed and re-echoed through the jungle.

Just as the majestic head dropped limply, and the last roar ended in a quaver, a second huge, striped beast appeared on the brink of the pit—evidently the mate of the dead tiger.

Just as evidently the tigress knew what had befallen her lord, just as evidently she was bent on vengeance.

She fixed her eyes on Marco, and roared with grief and rage; then pattered around and around the pit, seeking for a place to descend.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE NOOSE OF A THUG.

Marco now felt that he was lost. He had successfully gotten rid of one tiger, but could he hope to do so with the other?

The female animal was more wary and crafty. She would probably find a way to reach her victim, and at the same time avoid the stakes.

As the moon crept higher a broader light shone on the edges of the pit. The tigress was a large and beautiful animal. Marco could not help admiring her, hard-pressed though he was to keep at the furthest possible distance from her huge head and paws.

He slipped from side to side, always keeping a couple of the stakes between him and his enemy. He tried to pull one of them up, thinking it would make him a good weapon, but it was driven too deeply into the ground.

Meanwhile the rage of the tigress increased. She roared loud and often. A chorus of answers came from the prowling animals of the jungle.

Marco was badly scared, but not sufficiently so to lose his presence of mind. He watched every movement of the tigress. Now and then he made a trumpet of his hands, and shouted as loudly as he could. He had a faint hope that there might be a village within hearing.

All at once the tigress stopped. She squatted on her hind legs, and thrust her head and forepaw over the brink of the pit—just like a great cat.

Her eyes flashed fire at the lad; her double rows of ivories gleamed in the moonlight. Now she crept a little nearer. Her purpose was to drop lightly into the pit.

Marco retreated behind the furthest stakes. Trembling in every limb, he waited the end. An irresistible fascination kept his eyes on the tigress—on the great jaws which he felt would shortly tear him limb from limb.

A few seconds went by. To the doomed lad they seemed so many hours.

Just as the beast quivered for the leap a crackling of brush was heard, and a yellow light flashed over the pit.

What followed seemed but a dream to Marco. He saw the tigress wheel around and vanish. He heard hoarse shouts, blended with a fearful roar. A rifle cracked twice. Another roar, and all was still.

Now the flashing light approached the pit. An arm appeared, holding a blazing torch. Two dusky faces looked down at Marco. They belonged to Baba Khan and the scrawny, evil-eyed servant of the Portuguese.

Marco uttered a glad cry. At such a time the sight of even Garcia himself would have been welcome. What mattered that he was a prisoner. He had just escaped a horrible death.

Baba Khan took off his kummerbund—a long silken sash—and let it down into the pit. Marco quickly noosed it around him, and was drawn safely up.

The first thing that he saw was the dead body of the tigress lying a few yards away. Then he turned to his rescuers, and noted with uneasiness the sinister expression of their faces.

"I came near making a meal for tigers," he said. "You reached here just in time. Are you going back to camp with me, Baba Khan?"

The Hindoo scowled, and glanced at his companion.

"If you do, I will make your peace with Matlock," resumed Marco. "He will forgive all when he hears how you saved my life."

"The sahib must die," replied Baba Khan, with brutal frankness. "The Portuguese sahib has said it. I am his servant now. I hate Sahib Matlock. Once he beat me."

The Hindoo's eyes flashed at the recollection.

Marco felt a sickening thrill of horror. He realized his awful plight. There seemed no escape. Both his captors were armed. As yet, he was too weak to risk a dash into the jungle.

For an instant his brain was busy. He must gain time at all hazards.

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

"Gunpat is a jungle fellow," replied the Hindoo, pointing to the scrawny native. "He has the scent of a jackal and the eyes of a serpent. The Portuguese sahib sent us on your trail. He bade us kill you, and bring back your head as a proof."

"Dead men betray not the living," croaked Gunpat, in an evil voice. "It is written that you must die, sahib."

He glanced eagerly at Baba Khan, as though expecting a signal.

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

"If you murder me your crime will be discovered," he cried, hoarsely. "I appeal to you to save me, Baba Khan. I have never done you an injury. Take me back to my friends, and I swear that you shall receive as many rupees as you demand."

The Hindoo obstinately shook his head, and Marco knew that further pleading would be useless. He drew a long breath, and glanced despairingly at the surrounding jungle. Then he nerved himself for a bold dash.

But Baba Khan divined what was passing in the lad's mind. He suddenly dropped his rifle, and seized Marco from behind, pinning his arms together.

Marco struggled desperately, and made the jungle ring with his shrill cries. But he was like a child in the grasp of the powerful Hindoo. He grew weaker and weaker.

"The rope, Gunpat," cried Baba Khan. "Be quick!"

From the folds of his blouse the native produced a thin lariat of hide, with a running noose at the end.

Marco shrieked with horror. By a peculiar daub of red ocher on Gunpat's breast, he recognized him as a Thug—one of that dreaded class of stranglers who have plied their nefarious vocation in India for centuries.

A hideous smile lighted up Gunpat's evil face. He

stuck his torch in the ground, and approached with the rope.

Marco made a frantic effort to escape. In vain! The slimy noose slipped over his head. He felt it tightening around his throat. He tried to shout, but it ended in a choking gurgle.

Crack! a red flash, and the shrill report of a rifle came from the jungle to the right.

Gunpat dropped the end of the lariat, on which he was pulling. With a gasping cry, he bounded in air, clutching at his naked breast. He fell in a limp heap on the edge of the pit, and plunged over. A sharp stake instantly spitted his body, but he was dead before he felt the pain.

Baba Khan saw the Thug's fate. He glanced in the direction whence the shot had come. Then he let go of Marco, and took to his heels, not even pausing to snatch his rifle.

Crack! crack! two bullets whistled after him. But he ran like a madman, and vanished in the gloom.

Marco stood for a second or two in dazed surprise.

Then a tall, dusky figure in a white turban and waist cloth bounded into the radius of torchlight. It was the faithful Gooloo Singh. He held a smoking rifle in his hand.

He embraced the lad in a frenzy of delight, and tore the noose off his neck.

"Thank God!" cried Marco. "I can scarcely believe that I am alive, Gooloo. What a night I have had! But where are the others?"

"They are encamped in the jungle at no great distance,"

replied the Hindoo. "I will tell you all, sahib. We returned from our hunt at midday, having had no luck. When we heard that you had gone in search of a tiger, Sahib Matlock prepared to follow. We started shortly, and traveled until sundown. I refused to stop. I feared you would encounter danger. I came on alone——"

"You faced the perils of the jungle at night to save me?" interrupted Marco.

"It was nothing, sahib. Something told me to come. When I heard your cries I put out my torch, and crept nearer. I saw the assassins about to murder you. I shot one, and the other fled."

"How can I thank you?" exclaimed Marco. "Your faithfulness saved my life."

"The sahib forgets the cobra," quietly replied Gooloo. "I am always your slave. My life is yours, sahib."

Marco was deeply touched; but he refrained from further expressions of gratitude, seeing that they were distasteful to the Hindoo.

He briefly told the thrilling story of his adventures, and even Gooloo's stolidity gave way to unmeasured indignation. He invoked the wrath of his gods on the Portuguese and the perfidious natives.

After glancing at the tigers and the body of the vile Thug, Marco and his rescuer started for the distant camp. The lad took possession of Baba Khan's rifle.

It was a long and weary tramp. There was little danger to be apprehended, since a blazing torch kept the wild animals off.

Marco could not have traveled without assistance. Gooloo's strong arms supported him all the way.

They reached the camp shortly after midnight, and were welcomed by Matlock and his force of eight natives. Hofstein was better, but he had remained behind in charge of the main camp.

Marco's story roused Matlock to a pitch of fury that was foreign to his usually placid nature. He finally quieted down sufficiently to hold a consultation with his companions, and decide on a plan of action.

Marco's hunger and thirst were satisfied, and then he fell soundly asleep in a snug corner of the tent. It was considered advisable to remain in camp until morning.

At the first flush of dawn the little party were off, bound on an expedition to recover the stolen tiger, and to punish the Portuguese and the treacherous natives.

They traveled rapidly, since it was expected that Baba Khan had long since reached Garcia's camp, and put him on his guard.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIGHT IN THE RAVINE.

Two hours after daybreak the village where Marco and his party had stopped while the tiger trap was being constructed was reached.

Here a search was made for Ram and his treacherous companions. Matlock's blood was up, and he wanted to punish everybody.

But not one of the natives who had assisted Garcia could be found. All had probably taken service with the Portuguese.

Matters now looked serious, for Matlock's party were but eleven in number.

The head man of the village, quite an intelligent fellow, was at first very stiff and uncommunicative.

But a gift of ten rupees had a marvelous effect. He found a guide who knew the way to Garcia's camp, and in less than half an hour he recruited a dozen natives, armed with matchlocks and spears. He declared that the men would fight like tigers if promised a few annas apiece.

This welcome addition raised Matlock's force to twenty-two. Four of his own natives were armed with rifles, as were also himself, Marco and Gooloo Singh.

In very unmilitary fashion, the savage-looking band straggled out of the village.

They found the tiger trap in ruins. From here the heavy wheel marks of the stolen cage were easily followed.

After marching steadily along a tangled jungle path for three hours or more, a vast open space was reached, much trampled, and scarred by fires. It was Garcia's deserted camp.

"This is the devil's own luck!" cried Matlock. "The scoundrel has fled."

Gooloo Singh made a careful examination of the ground.

"They have been on the march but a short time," he reported. "Behold, sahib! Some of the fires are smoking, and the wheel marks are fresh."

"Then on at full speed!" roared Matlock. "A rupee apiece, men, if we overtake this ruffian."

For such a sum the natives would have braved anything. They pressed along the trail on a dogcart, oblivious to heat or fatigue.

Matlock felt more hopeful with every step. The much-trampled road indicated that Garcia's party were burdened with numerous cages. Surely they could not long keep the lead.

Shortly after midday, while Matlock, Gooloo Singh and Marco were marching at the head of the force, an evil-looking native sprang into the road sixty feet beyond them. He uttered a yell, and dashed off at full speed.

Matlock hastily took aim and fired. But the fellow escaped injury, and speedily vanished around a bend.

"He is a spy, sahib," cried Gooloo Singh. "He was put here to watch. The Portuguese is not far distant."

The news passed along the line, and every man girded himself for the fight. They advanced at a rapid gait.

Five minutes later the jungle ended on the verge of a strip of grassy plain, half a mile across.

Beyond lay a range of low, heavily-timbered foothills.

And right in the center of the plain was a thrilling sight—a string of seven stout cages mounted on wheels. The drivers were furiously lashing the bullocks, and urging them to a mad gallop. Alongside and in the rear ran nearly a score of natives.

Garcia's figure was visible in front, mounted on a horse. With him were several white companions, no doubt Portuguese.

"Faster! faster!" cried Matlock. "The rascals are aiming for the hills. We must overtake them in the open."

With hoarse yells the pursuers dashed over the plain. They steadily gained on the enemy.

Gooloo Singh stuck by Marco's side, and urged the lad to be careful.

"I won't stay at the tail end of the fight, if that's what you mean," cried Marco, a little indignantly. "Every rifle is needed, and I know how to use mine."

"Beware of Baba Khan and the Portuguese," urged the Hindoo.

"Those are just the rascals I want to meet," replied the lad. "Never you fear, Gooloo, I'll be careful."

Further conversation was impossible. The hostile bands were now within rifleshot, and a lively fire opened.

Bullets whistled overhead, and puffs of smoke drifted over the grass.

Garcia's band fell to the rear of the cages, which were now moving at a slower pace.

The Portuguese seemed to bear a charmed life. Though a target for countless bullets, he continued to ride to and fro.

Now the enemy made a forward rush, shooting as they came. So fierce was the onset that Matlock's party fell back, losing two men.

A ball carried Marco's cap from his head, and grazed Gooloo Singh's shoulder.

Matlock, whose rage made him fearless, was shot through the fleshy part of the left arm. He quickly bound up the wound, and turned, with angry threats, to his followers.

The panic was soon allayed. The natives came to a standstill, and reloaded their weapons.

But by this time the enemy were retreating as swiftly as they had come. The temporary cessation of hostilities gave them the chance they wanted. They swarmed around the cages and urged the bullocks at full speed toward the near-lying hills.

"Two rupees if we overtake them," thundered Matlock. "Two rupees, men! Let me see how you can fight."

With wild cheering, the motley horde followed their three leaders, not stopping to pick up the dead. Slowly, but surely, they gained on the foe. The rifles began to crack again.

On went the wheeled cages, careening from side to side of the rugged path. The hills were now very near.

Suddenly, the hindmost cage hit some obstruction, and went over with a crash. It burst apart, and out leaped a huge panther.

The beast seized an unlucky native by the throat, bit the life out of him, and then vanished in the tall grass.

This accident caused delay and confusion. While the bullocks were being cut loose from the overturned cage, Matlock's party gained considerably on the foe.

"Now we have them," he cried. "A bold rush will scatter the rascals like sheep. Aim low, men, and don't waste your powder."

But just then Garcia was seen to give hurried instructions to his followers. A line of natives, a dozen strong, spread out to right and left.

The object of this move was quickly apparent. Here and there curls of thick, yellowish smoke. An instant later a sheet of crackling, raging flames was rolling toward Matlock's band.

The enemy were no longer visible, but from behind the fire and smoke rang savage cries of triumph.

A soft breeze was blowing from the hills. It fanned the flames onward, and to right and left. The red line advanced, consuming the dry, parched grass with amazing rapidity. For a moment there seemed no escape. The natives huddled together in helpless panic. To advance was out of the question. They would speedily be overtaken by the flames if they tried to reach the jungle.

Marco's stout heart quailed at such awful peril. On Matlock's face was an expression of grim despair.

Then, with a ringing shout and a gesture, he drew his companions around him. He pointed to the left, where the line of fire could be seen to terminate in a yellow veil of smoke.

"It's our only chance," he thundered. "We must circle around the flames. Follow me, and don't drop your weapons. We will have these ruffians yet."

His voice and manner inspired confidence. Every man was at his heels as he dashed through the tall grass. Gooloo Singh clutched Marco's arm, and aided him to run.

It was a frightful race, for the issue was uncertain. Clouds of smoke hovered over the imperiled little band. They breathed heated air and sparks.

But they plunged on hopefully, guided by Matlock's tall figure. Just when an agonizing death seemed most sure, they staggered out from the smoky curtain and waded knee-deep across a pool of water.

On the farther side they paused, and watched the flames race by.

Then every eye turned to the plain. It was empty. The last cage was just vanishing in a narrow defile between two of the foothills.

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

"Not so, lad," declared Matlock. "We have force enough to do it. But we must act at once, and take the

dogs by surprise. They will hardly be expecting an attack now. What think you, Gooloo Singh?"

"It is good, sahib," replied the Hindoo. "Surely we will have no better chance. There is much danger, but if all can be relied upon——"

"I will see to that," interrupted Matlock.

Turning to the natives, he added:

"We are going to storm yonder mountain pass, my brave fellows. I rely on you to fight well, and earn your rupees. If you show a bold front, the enemy will run."

He was answered by approving shouts. The grim, determined faces of the men showed that they could be relied upon.

There was a hasty loading of weapons, and looking to small arms. Then a score of dusky figures trotted forward over the charred and smoking plain.

They struck the base of the hill a few yards this side of the pass. A moment later they were swarming up the narrow, rugged defile, between walls of rock and tangled scrub.

The path twisted to right and left, and was visible for but a short distance, owing to jutting angles of rock and timber. It was barely wide enough to have admitted the cages.

Amid dead, ominous silence, the attacking party advanced.

Suddenly, from the turn above, a heavy rifle fire and a shower of spears was poured down the ravine.

One man fell, but before the others could lose heart at the sight, Matlock's order to charge rang shrill and clear.

Straight up the road surged the plucky band, shooting and yelling as they went. Swarming around the curve, they came face to face with the enemy. Neither Garcia nor Baba Kahn were visible.

A hand-to-hand fight ensued. Cries of rage and agony blended with the thud of clubbed rifles, the swish of cutlasses, and the firing of revolvers.

Marco was carried away by excitement. He struck right and left at the savage faces. Gooloo Singh kept a watchful eye upon him.

Finally the foe wavered and broke. They fled up the road, leaving half-a-dozen dead behind.

Matlock's plucky band followed, maddened with triumph and the lust of blood. Their savage cries re-echoed through the hills.

Now a sharp curve brought the cages into view. They were drawn up by the base of a steep cliff. On the opposite side, the road ended on the verge of a precipice. Sixty feet below a mountain torrent roared and foamed.

In this perilous spot occurred the most desperate fighting. The fleeing foes turned at bay. They were instantly reinforced by the remnant of the band, among whom were Baba Khan, Garcia and two other Portuguese.

The tumult was deafening. A mist of powder smoke hung over the scene. The issue of the struggle was doubtful.

Marco and Gooloo Singh found themselves in a circle of foes. The lad struck down a burly native, and the blow split his rifle in two. He had hardly drawn his revolver, when a stone knocked the weapon from his hand.

"Take this, sahib," cried Gooloo Singh, thrusting a short cutlass into his companion's grasp. At the same instant he tore a spear from one of the enemy, and immediately ran the fellow through the heart.

Marco had his work cut out for him. He slashed one antagonist across the head, and another in the arm.

He reeled slightly as a stone bruised his shoulder. Then he lifted his cutlass to strike at a new enemy, who had suddenly crowded forward.

This was none other than the treacherous Baba Khan. His evil face blazed with hatred and triumph.

"Die, dog of a sahib!" he cried, as he aimed a pistol at Marco.

Quick as lightning the lad's cutlass flashed. It knocked the pistol upward, so that it was discharged in the air. The keen blade went farther, and laid open Baba Khan's cheek.

With a cry of rage, the Hindoo sprang forward and seized Marco in his burly arms. They fell together, and the lad made a desperate struggle against his powerful antagonist.

Unconsciously they rolled to the outer edge of the path, and before either realized the danger, they plunged over the dizzy precipice!

CHAPTER VII.

THE FATE OF BABA KHAN.

Nine times out of ten a fall over the cliff at this point would have meant certain death.

The rocks dropped sheerly down for thirty feet. Then came an almost equally steep slope of loose stones, undergrowth and young timber, terminating at the torrent.

Marco and Baba Khan shot through the air, and landed in a dense clump of bushes part way down the slope. The Hindoo was undermost, and received the most violent shock. Both were badly stunned. In a half-unconscious state they bounced out of the bushes and rolled swiftly toward the base of the hill.

They clung fast to each other as they revolved from stone to stone, from one clump of undergrowth to another.

Bruised and bleeding, they reached the brink of the stream. With a tremendous splash they plunged head-first into a deep, circular pool of icy water, above and below which a fierce current brawled and foamed amid jagged rocks.

The shock of the cold bath had a reviving effect on both. Marco struggled free of his enemy and came to the surface.

A second later Baba Khan's head bobbed up a little to one side. The gaping wound on his cheek gave him a horrible appearance. He glared at Marco in a frenzy of hatred.

"Dog of a sahib!" he snarled; "I will have your life!"

With vigorous strokes he swam toward the lad.

Marco was also a good swimmer. He turned and made for the side of the pool, hoping to climb out on shore and elude his enemy.

But neither had given a thought to an unforeseen force that lurked beneath the placid water. A fierce undertow suddenly seized its victims with a grip from which there was no escape.

First Marco was sucked through a narrow gap at the lower end of the pool; the Hindoo followed at an interval of half-a-dozen feet, struggling wildly to stem the current. Then both were tossed like corks from wave to wave as they shot down the foamy stretch of the torrent.

It was just at this critical moment that Gooloo Singh, who had been hard pressed by the enemy, gained a moment's breathing spell by dispatching two of his foes.

He instantly discovered Marco's absence. At first he feared the lad was killed. He ran to and fro among the dead bodies, exposing himself to fearful risks from the enemy.

Suddenly he caught sight of a belt lying on the outer edge of the path and recognized it as Marco's.

With a cry of despair he hastened to the brink of the cliff. Far down in the ravine he saw two figures strug-

gling for life among the boiling cascades of the torrent. The distance was too great for recognition, but he knew that one was Marco.

The faithful Hindoo turned his back on the fight and ran along the precipice for twenty yards.

Here he found what he was looking for—a spot where the cliff fell at a moderate angle and was broken by projecting crags and tufts of stout grass.

With a long spear grasped in one hand he made his way down the dizzy incline, clutching at everything that offered the least support.

He safely reached the lower slope of stones and undergrowth. Down this he plunged at reckless speed, and gained the side of the torrent.

Meanwhile, how fared it with Marco and Baba Khan?

The lad had all he could do to save himself from drowning; the enemy behind him was temporarily forgotten.

He whirled on and on, now high on the crest of the picture waves, now deep under the hissing water.

In vain were his frantic struggles. He was as helpless as an infant. Again and again he collided roughly with submerged rocks. Each second promised to be his last.

Just when the agony of suffocation had begun he was flung high in the air by a mighty wave.

Like a flash, he saw a jagged boulder close ahead. He reached blindly out, and seized it with both arms.

For a few seconds he held fast in spite of the angry buffeting of the waves. Then a little strength returned,

and he was in the act of pulling himself to a safer position when Baba Khan came swirling along.

The Hindoo saw the rock, and grabbed at it. He swung alongside of Marco. Clinging tight with one hand he lifted the other and struck the lad brutally in the face.

"Down, you dog!" he shrieked. "Down!"

At the third blow Marco slipped from the rock. With a cry of despair ringing on his lips, he was swept away by the merciless waves.

He heard Baba Khan's mocking laugh. Then began another battle for life. Up and down he tossed amid churning foam and spray.

But his strength was leaving him, and the torrent was growing wilder and swifter.

Suddenly, when hope was at an end, he spied another jutting rock to the right of the channel.

The current swung him that way, and almost by a miracle he caught it. He clung fast with both arms, and gradually gained a secure kneehold.

Marco's chances were now good. Between the rock and the bank the stream lay a comparatively quiet eddy.

"As soon as I get a little strength," he said to himself, "I can wade to shore."

Suddenly he remembered Baba Khan. He glanced up the channel, and was horrified to see the Hindoo in the very act of scrambling out on the bank. He had safely stemmed the intervening strip of waves.

Before Marco could make an effort to wade across the eddy the blood-thirsty ruffian was limping toward

him with eager strides. On the way he stopped to pick up a jagged stone of many pounds' weight.

A cold shiver ran through the lad's exhausted frame. He was face to face with death. Not a ray of hope remained.

A few yards below him the stream plunged down a slanting reef of rocks and lost itself in a boiling, funnel-shaped whirlpool. So to let go the rock and trust himself once more to the current would be nothing short of suicide.

Baba Khan had now reached a spot on the rugged shore directly opposite his intended victim. His dusky and mangled face shown alone with vindictive triumph.

"At last, dog of a sahib," he hissed, as he lifted the huge stone with both hands, "you are in my power. Nothing can save you. Your crushed body will feed the whirlpool yonder."

"Mercy!" pleaded Marco. "Have mercy! Don't kill me!"

Baba Khan laughed mockingly.

"A lakh of rupees would not purchase your life!" he snarled. "The spirit of Gunpat the Thug calls for vengeance. Die! Die!"

With keen enjoyment of his victim's torture the Hindoo held the engine of death poised for an instant.

That brief respite saved Marco. Suddenly, from some unseen point, a long spear whizzed through the air.

With unerring aim the barb pierced Baba Khan's back, and came out between his ribs. The stone fell from his

nerveless hands. He uttered a gurgling cry, and toppled head first into the water.

The current rolled the dusky body to the verge of the whirlpool, where it was instantly sucked down into the churning depths!

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW THE FIGHT ENDED.

The tragedy was over like a flash. Marco had scarcely time to realize his good fortune when Gooloo Singh came leaping down over the rocks to the edge of the torrent.

With a cry of joy, the faithful Hindoo plunged into the eddy, breasted his way to the rock, and dragged the lad safely to the bank. His eyes flashed exultantly as he glanced at the boiling waves amid which Baba Kahn's body had disappeared.

For a moment or two Marco lay helpless on a patch of soft grass, looking unutterable gratitude at his preserver. Then his strength partially returned, and he sat up.

"I owe you my life twice over," he said, huskily. "This last was the closest shave. It seems a miracle that I am living. How can I ever repay you——"

"Waste no breath, sahib," interrupted the Hindoo. "You will need it. There may be great perils to face. Listen, they are fighting as savagely as ever."

Gooloo was right. Down the rocky precipice floated husky yells and the clanging sounds of strife. There was nothing to indicate victory for either side.

Marco rose unsteadily to his feet.

"We must get back," he said. "They have need of us.

Is Baba Khan really dead? After I saw him fall a mist seemed to swim before my eyes."

"The traitor's body is tossing from rock to rock," replied Gooloo, pointing to the torrent. "His death was more merciful than he deserved. Come, sahib, your words are wise. We must gain the path."

"How?" asked Marco, glancing in despair at the sheer precipice.

"Farther down the slope it is less rugged," answered the Hindoo. "Moreover, there will be less danger of meeting an enemy. My arms are strong. I will carry you."

"No, I can manage well enough," protested Marco. "I feel much better. I don't mind a few bruises and a headache."

He proved the assertion by vigorously shaking the water from his clothes and walking a few feet over the rough stones.

Gooloo Singh was satisfied.

Without further comment, he led his companion along the brink of the stream. In a short time they were several hundred yards below the scene of Baba Khan's death. The sound of strife from above rang fainter and fainter in their ears.

Now the rocky sides of the gorge fell away to timbered slopes. Gooloo Singh stopped and pointed upward.

"Here, sahib, is a likely place," he said. "You go first. I will be at your heels, ready to help."

Marco nerved himself, and wearily began the rugged ascent. The faithful Hindoo stuck close behind him.

Soon both were concealed from view by the trees and undergrowth.

Meanwhile, exciting scenes had been taking place on the narrow path far above the torrent. So fierce and hot was the hand-to-hand struggle that the disappearance of Marco and Gooloo Singh was unheeded.

The situation almost precluded the possibility of flight. Garcia's party fought with grim desperation. Matlock's bravery and pluck inspired his handful of followers. For a time the contest was waged stubbornly and unyieldingly on both sides.

At length Matlock extricated himself from a tangle of foes. Swinging his rifle around him, he quickly cleared a wide swath. His face and hands were bloody and powder grimed. He was a terrible sight to his enemies.

"Come, my brave fellows!" he yelled. "At them again! They are giving way."

The natives responded with lusty cheers. They pressed on amid the clash and thud of weapons.

The two Portuguese belonging to Garcia's party were craven cowards at heart. They were poorly armed; and, moreover, they foresaw the certainty of defeat. All at once they broke from the circle and dashed up the path. In less time than it takes to tell they had vanished beyond the cages. No pursuit was attempted.

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

The rush was a determined one, and the dusky faces closed in on the foe.

The loss of his two trusted allies brought a blaze of anger to Garcia's eyes. For an instant he, too, meditated flight. But while he hesitated the opportunity was lost. He and the remnant of his band were driven back against the cliff.

Here there was a brief and bitter scuffle. Blood flowed freely. Matlock hewed his way to the front and faced Garcia.

The two leaders were armed with rifles. They exchanged glances of bitter enmity as they skillfully parried each other's blows.

Crack! Garcia's rifle parted at the stock. He reeled heavily against the wall, expecting his death blow.

But Matlock, stirred by an impulse of mercy, did not strike.

"The law shall deal with your wretched life," he cried. "Surrender, scoundrel!"

Garcia scowled ferociously.

"Never!" he hissed. "Malediction on you! Take that!"

"That" was a short spear which the Portuguese suddenly snatched from a native and launched directly at his enemy.

Matlock was scarcely prepared for such a treacherous deed. He dodged swiftly to one side, and thereby narrowly escaped death.

The spear passed under Matlock's right arm, and whizzed on with vengeful force. A second later it buried itself deeply in the foreflank of one of the bullocks that were harnessed to the nearest cage.

Then happened a strange thing. It was so rapid that Matlock lost the opportunity of stretching the Portuguese lifeless on the ground—which he fully intended to do.

The bullock, maddened by pain, swung around, dragging his mates with him. The cage toppled over and struck the stony path with such force as to jar the timbers apart.

A horny, pointed head instantly squeezed from between them. Then followed the huge body of a wild buffalo.

In all India there is no beast more to be dreaded at close quarters. This particular fellow was in a frenzy of rage. He caught sight of his natural enemies. He sniffed the air and bellowed hoarsely. Then, with lowered head, he charged down the narrow path like a hurricane.

The fight ended at once. There was a general scramble in all directions. Friends and foes jostled one another. Some ran to the precipice and let their bodies dangle over in space. Others scaled the rocky cliff with the agility of cats, an example that Matlock was the first to set.

For a brief moment Garcia stood still. He was dazed and maddened by his defeat. When he realized his peril it was too late to gain safe shelter. He set his face down the path and fled at his topmost speed.

The buffalo whirled by, trampling ruthlessly over the bodies of the dead. Bellowing and snorting, it sped on in pursuit of the Portuguese.

Matlock and his men followed in the rear, fascinated by the excitement of the chase. The other natives took advantage of the opportunity and fled up the gorge.

Garcia was in a bad plight. For more than a hundred yards he kept ahead of his determined enemy. Then his strength gave way, and he lost ground rapidly, cumbered as he was by his boots and clothes.

"Jump into the ravine!" yelled Matlock, "or climb the hill on the other side!"

Either the Portuguese did not hear, or he was too confused and frightened to understand. He suddenly wheeled around, and quickly the mad brute was upon him with lowered horns.

Garcia rose in air and came down on the timbered bluff to the right of the path. He clutched at the undergrowth, and held tight for an instant. Then he crawled slowly in among the leaves and disappeared.

The buffalo stamped and snorted and looked vainly for his victim. He had thoughts of charging the crowd in his rear, and shook his shaggy head at them. Then he wisely galloped down the path and was quickly lost to view.

It was just at this juncture that Matlock missed Gooloo Singh and Marco, and the discovery banished all else from his mind. But before he could conjecture what had become of them the absent ones hove in sight over the brink of the gorge, twenty yards down the path.

Their friends hurried to meet them. The steep climb had exhausted Marco, and he clung limply to the Hin-

doo's arm. He briefly related his thrilling adventure and rescue.

"Baba Khan got only his just deserts," was Matlock's comment. "I shan't forget you, Gooloo Singh. Thank God that you are safe, my lad. I could illy have spared you."

He went on to explain what had just happened.

"The rascally Portuguese must not escape," he concluded, turning to the natives. "The horns of the brute undoubtedly injured him. Search the hillside, men. Look among the stones and bushes. I will pay ten rupees for Garcia's capture."

Incited by the reward, the natives swarmed up the bluff and searched zealously for twenty minutes. Then they came straggling back, one by one.

Out of their mixed stories was gleaned one conclusive fact, namely, that Garcia had reached the densely-timbered plateau that stretched far beyond the verge of the hill.

"It is useless to chase him," said Matlock. "The rascal can't be badly hurt after all. Come, we are losing valuable time."

He led the way up the path.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE JAWS OF DEATH.

The scene of the fight was quickly reached. Half-a-dozen of Garcia's party, who had crept back to recover the cages, were taken by surprise. Two surrendered and the other four escaped by a daring rush.

It was a dearly-bought victory, and Matlock was saddened by the scene of destruction that everywhere met the eye. His forces were badly thinned out, and the enemy had suffered even more severely. It was a matter of regret that the traitorous Ram was among the missing.

As rapidly as possible the narrow path was cleared of dead and injured. The latter were placed on heaps of boughs and tenderly cared for. Their companions bandaged their wounds and made tedious journeys to the ravine for water.

Matlock directed the dead foemen to be stretched along the base of the cliff.

"No doubt their friends will return and bury them," he said. "Our dead must be taken back to the village."

"How about Garcia's cages of animals?" asked Marco. "I suppose we can regard them as the spoils of war?"

"Not exactly," replied Matlock, "but the wisest

course will be to take them along. We will turn them over to the authorities in case a rumpus is kicked up about the affair."

"A rumpus?" queried Marco, uneasily.

"Yes, lad. You know we have taken the law into our own hands. We may be called to account for it."

"But there was no other way," said Marco. "Where would our tiger be now if we had appealed to the nearest magistrate instead of pursuing García?"

"Very true," assented Matlock; "and that is why I acted as I did. I admit that I did not anticipate such a loss of life. However, we must make the best of it now. Don't worry, lad, we shall come out all right. And now let's have a look at the cause of war."

Marco followed him to the cage that contained the tiger. The captive was a magnificent fellow, huge of limb and superbly striped. He glared at his visitors through the stout slats and snarled ferociously.

"Such a prize is well worth all we have gone through," said Matlock. "I don't wonder Garcia wanted him. And it was you who trapped the beast, lad? You are getting on famously."

Marco thrilled with pride. Then his face clouded.

"I wish poor Dan was alive," he reflected, sadly. "It would please him to know it."

In all, five cages remained intact. The tiger occupied one, and another was half-filled with camping paraphernalia. The other three contained respectively a black panther, a leopard and a pair of hyenas.

So much time was required for the wounded natives

that darkness came on before the preparations to start could be completed. Matlock reluctantly gave orders to camp until morning. He feared that Garcia might collect a force of the savage hill men who lived in the vicinity and make an overwhelming night attack.

Every precaution was taken. Guards were set above and below the camp, and huge fires were built.

But the dreaded hours of darkness passed without alarm. There was little sleep for any one. The groans of the suffering natives mingled with the restless cries of the caged beasts. The bullocks, deprived of food and water, bellowed incessantly.

The first flush of dawn saw the somber procession winding down the gorge. Matlock marched at the head, though he was weak and feverish from his wound. On the truck that had belonged to the broken buffalo cage were the dead and injured of the party.

At the mouth of the pass happened the one exciting incident of the return journey. The two prisoners broke loose and made good their escape in spite of a hot pursuit.

An hour after sunrise the plain, scorched and scarred by yesterday's fire, was left behind. The village was reached before noon. A pitiful scene ensued on the arrival of the party. Men, women and children loudly mourned the dead.

But the people were reasonable. They accepted Matlock's rupees, the head man getting the lion's share.

Their wrath was directed against Garcia and his allies,

and the perfidious Ram. The latter would have fared badly had he chanced along at that time.

Matlock paid off his hired fighting men, and pressed on with the handful of companions that remained. The sorely-taxed bullocks made slow progress through the tangle of miry paths, and another night camp in the jungle was imperative.

When the following day was half spent, the exhausted travelers filed into camp. They found Hofstein quite well, and with only good news to report.

He rejoiced at the capture of the tiger, but he looked grave when he heard the complete story of the expedition. He and Matlock entered the tent, and held a secret consultation that lasted until nearly supper time.

Meanwhile Marco and Gooloo Singh superintended the arranging of the new cages, and the feeding and watering of the bullocks and wild animals.

Twenty-four hours later every one was rested, and the camp was once more in its normal condition.

Four days slipped by. Nearly all of the cages had occupants. It would soon be time to return to Calcutta. There the animals would be shipped to New York by way of Hamburg. After that, fresh instructions would be received from the animal dealer—the tenor of which could only be surmised.

This question was being discussed on a burning, scorching afternoon. Matlock and Hofstein were stretched full length beneath a shaded tent, gasping and prepiring. Marco sat at their feet, looking rather more comfortable.

Just outside squatted Gooloo Singh, calm and stolid as a bronze idol.

"Ach, Richter, the animal dealer, knows not his own mind," Hofstein was saying. "He may order us to the Rocky Mountains, or to the Himalayas, or to the forests of the Congo, or to the desert beyond Suakim——"

"It is far more likely that we shall accompany the convoy of animals to New York," interrupted Matlock. "I am glad, at all events, that we are soon going to Calcutta."

"You still worry about Garcia, then?" asked the German.

"Yes, a little. He may trump up a damaging case, and lay it before the authorities. We have his animals in our possession. It would have been better had we abandoned them in the mountains. I don't know how to get rid of them now."

"They are valuable, too," said Marco, "especially the black panther."

"They really belong to the Madras house that Garcia represents," suggested Hofstein. "It must be Sonburg & Company. They have an agent in Calcutta. We will turn the animals over to him."

"Good!" exclaimed Matlock. "That cuts the knot. A few days more will finish our work here, and then——"

The rest of the sentence was inaudible. His voice was drowned by a commotion and shouting from outside the tent. Plainly something had happened.

Hofstein rolled through the doorway and collided with Gooloo Singh. They sprang to their feet, and dashed

toward the outskirts of the camp, followed by Matlock and Marco.

The cause of the excitement was quickly explained. Surrounded by the camp employees were two of Matlock's native shikarees, whose business it was to search the jungles.

They had just arrived from different directions, and each had a thrilling piece of news.

"A tiger is my find, sahib," exclaimed Chundra. "The beast is sleeping in a bed of reeds about two miles to the south. I have men watching the spot. It is a great chance to use the nets."

"Sahibs, hark to me," cried Dalo, the second shikaree. "I have been to the pits that we dug to the eastward three days ago. In one of them is a rhinoceros—a plump, full-grown fellow."

"Ach, good for both of you!" shouted Hofstein.

"Just the animals that we need to complete the order," added Matlock. "We must start at once in spite of the heat. Conrad, you and I will go with Chundra, and try to bag this sleeping tiger."

"Very well," assented Hofstein. "Marco, we trust the rhinoceros to you and Dalo. Take Gooloo Singh along."

"It will be an easier task than yours," replied the lad. "But all the same I wish I was going after the tiger."

Preparations were hurriedly made, and just as the heat of the afternoon began to lose its intensity, the two parties started in different directions.

In the rear of each a cage followed slowly, drawn by lagging bullocks.

With his rifle strapped to his back, and a sola topee, or sun helmet, on his head, Marco pushed eastward with his two companions. He knew the location of the pits, which were about three miles from the camp.

Dalo and Gooloo Singh carried spades and coils of rope. The task before them was one of labor and skill rather than of peril. They expected to dig a narrow, sloping passage to the pit, and drag or drive the rhinoceros into the cage.

The way led through a dense jungle, and Marco traveled at an easy pace. He knew that the cage would be tardy in overtaking him.

Finally the first of the pits was reached. Its covering of grass and bamboo was undisturbed.

Now a dull, pounding noise was heard, mingled with occasional angry snorts.

"Yonder is the spot," whispered Dalo. "The beast appears to be in an ugly mood."

"Let me go first," said Gooloo Singh. "There may be danger. Keep back, sahib."

"There can be danger only from one source," replied Marco, "and I don't see much chance of that. The pits were well dug."

He pressed on at the heels of the two Hindoos. The intervening strip of jungle was quickly crossed. The sounds grew louder and nearer.

Here was the pit at last. What Gooloo Singh had feared was an actual reality. The rhinoceros was almost free. With his pointed snout and horn he had undermined one wall of his prison and caused a cave-in.

Now he was beating and trampling the earth, and the slope thus formed already reached almost to the top of the pit.

The captive was a huge and savage fellow. He paused long enough to snort angrily, and to glare at his three visitors out of his wicked little eyes. Then he went on with his fight for freedom.

"All this has been done since I was here," declared Dalo. "It was an unfortunate place to dig a pit. Look, the soil is loose and rotten."

"We can't let such a splendid animal escape," cried Marco. "Quick! throw a noosed rope over his head and drag him to the other end of the pit. That will give me a chance to straighten this wall."

"A good plan, sahib," approved Gooloo. "The cage will doubtless soon be here."

The two Hindoos deftly adjusted the rope, and at the first throw they noosed the rhinoceros. Running to the rear end of the pit they hauled with all their might.

The brute lunged frantically to right and left for a moment; then he sullenly allowed himself to be drawn several feet backward.

Marco unstrapped his rifle and threw it to the ground. Then he seized one of the spades and lustily attacked the sloping wall.

"Be careful, sahib," warned Gooloo Singh, from the opposite side.

At that very moment the treacherous earth crumbled and let Marco several feet into the pit. There he stuck fast, buried to the knees in the soft ground.

Before the lad could extricate himself, the rhinoceros made a mad lunge forward. Gooloo Singh let go of the rope in time, but Dalo pitched headfirst into the pit.

With a snort of passion, the wicked brute charged up the sloping wall, straight at Marco.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNPLEASANT DISCOVERY.

The shrill cries of the two Hindoos rang for a brief instant in Marco's ears. Then, from behind, he was struck like a catapult by the tough snout of the rhinoceros. Luckily, the sharp horn did not touch him.

He rose dizzily from the clogging earth, described a semicircle, and landed on hands and knees a few feet clear of the pit's edge.

He was stunned and bruised, but otherwise uninjured. He staggered to his feet, and looked back. Just then the rhinoceros, by a tremendous effort, surmounted the crumbling side of the pit.

Marco did not have his full wits about him. He was still too dazed to take advantage of the slim chance of escape that now offered.

Instead of doubling to right or left, he dashed straight forward, with the vicious brute in hot pursuit. He felt its warm, steaming breath; he heard its puffing snorts, and the clumsy trample of its hoofs.

Like a flash he saw the limb of a tree drooping over the path just ahead. This was his last chance, and in desperation he leaped high and grabbed at it. He made a slight miscalculation, and secured a weak hold with his finger tips.

For a fraction of a second he swung in air. Then he was suddenly lifted upward, and wrenched by an irresistible force from his frail support.

At first he was dazed and half-blinded. The heated atmosphere flew by him. There was a warm, hard substance under him, and when he threw his hands out in fright at the swaying motion, they clutched something rough and wrinkled. He heard, vaguely, a husky shout far in the rear.

All at once he realized the truth. The rhinoceros had swept him off the limb, and now, perched on the animal's back, he was whirling through the jungle. It was, indeed, a unique situation, and one that contained a grave element of peril. Still, it was better than being at the mercy of the brute's hoofs, and sharp horn, as Marco reflected.

His first act was to straddle the broad back of the rhinoceros as flatly as possible, and take a firm hold of the tough folds of skin on the neck. Then he closed his eyes, and tried to think.

The rhinoceros was by far the more frightened of the two. It had not counted on being turned into a beast of burden. It was panic-stricken by the living, breathing weight that clung to its back.

So the terrified quadruped sought relief in furious flight. It quickly left Gooloo Singh and Dalo far behind.

Marco clung to his perch, though buffeted and scratched by the over-hanging foliage. He was afraid to roll off, lest the rhinoceros should turn and tear him to pieces. He wondered how long the mad ride would last.

All around him were the dense, gloomy fastnesses of the jungle.

Suddenly the brake and jungle melted away, and all around was a light that seemed dazzling in contrast to the recent shadows.

Crunch! crunch! splash! splash! Now cool water spurted over the lad's fevered face and hands. He lifted his head slightly and looked.

The rhinoceros was fording a swift and narrow river, some two hundred yards broad. The dusky glow that precedes the twilight was just fading from the opposite bank.

Still goaded by fear, the quadruped scarcely slackened its speed. It splashed and crunched across the stream, now belly deep, now submerged so far that Marco's hands and feet were under water!

In mid-channel was a bit of an island—a mere mud bank—that gave existence to an eddy off its lower end. Here the opposing currents had scooped out the bottom.

Just as the rhinoceros came to the verge of this hole a huge crocodile poked its scaly snout from the murky depths. The quadruped snorted with fear, and swung around so suddenly that Marco lost his grip and went headfirst into the water.

When he reached the surface he was in the grasp of the swift current. He splashed and kicked vigorously as it whirled him clear of the eddy and on down stream.

Glancing back, he saw the rhinoceros beating its way

straight up stream, like a small side-wheel steamer. The crocodile had vanished.

"I ought to be thankful to that scaly reptile," reflected Marco. "But, come to think of it, I don't know as I'm much better off. Crocodiles don't grow singly, and there may be a score of them watching me at this minute."

Terrified by the notion of such a possibility, the lad splashed more noisily than ever. He tried to gain the west bank of the river, but he was far nearer the opposite shore, and, moreover, a strong current set in that direction.

So, against his inclination, Marco finally crawled out on the bank that was farthest from camp and friends. He was exhausted by the hard swim. He crouched, panting and dripping wet, on the narrow strip of sand.

Vaguely he heard confused sounds in the distance—in what direction he could not tell. Did some new and terrible danger threaten him?

Patter! patter! Jingle! jingle!

From the black jungle into the dusk of twilight, cantered, by twos and threes, a squad of English cavalry.

The thud of hoofs and jingle of accouterments was all around Marco before he knew what it meant.

Then he sprang to his feet with a shrill cry and went down as quickly under the hoofs of the foremost horse.

"Halt!" rang out Captain Clemson's voice. "Back, men, back."

The officer dropped quickly from the saddle and took

Marco in his arms. Others gathered around, amazed and curious.

"An English lad!" exclaimed one.

"And soaking wet and unconscious," added another. "There is some mystery here."

"The poor chap must have just crawled from the river when my animal struck him," declared Captain Clemson. "I don't think he is hurt severely. He breathes well and is merely stunned."

"Mayhap he's one of them named in the warrant, cap'n," suggested a cavalryman.

"No; he's only a boy," was the reply. "Here, Redfield, you take care of him. We can't stop to revive him now."

Accordingly, a burly trooper lifted the unconscious lad onto the saddle in front of him.

The officer held a brief conversation with a scrawny native astride of a lean horse, who was evidently present in the capacity of guide. Then the former remounted, while the latter ignited a flaring torch.

An instant later the command to start was again given. The score of gray-uniformed troopers spurred their horses down the bank of the river until the native designated a fording place. Then all splashed noisily across—reckless of crocodiles—and followed the torch into the jungle.

The return of consciousness brought with it to Marco an instant recollection of all that had happened. He had escaped injury from the captain's steed. It was the striking of his temple on a hard stone that had

stunned him. With aching head and limbs he rested loosely against Redfield's broad bosom. His eyes watched the torchlight flashing on horses and riders, gleaming into the depths of the jungle.

He heard and understood the conversation of the troopers. He listened intently, and relaxed his attitude so as to feign insensibility the better. For a moment his brain was very busy.

"This is Garcia's work," he said to himself. "The cavalry are on their way to arrest Matlock and Hofstein. Perhaps they want me, too. They don't know yet who I am, anyhow. If I could only warn my friends, and give them a chance to get away. I must do it—I must. But how?"

The question was speedily answered. A moment later a clump of rocks was passed, and now Marco had his bearings.

The troopers were following what had been originally a mere elephant path. It would lead to the camp, but by a very roundabout way. Straight across the jungle the distance was less by almost one-half.

Marco's plan was formed. But could he carry it out?

The knowledge of what depended on him made him cool and clear-headed. He watched and waited.

Now the path narrowed, and swung between serried walls of brake. Marco slipped limply down under the trooper's arms. The next instant he was under cover of the jungle, running blindly and at full speed.

No pursuit was attempted. What would have been the

use? Not a man dismounted. There was some grumbling and swearing. Then they reluctantly rode on.

Marco joyfully heard the trampling of the hoofs die away in the distance. He ran still faster, taking care not to lose his bearings. Thorns and spear grass lacerated him. He heard the howling of wild beasts.

Then another sound fell on his ear. Some one was calling his own name. Yes, that was it, surely.

He timidly ventured to give a low shout. The reply was instantaneous. He stood still and waited. Threshing footsteps came near.

The suspense was quickly over. Imagine the lad's joy when the unknown ones turned out to be Dalo and Gooloo Singh.

The honest fellows were equally delighted. Their story was hurriedly told by Gooloo.

"We followed the rhinoceros," he said, "expecting to find your mangled body, sahib. Finally, when night fell, we turned back to camp to procure torches. We heard the horsemen coming, and hid by the path. They had hardly gone by when we saw your brave escape. As quickly as possible, we followed after you. But what mean the Feringhi cavalry?"

Marco briefly explained, and his companions shared his anxiety. Precious time had already been lost, and without further delay they pushed on through the dark jungle.

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING CHARGE.

The little party safely reached the camp, and burst impetuously into the circle of cleared ground that was penned in by the cages.

Here, over blazing fires, the natives were preparing supper. Matlock and Hofstein lounged before the tent, enjoying their pipes. They stared in wonder at the new arrivals.

"What luck, lad?" demanded Hofstein. "We were about to start after you. That stupid fellow yonder drove the cage in the wrong direction. He missed you and came back."

"Hope you had better luck than us," added Matlock. "The tiger gave us the slip, and——"

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

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

"English cavalry," panted Marco, "coming to arrest you—here in a minute—don't delay—hide in the jungle."

Both men sprang to their feet. Dashing into the tent, they pulled on their coats, and snatched weapons.

"Look here," exclaimed Matlock. "We can't abandon all our property in this way. Let's face the music."

"Whatever you say," muttered Hofstein. "It's an ugly scrape."

The next instant the choice was taken out of their hands. A crashing noise rose from the jungle. The shrill notes of a bugle quavered on the night air.

Consternation seized the whole camp. The natives sought shelter under the cages.

Matlock and Hofstein fled toward the rear, followed by Marco and the two Hindoos. The click of rifles and a glimpse of gray uniforms drove them back. The camp was surrounded.

"Offer no resistance; I come in the queen's name!" shouted Captain Clemson, as he rode into the inclosure with half-a-dozen troopers at his heels.

He glanced curiously about him for a moment. Then he dismounted, handed the horse to an orderly, and approached the little group before the tent.

"I am in search of two men," he said, pompously. "Their names are Ralph Matlock and Conrad Hofstein. I have a warrant for their arrest—a warrant bearing the signature of the Governor-General of the Province of Bengal."

Matlock stepped forward. His face was flushed and angry.

"I am one," he said; "and here is the other," pointing to Hofstein. "I assure you the whole affair is a mistake. It is we who should have sworn out a warrant——"

"Ach, that's true," growled Hofstein. "We have been infernally treated. I will wring the neck of that dirty Portuguese."

"I don't want to hear your story," replied the officer.

"The time for that will come soon enough. Prepare to accompany me. I don't intend to spend the night here."

"May I ask, sir, on what charges the warrant is based?" said Matlock.

"Various ones," replied Captain Clemson. "You are accused of murder, of highway robbery, and of unlawfully amassing armed men in the queen's district of Chota Nagpur."

Marco and the Hindoos gasped in terrified amazement. Hofstein nearly swallowed his pipe, and his eyes bulged out like saucers.

Matlock bit his lip, and looked at the ground with a puzzled, anxious expression.

"This is preposterous," he said. "I see through it all. But, of course, you are only doing your duty. We will be ready to accompany you in a short time. First, I crave your permission to ask a few brief questions."

"They must be very brief, then," replied the officer, glancing at his watch. "We have a night ride of twelve miles before us. Go ahead."

"Thanks," said Matlock. "Will you tell me the name of our accuser?"

"There are two of them," Captain Clemson answered. "A Portuguese by the name of Garcia, and a Hindoo called Ram. The latter is from the village of Howla."

"I thought so. When was the charge made?"

"Two days ago."

"Ah! Where are Garcia and Ram now?"

"I don't know," replied the officer, a little impatiently.

"They will appear in Calcutta at the preliminary hearing."

"Calcutta?" gasped Matlock. "Must we be taken clear down there?"

"Certainly. Where else?"

There was a moment of silence. Hofstein looked puzzled. Matlock seemed dazed. His lips worked convulsively.

"Come; we must be off," said the officer, gruffly.

"One moment," exclaimed Matlock. "I have a request to ask. Our arrest is a piece of malice, and there is a deadly plot back of it. If we are taken away, our property will be in great danger. I implore you to leave an escort here."

"Nonsense," laughed Captain Clemson. "One would think we were in a hostile country. The peril exists only in your imagination. I have no men to spare. If anything goes wrong, your servants here can send word to the cantonments at Barakar."

"You refuse, then?" said Matlock, bitterly. "Well, remember then that I shall hold you responsible for whatever happens. Mark my word, sir, our accusers will not appear at the hearing in Calcutta."

The officer was staggered for a moment. He hesitatingly tugged at his drooping mustache.

"My orders are plain," he replied. "We have had enough talking. You must be ready to leave in five minutes. That is the utmost limit."

He gave a signal to his bugler, and a low musical note

instantly floated through the jungle. The balance of the troopers came riding into the inclosure.

Then there was a stamping and a prancing of hoofs, for the steeds were terrified at the near presence of the wild animals. The men could scarcely hold them.

While Matlock and Hofstein were in the tent preparing for their journey, Captain Clemson recognized Marco for the first time.

He made the lad tell the whole story of his adventure. He also questioned Gooloo Singh, and for a time he was inclined to take both into custody.

Matlock, coming out just then, divined the officer's purpose.

"This lad and the Hindoo are my most valuable employees," he said. "They are not named in the warrant, nor are they needed as witnesses."

"Very well; I won't take them," muttered Captain Clemson. "By the way, I must leave somebody here. The Portuguese claims some of the animals.

"Redfield," he added, turning to the big trooper who had carried Marco. "I put the camp in your charge. See that nothing is taken away. That will be your duty until further orders."

Redfield made a wry face. He dismounted, and picketed his horse over near the bullocks.

Meanwhile, Hofstein was clumsily mounting behind one of the troopers, greatly to the amusement of the spectators. Taking advantage of this diversion, Matlock drew Marco a little to one side.

"Sharp ears now, lad," he whispered. "Don't lose a word. Be watchful while Conrad and I are gone, and keep guards set day and night. I am satisfied that Garcia means mischief. This is only a ruse—our arrest. He will likely attack the camp."

"Why was my name not in the warrant?" asked Marco.

"Ah, that's the worst of it. It looks to me as though Garcia wanted to find you here. He has a grudge against you, you know. So be careful, lad. May God keep you from harm. I am satisfied that we won't be detained long in Calcutta——"

Just then came the officer's gruff summons. There was time for a hasty good-by, and a pressure of the hand.

An instant later the bugle rang loud and clear. The impatient horses pranced into the jungle path. Matlock and Hofstein, each mounted behind a stalwart trooper, turned for a final wave of the hand.

Then they vanished, and the glimmer of the torches faded from sight.

The natives crept out from beneath the cages, and went back to their duties at the fire as calmly as though nothing had occurred. Redfield squatted nearby, and looked hungrily at the viands.

Marco felt dazed. He went and sat down before the empty tent. The faithful Gooloo Singh presently followed him there, and they had a long, earnest talk over the situation.

The Hindoo was keen-witted and intelligent. He

agreed with Marco that the danger was real and not imaginary. They had planned what meagre defenses were possible.

The meal was commenced amid gloomy constraint. The presence of this long-limbed cavalryman seemed an intrusion. Gooloo watched him furtively. The servants scowled at him behind his back.

But Redfield was not a man with whom one could be on bad terms. Jollity and good humor beamed from his eyes and lurked under his shaggy mustache.

"Cheer up, comrades!" he cried, with a mellow laugh. "Your friends'll be back before many suns set. An' meanwhile I'll take a hand if there's to be any fightin'. An' 'twixt you an' me, it ain't unlikely."

He soon had the confidence of Marco and Gooloo Singh—and the others as well. He knew all about the recent trouble, and discussed it unreservedly with them. He was of the same mind on every point.

After supper all hands fell to work, and the entire arrangement of the camp was changed under Marco's supervision.

The cages were drawn so close as to contract the circle by one-half. A single narrow opening was left for the bullocks to reach the water hole, which was fifty yards distant. Near this opening was the lean-to where the natives slept. The tent was at the opposite side of the inclosure.

Then a more formidable task was undertaken and finished. Quantities of thorn bushes were cut and heaped

against the outer side of the circle of cages, so that no enemy could crawl under.

The beasts—wild and domestic—had been fed and watered before the arrival of the cavalry. They needed no further attention.

At a late hour the final touches were added. The force in camp numbered ten. Marco divided these into two watches, taking personal charge of one, and giving the other to Redfield. Each had four men under him.

Happily, the night passed without alarm, and dawn was eagerly welcomed.

But this was no sign that the danger was over. Sunset was anticipated with feelings of dread.

There was work for all hands during the day. The bullocks and animals were fed and watered, and the cages had their customary cleaning.

The two shikarees ventured into the jungle after fresh meat for the beasts. They returned with a spotted deer. In a radius of four miles they had seen no trace of human beings.

"There is plenty of time yet," said Marco, gloomily. "If Garcia intends doing anything he will do it well."

"True, lad," replied Redfield. "And the rascal knows that your friends can't well get back from Calcutta under a week or ten days."

"Sahibs, would it not be wise to hire a small force from the headman of the village of Howla?" suggested Gooloo Singh.

Marco caught eagerly at the idea.

"I'll do it to-morrow," he replied. "I'm glad you mentioned it, Gooloo."

It was now late in the afternoon. Soon the shades of night settled down on the camp, and the fires were lighted.

CHAPTER XII.

A DEED OF DARKNESS.

Until nearly midnight Marco and Redfield sat before the tent. They were in hopeful spirits. The trooper, puffing at a blackened brier pipe, prattled of his adventurous life in the service. Marco let him do all the talking.

Finally Redfield rose and stretched his lank limbs.

"Time for guard duty," he remarked. "My men are waiting for me at the fire. Yours are sound asleep, and you had best join them, lad."

"I will," replied Marco. "I don't believe we shall be disturbed to-night. And the first thing in the morning I am going to the headman of the village with a bagful of rupees. I am sure that is what Matlock would want me to do."

"Ay, that he would," said Redfield. "Pleasant dreams, lad. I'll rouse you on time."

He strode across the inclosure and sent his men to their respective posts of duty. For an hour he paid frequent visits to them, and kept the fire in a continual blaze.

Marco slept soundly within the tent. Gooloo Singh lay at his feet, wrapped in a blanket.

Suddenly a shrill, gurgling cry rang out on the stillness of the night. A deep groan followed, and then all was still.

The Hindoo slept on, but Marco sprang to his feet, snatched a rifle, and dashed from the tent. He was half inclined to think himself the victim of a troubled dream.

But he knew better when he saw Redfield drop an armful of wood, and stare wildly about.

"You heard it, too, lad," demanded the trooper. "It was an ugly sound. I'll stake my life it was a death-cry."

"It came from outside the camp," said Marco. "I'm afraid we're going to be attacked. Shall I waken my men?"

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

They waited a full minute, scarcely daring to breathe. But there was no further alarm, nor did the sentries rush in.

A dark figure stole up from behind. It was Gooloo Singh.

"Is there danger, sahib?" he asked. "You are listening."

Redfield briefly explained, and the Hindoo's face clouded with perplexity.

"I must take a look around the camp," added the trooper. "Be ready if anything happens."

"Wait, I'll go with you," declared Marco, and Redfield made no objection.

Gooloo Singh followed, as a matter of course. The trooper lighted the way with a blazing brand. The others held their weapons ready for instant use.

Just outside the camp the first sentry was found at his

post. He had probably just awakened from sleep, for he denied all knowledge of the mysterious sound.

They pushed on to the second sentry. He was in a pitiable state of fright. He had heard the shrill cry, and he declared that it came from a point close by.

The little party hurried forward, taking the man with them. Now a semi-circle of the camp was almost completed. The light of the torch, flaring ahead, shone on the little cleared spot in the jungle where the third sentinel had been stationed. The post was empty!

Redfield was first on the scene. A low cry escaped his lips as he held the torch low and let it shine on the trampled grass—on dabs and spatters of warm blood.

"Murder has been done!" he gasped, hoarsely; "foul murder!"

"Perhaps a tiger pounced on the poor fellow and carried him off," whispered Marco.

He peered anxiously around as he cocked his rifle.

"A human tiger, sahibs," replied Gooloo Singh, and stepping forward over the blood stains, he parted the surrounding screen of bushes. "Behold, sahibs!" he gasped.

Redfield and Marco were quickly beside him, staring with horrified eyes into the thicket.

There lay the sentry, his lifeless face upturned. His rifle and ammunition belt were gone.

Redfield rolled the body over, and revealed a short dagger buried to the hilt in the back. It had evidently penetrated the heart.

"The work of some prowling jungle thief," he mut-

tered. "I'd make short shrift of the assassin if I had him."

"It means more than that," said Gooloo Singh.

"Yes, I'm sure it does," said Marco, impulsively. "Garcia is not far away, and the murderer was his spy."

"Mayhap you're right," replied Redfield. "If so, it's risky to stay here."

"We must go back and waken the others," said Marco. "The camp is in danger. But first we ought to visit the last post."

"We will return that way," replied the trooper.

The Hindoo let the bushes swing back, hiding the ghastly sight of the murdered man. Then, with fast-beating hearts, the little party crept along the outside of the camp.

When they were half-way to the spot where Dalo, the fourth sentry, was posted, Redfield halted abruptly. He spoke no word, but reached the torch down by his side. In the hedge of thorn bushes that were stacked against the cages a narrow gap was seen.

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

"Then we have him!" exclaimed Marco. "Quick! let us hurry around to the entrance."

"There is a better and surer way," said Redfield. "Stick by me."

He dropped the torch and ground it under his heels until every spark was extinguished. Then, on hands and knees, he entered the gap in the hedge.

"Keep your mouths shut," he whispered. "Don't make a sound."

The trooper's act was a daring one, since the exact whereabouts of the assassin was unknown. Possibly it was Garcia himself.

Gooloo Singh followed Redfield, and Marco came last. One by one they issued from the hedge. They were now under one of the cages. The tent, staked a few yards away, prevented a clear view of the inclosure.

"We'll have the rascal if he is still lurking about," whispered Redfield.

He crawled out from the cage, and stood erect, then he went cautiously forward.

The others followed at his heels. Marco, coming last, diverged to one side. In the dim light he did not see a dark blot cunningly interwoven with the trampled grass.

Crash! he tripped and went headlong to the ground. He felt a warm, squirming body under him. He heard an angry snarl. Then a pair of muscular arms gripped him.

The lad soon realized that he was in the grasp of the assassin. He fought hard, shouting hoarsely for help as he rolled over and over.

But before Redfield or the Hindoo could interfere, Marco's enemy twisted loose with the slipperiness of a serpent. He was off like a streak, and when the lad rose dizzily he saw the dusky figure speeding toward the exit of the camp.

"Out of the way, lad; I'll stop him!" cried Redfield.

The trooper's rifle rose to his shoulder. Crack! The

ball sped true, and the fleeing assassin tumbled over in a heap by the very edge of the fire.

An instant later a very pandemonium raged. The frightened bullocks stamped and bellowed; the wild animals roared, and snarled, and dashed against the bars of their cages. The natives burst out of their sleeping quarters in a state of ludicrous terror.

Just as Redfield and his companions reached the fire the three sentries hastened into the inclosure, drawn away from their posts by the shot.

All gathered around the trooper's victim. The spy, if such he was, had paid dearly for his temerity and for the assassination of the sentinel. He was stone dead.

He was a repulsive-looking fellow, small of stature, but tough and wiry. He was naked, except for a waistband. His features were brutal and depraved. His long, black hair was matted and unkempt.

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

"He dropped the rifle when I fell over him," said Marco. "He's a queer-looking chap. I don't believe he hails from these parts."

"You are right, sahib," replied Gooloo Singh, solemnly. "The presence of this man here means grave danger. He belongs to the half-civilized people who dwell in the hills to the north—beyond where we had the battle. They are cruel and blood-thirsty, and many of them are thugs."

"I've heard of them," muttered Redfield. "They are regular fanatics at fighting—don't care for man or beast."

"Then Garcia has hired a lot of the wretches," declared Marco. "It's worse than I thought it was. We're in a bad scrape."

"We'll do our best to get out of it," Redfield exclaimed. "If there are any final preparations to be made, make them now. We don't want to be caught napping. The attack may come at any moment."

The trooper's words roused all to a sense of the impending peril. But no panic or craven fear was manifested. Matlock had been careful to hire only brave and experienced men.

All were armed with rifles, and some of the weapons were repeaters. More ammunition was needed, however, so Marco and Gooloo Singh hurried to the tent to fill the want.

Meanwhile Redfield gave brief orders to the men, and posted two of them at the exit of the camp. Then, accompanied by Chundra, he ran to the rear of the inclosure, and stopped at the gap in the hedge.

He returned just as Marco and the Hindoo reached the fire with a box of cartridges. The others swarmed around them, intent on filling their ammunition belts.

At this unguarded moment a volley of rifle shots rang on the night air. One of the two sentries outside the camp reeled to the ground with a cry of agony.

The other escaped a like fate by dashing into the inclosure, and that instant the passage between the cages became alive with savage faces and dusky, squirming forms. From scores of throats rose one mighty yell, shrill and blood-curdling!

CHAPTER XIII.

SAVED BY A PANTHER.

Thus the attack came, and so swiftly as to preclude the slightest warning. For an instant the little band seemed doomed to speedy defeat and massacre.

But Marco and Redfield were equal to the emergency. The former drove his companions a few yards to one side, where their position was less exposed.

"Down, all of you!" yelled the trooper, in ringing tones. "Throw yourselves to the ground!"

The command was instantly obeyed. Just as the last man dropped flat an explosion of musketry sent a leaden hail over their heads. Most of the enemy were armed with spears. These they hurled with vengeful force as they rushed on.

Now was the opportunity of the besieged. It was badly needed, for the passage leading to the interior of the camp was fairly choked with hideous, half-naked wretches. The assailants were indeed the fanatical hill-men from the north. If Garcia commanded them, he discreetly kept out of sight.

"Fire!" cried Marco. "Let them have it! Make every shot tell!"

Instantly, and with keen aim, the little cluster of rifles centered their deadly contents on the mouth of the passage. The reports blended in a deafening medley.

Above the drifting smoke the foremost ranks of the foe, now well within the camp, were seen to reel and tumble. In their death agonies they clutched at the empty air or tore up the grass in handfuls.

But those behind pressed madly on, trampling dead and wounded under foot. There seemed no checking them.

Redfield and Marco yelled hoarse words of encouragement to their comrades. They could scarcely be heard for the fearful din. The wild animals were roaring and screaming in their cages. The bullocks were dashing to and fro with mad bellows.

Still the plucky little band aimed and fired until the rifle barrels grew hot in their grasp; still the savage hill-men surged into the inclosure, whooping and yelling like demons. As yet, the blazing fire and a curtain of smoke lay between them and their foes.

But valor and doggedness were of little account against such a fanatical multitude! With bitter pain, Marco and Redfield realized this.

"It's no use, my brave fellows!" cried the trooper; "one more volley and then run for your lives. We must break through the hedge at the rear of the camp!"

"I won't do it!" Marco hissed through his clinched teeth. "I've got to stick to my trust. I'll die first."

"That will accomplish nothing, sahib," said Gooloo Singh, who was at the lad's elbow. "Be wise, and escape while you can."

Marco's reply was a frenzied shout. With a steady hand he aimed and fired across the flame-lit smoke.

For several moments the rifles cracked and thundered.

But that last volley was as futile as the first. Half a score of the foe had gained the very edge of the fire. In the rear came a wave of dusky forms, hot for pillage and slaughter.

"Run for your lives!" yelled Redfield, springing to his feet. "Come lad, we'll stick together. Are you mad?" as Marco stubbornly held back. "It's our last chance."

Just then a blood-curdling scream rang from one of the nearby cages; above the tumult a smashing and creaking of wooden bars was heard.

The black panther was free. With another scream the maddened brute leaped blindly from the shattered cage, and landed in the very midst of the bullocks.

Now happened a strange and unexpected thing. In almost less time than it takes to tell the situation changed.

The bullocks, more terrified by the danger behind than in front, bolted wildly and simultaneously for the exit of the camp.

Bellowing and bawling they swirled close by the little group of defenders, trampled over the first ranks of the foe, and plunged into the narrow passage.

Even the fanatical hill-men could not stand such a charge. They turned and fled—as many of them as were able.

For a few brief moments cries of agony blended with the bawling and snorting of the cattle. Then the passage was clear, save for the dead and maimed. From outside the camp the bullocks could be heard scattering into the jungle.

Half-a-dozen of the enemy, who had dodged the charge,

remained within the inclosure. Four of these swiftly made their escape through the passage.

The other two recklessly advanced, and were shot down by Redfield and one of the natives. Meanwhile those of the injured who could move crawled out to their friends.

At first this occurrence seemed to offer the defenders only a breathing spell. Doubtless the enemy would soon rally and dash more determinedly than ever into the camp.

"Now is the time to escape," urged Redfield. "Come, I'll lead the way."

He started toward the rear of the camp, but Chundra caught his arm.

"Be careful, sahib!" he exclaimed. "The panther is yonder in the darkness. He will spring upon us."

"Are you mad?" cried Marco, "or have you all turned cowards? Just when the enemy are beaten off you want to escape. Our chances are better than ever. I will save the camp yet if you stand by me."

There was a moment of indecision. Gooloo Singh kept a wary eye on the passage. The trooper's face flushed.

"Coward is a hard name, lad," he muttered. "If we wait for another attack we are lost."

"I won't abandon the camp," Marco replied, doggedly. "Here, help me with this cage. Then see if we can't stand the rascals off."

The cage referred to formed the left wall of the passage. Redfield's face cleared as he saw the lad's idea. He hurried to Marco's assistance, followed by the others.

The cage was quickly hauled around broadside, so that

it completely blocked the passage, with the exception of one narrow gap. It was the cage containing Garcia's camping paraphernalia, and since its capture the contents had not been investigated.

During the placing of this barricade, the enemy, strange to say, made no sign. They must have been widely scattered by the charge of the maddened bullocks.

"Your idea is not a bad one, lad," said Redfield. "This is what we should have done in the beginning. With twice as many men I should feel pretty sure of holding the camp. However, I'll stick by you now, come what may."

"I hope you won't regret it," replied Marco. "I really think the odds are in our favor. The only weak spot in the whole circle is this gap here."

"We'll soon fix that," said the trooper. "All hands to work now, quick! Tear down the shanty yonder."

The little building was soon demolished, and the lumber was used to stop up the crevice and otherwise strengthen the barricade.

Hardly had this been completed when the savages were heard gathering on the outer side. They yelled ferociously for a little while, sending a few rifle balls and spears through the crevices of the cages.

Marco kept his men flat on the ground, and they escaped injury.

Finally the foe desisted. A deep silence ensued that was fraught with ominous meaning.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FLAG OF TRUCE.

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

"No doubt they will go spying around in search of a weak place," whispered Redfield. "The siege won't be raised before daylight, that's certain."

"Not if Garcia is in command of these devils," assented Marco, "and of course he is."

"You are right, sahib," said Gooloo Singh. "The Portuguese is bent on revenge. Plainly his force is very large, so we must take every precaution."

"And the first step is to put out the fire," declared Redfield. "Then we can move about with little danger, and our eyes will soon become accustomed to the darkness. At present we can't stir for fear of being shot."

Chundra volunteered for this perilous duty, and he succeeded in extinguishing the fire without drawing a shot or a spear from the enemy.

The camp was now enveloped in gloom—not so thick, however, but that the outlines of the cages and of human figures could be seen.

The loss of the two sentries had lessened the defenders to ten—Marco, Redfield, Gooloo Singh, the two shika-

rees, Dalo and Chundra, and three other natives. It was a small enough force to keep at bay a horde of the savage hill-men.

Another brief consultation was held, and all agreed that in constant watchfulness lay the only hope.

"We have reliable guns and plenty of ammunition," said Redfield. "That means everything. Now I am going to post you all around the circle. You must depend more on your ears than your eyes. At the first sign of danger give a low whistle. That will summon the rest of us to the spot."

This was the best plan of defense that could have been adopted. The barricading of the exit left the camp equally protected on all sides. The enemy would probably attack by breaking through the hedge.

Redfield chose the lower end, and, with two others, he carefully examined the scene of the recent carnage. Eleven bodies lay on the trampled grass, and only two showed signs of life.

Meanwhile Marco worked his way along one side of the inclosure. He had assigned two men to their posts of duty, and was measuring the distance for the third, when a dusky figure rose at his very feet, and bounded across the circle.

The fellow had a fair chance of escape, for his enemies were so startled that they forgot to fire.

But just as he reached the center of the camp he was pounced upon by the black panther, who had been lying concealed in the grass.

The blood-curdling scream of the beast mingled with the man's death-cry.

There was a general rush forward from all directions. Marco outdistanced the others. He halted ten feet from the spot, and took aim at the crouching figure of the panther.

The beast screamed horribly, and quivered for a spring at the daring lad. That instant the rifle cracked, and when the smoke cleared away the panther lay dead on the ground.

The man was also dead. In the dim light his bitten and mangled throat could be seen.

"One of the hill-men," said Marco, bending over him. "I suppose he was with the attacking party, and ran in this direction when the bullocks stampeded."

"That's it," replied Redfield, "and he was watching his chance to get out. Well, the panther won't trouble us any more. Back to your posts, men. We are giving the enemy a good chance."

A moment later the brief tragedy was forgotten. There were more important things to think about. After posting all the men, Marco took up his own position next to Redfield.

Of course, the shooting of the panther had stirred the wild beasts to a high pitch of howling and roaring. Presently they became quiet, except for an occasional wheeze or yawl.

The surrounding jungle seemed deserted. Not a sound could be heard from the wounded savages who had

crawled out of the camp. They were enduring their injuries with Spartan fortitude.

An hour slipped by. To the little band of ten, shut in by bloodthirsty foes, the period was one of constant suspense.

They listened with keen ears for the dreaded signal. They strained their eyes through the murky gloom.

At frequent intervals either Marco or Redfield paced around the inclosure. As the minutes went by, the hope that the enemy had retreated grew stronger.

It was a vain hope. Marco's heart would have been wrung with anguish could he have foreseen the result of his refusal to escape when the opportunity offered.

Gooloo Singh's alertness discovered the first attack. The brave Hindoo was posted on the left side of the camp. Hearing low, guttural voices, and a rustling in the thorn hedge, he gave the signal—a sharp, clear whistle.

It was quickly responded to, and just as the last man reached the spot half a score of slippery savages burst through a gap in the hedge.

"Throw yourselves flat!" cried Marco. "Now give it to them. Shoot under the cage!"

The rifle fire that followed did fearful execution, and took the foe by surprise. With shrieks of agony, they fled back to the shelter of the jungle.

The defenders fired steadily for several minutes. When they stopped all was quiet. Under the cage half-a-dozen dead bodies could be dimly seen.

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

"And we'll teach them more if they need them," replied Marco. "This is a dangerous spot and will have to be watched. I'll leave Chundra here to keep you company, Gooloo. Lie flat on the ground so that the savages have no chance to shoot or spear you."

After posting the others at different points, Marco and Redfield paced around and around the camp. They felt that it would be dangerous to rely on signals, since the wild beasts were all in a state of howling panic.

Scarcely five minutes had elapsed when the second attack came—from the opposite side of the inclosure.

This time the enemy did not succeed in breaking through the hedge. A well-delivered volley caught them while they were entangled in the meshes of the thorn bushes. Another volley drove them back to the jungle.

The men returned to their posts. Marco and the trooper, now more confident than ever, paced up and down the camp.

Suddenly the sentry at the upper end of the inclosure uttered a shrill cry and fired his rifle.

The entire force hastened to the spot just as a desperate attack began. Half-a-dozen savages had already wormed in through the crevices.

They were armed only with spears, and before they could do any damage four were shot dead in their tracks. The other two retreated.

The defenders of the camp dropped flat in the grass, and a volley of spears and bullets passed harmlessly over them.

A brief breathing spell ensued. Marco sent Gooloo

Singh and Chundra back to their posts, lest the enemy should make a second attack on the broken hedge.

"That's right, lad," commented Redfield. "There are only eight of us now, but we'll give a good account of ourselves. Look out, here comes the rub!"

There was a burst of fiendish yells from outside the camp. Then—crash! The cage that blocked the passage was tumbled clear off the truck. Its position was not materially altered, though the barricade was now three or four feet lower.

Instantly the desperate savages clambered upon the fallen cage, ready to leap down into the camp!

"Fire!" cried Marco, and the repeating rifles mowed the enemy aside like ripened grain.

Some fell backward, carrying down those who were scrambling up from behind. Others reeled forward, crashing to the ground in limp heaps, and squirming in their death agonies.

A few desperate ruffians jumped into the camp, full of life and deviltry, and advanced in the teeth of the fire until they fell, riddled with bullets.

Now and then, when the shooting slackened for an instant, the grim little band heard the crack of rifles in their rear. This meant that Gooloo Singh and Chundra were resisting a counter-attack.

But no relief could be spared them now. The savage hill-men were still hotly storming the barricade.

"Fire! fire!" shouted Redfield. "Keep it up, men!"

"Make every shot tell!" cried Marco. "They can't stand it long!"

Crack! crack! crack! The murky night blazed with red flashes; a pall of smoke hid the heavens. The roars of wild beasts blended with the howls of tigerish men.

Ah! now the barricade was clear. No more climbed up from behind. One frenzied savage, who had toppled into the camp, went down before Marco's rifle.

That was the last shot. The bloodthirsty foe fell back to the jungle, beaten off for the fourth time. Half a score of dead cumbered the inner side of the barricade, and no doubt many more lay without it.

There was now comparative silence. The rifles of Gooloo Singh and Chundra were stilled.

The plucky victors stretched their cramped limbs and looked at one another in the smoky gloom. They reloaded their rifles, and stuffed their belts and pockets from the ammunition box, which was close by.

"Any one hurt?" Marco asked, in a husky voice.

"Not seriously," responded the trooper. "Dalo here has a spear wound in his arm, and a bullet nipped my left ear. The rascals had hardly a chance to fire at us. I think we've settled them for good this time."

Marco laughed hoarsely. His head was aching and dizzy. He crawled to the water bucket and took a deep, long draught.

Redfield hastened up the camp, and returned a moment later.

"All's snug in that direction," he reported. "The rascals tried to enter by the torn hedge, but the plucky Hindoos drove them back."

"Is Gooloo hurt?" asked Marco.

"Not a scratch on either of them," replied the trooper. "One of the hyenas in yonder cage is dead, though. You see it was right in the line of the enemy's fire."

"It's not our loss," said Marco. "The animal belonged to Garcia. I think I'll move the tiger's cage a little to one side. I'd rather—hello! what does that mean?"

He pointed to a fluttering white object that had suddenly appeared above the barricade.

"Blest if I know," muttered Redfield. "Some deviltry, I'll bet a rupee. By Jove! lad, it must be a——"

"Flag of truce," interrupted a clear, ringing voice from beyond the barricade, thus completing the trooper's sentence.

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

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

"That sounds well from such a pack of devils," growled Redfield. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Will you grant me a safe interview?"

"Yes, a short one. Show up!"

There was a brief pause. Then the head and shoulders of a man rose above the barricade. The dim light sufficed to reveal the crafty features of Senor Garcia.

CHAPTER XV.

A DEN OF SERPENTS.

The appearance of the Portuguese was not entirely unexpected, for Marco had fathomed a familiar ring in the voice.

So had some one else. Gooloo Singh stood behind the little group with a look of interest on his dusky face.

"Chundra will defend the post, sahib," he whispered in the lad's ear. "I am anxious to hear what this treacherous dog says."

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

"Pardon me if I intrude," he began, in oily, deprecating tones. "I have a little matter of business with your leader—a lad named Marco."

"I'll speak for him, you scoundrel!" replied Redfield, nervously fingering his rifle. "There's nothing you can say that will help your case any. You'll repent this dirty trick when Her Majesty's Government gets hold of you. I hope I'll be with the squad that runs you and your hired bloodhounds down!"

Garcia laughed—a curt, mocking laugh that stung his hearers to the quick.

"My friend, you speak boldly for a rat in a trap," he said. "But I must see the lad, and none other. He has

the lives of all of you in his power. They are lost if he denies me an interview."

"Pay no attention, sahib," whispered Gooloo Singh. "He is not to be trusted."

"No more than a cobra," added Redfield. "Some deviltry is brewing in his brain."

"But it may be to our advantage," protested Marco. "Anyhow, there is no danger while the truce lasts."

He resolutely advanced to within ten feet of the barricade, carrying his rifle carelessly in one hand. The others kept a keen watch on the Portuguese, ready to fire at the first sign of treachery.

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

"The surrender of the camp," replied Garcia, "and the restoration of my animals and property. On my part, I agree to spare the lives of all, and to take nothing that is not my own. I will also forgive the personal wrongs you have done me."

"Forgive!" exclaimed Marco, wrathfully. "Senor Garcia, you are the most impudent rascal that ever lived. This interview may as well end. I shall hold the camp. If you want your property, appeal to the authorities."

"Stop!" cried the Portuguese. "Do you realize what a refusal means? I have four score of desperate savages left. At each attack to-night I called them back. I was merely testing your powers. Now I shall unleash them. I shall bid them do their worst. They will attack the camp at one point. At most you will shoot down a score. The rest will have you at their mercy. And such mercy! Ah, it will be a great revenge. Do you still refuse?"

"Yes," replied Marco. "You can't scare me with your bluster. And now——"

Crack! With lightning-like rapidity, the Portuguese had whipped out a pistol and fired at the lad. The ball whizzed within an inch of Marco's head, and narrowly missed his companions.

Gooloo Singh and Redfield instantly returned the fire, but Garcia had dropped behind the cage. The cummerbund fluttered for a moment and then disappeared.

Gooloo Singh caught Marco in his arms.

"Are you hurt, sahib?" he cried, anxiously.

"No; but it was a close call," replied the lad. "I didn't expect such treachery."

"The fiend shall pay dearly for it," declared Redfield. "Back, all of you. This is a dangerous spot just now."

The trooper was right. The little group had barely moved to one side and thrown themselves flat when spears and rifle balls whistled into the camp.

These hostile demonstrations quickly ceased, and the jungle beyond the barricade became silent.

"Garcia's talk about taking the camp was only bluster, of course," said Marco, a little uneasily.

"Certainly," replied Redfield, "else he would not have been so angered by your refusal to surrender."

"But he will do his best to carry out the threat now," said Gooloo Singh. "There is grave danger, sahib. Moreover, if he have four-score of men left——"

"I'm a little doubtful myself, I'll admit," interrupted the trooper. "If the devils had made one more rush the last attack I'm afraid we should have been snowed under.

Suppose we send a man to the military cantonments at Barakar? There's a chance to slip out of camp now. If he gets through all right Clemson and the troopers will be here by noon to-morrow."

This plan needed no discussion. It was eagerly approved.

"Garcia will be nicely trapped if he keeps the siege up long enough," said Marco.

"If he keeps it up that long we'll hardly be here to welcome the soldiers," muttered Redfield, in an undertone.

Gooloo Singh nodded significantly, and there was a worried expression on his face as he glanced at Marco.

Two of the natives volunteered for the journey. No doubt both were actuated by a desire to get away from that doomed camp.

The choice fell on Salar, the younger of the two. He was a fleet runner, and, moreover, was well acquainted with the road to the cantonments.

He received his instructions and then crept softly to the rear end of the camp. His companions heard a slight rustling and crackling as he forced his way through the hedge.

A moment later a terrible shriek rang on the night, and was followed by a hoarse, exultant cry. Words could not have made the story plainer. The messenger had been butchered by the enemy.

Salar's friends were powerless to avenge him. At first they were dumb with horror. Then a fearful rage made them thirst for blood.

"Wait!" cried Redfield. "We'll pay them for this. Our chance will come."

"I wish it would come now," added Marco. "And I hope Garcia will lead the next rush."

"Do nothing rash, sahibs," warned Gooloo Singh. "There is no aid to be looked for from the soldiers. We must hold the camp until the siege is raised."

Five minutes of silent suspense went by. Every man examined his weapon. Only seven were left—seven against four-score!

Marco and Redfield paced along opposite sides of the camp, with eyes and ears on the alert.

The lad paused a moment before a long, shallow cage that was not on trucks like the others. It rose only six feet from the ground.

"Here is a weak place," he reflected. "The savages could easily swarm over. I wonder Garcia has not discovered it long ago."

The face of this cage was covered with wire netting, and it was partitioned into three compartments. Here, amid grass and stones, lived a colony of serpents.

Half-a-score of deadly cobras occupied one compartment. In the next were other serpents, almost equally venomous. The third held a huge and very ill-natured python.

Just as Marco moved on, the jungle outside echoed to the rustle of many feet. The next instant the thorn hedge was torn apart, and the savages came with a dash against the serpent cage.

But they failed to push it in, since Marco had taken

the precaution to drive heavy stakes in front of it. Foiled in this, they swarmed upon the top of it, uttering fierce yells, shooting muskets and hurling spears.

By this time the handful of defenders were on the spot, and a deadly rifle fire made havoc with the foe.

In the midst of the conflict, a keen watch was kept on the entrance of the camp. Gooloo Singh and Chundra were ready to rush to the spot at the first sign of a counter attack.

But Garcia seemed to have rallied his entire force at one place, as he had sworn to do. With utter contempt of the hail of bullets, the fiendish wretches surged over the cage, and plunged into the camp.

The defenders were compelled to fall back a little, still shooting incessantly. With fear and rage they saw half-a-dozen of the foe pressing them face to face. Others were dropping down from the cage every second. The living trampled over the dead and dying.

A shower of spears was hurled, and the native at Marco's side was pierced from breast to back. He fell with a groan. Only six men left now!

Redfield's voice rang hoarsely above the tumult:

"Give them another volley! Drive them back. Fire! fire!"

The rifles spit out flame and lead. Here and there dusky wretches bit the ground in their death agonies. But they were instantly replaced. There seemed no checking the foe now.

At this critical and desperate moment a horrible disaster befell the hill men. The top of the cage was of thin

planking. It suddenly gave way with a crash, and eight or ten of the savages went down among the serpents.

They instantly discovered their frightful peril. With bloodcurdling screams, they fought like madmen to escape.

In their struggles, the cage was overturned, and snakes and savages swarmed out together among the half-score hill men who had gained a foothold within the camp.

No tongue or pen can describe the awful scenes that followed.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EXPLOSION.

The bravest of men are likely to meet, some day, a peril that will turn their long-tried courage to wax.

And so it was now. The struggle for the camp was forgotten in the presence of this horde of hissing, venomous serpents.

The snakes, roused to anger and activity, sprang and bit right and left at the half-naked bodies of the savages. Every nip of the sharp fangs meant speedy and certain death. Wails of keenest agony echoed far and near through the jungle.

One after another the victims fell, tearing at their bitten limbs, through which the poison was swiftly coursing. Some staggered away from the fatal spot before they reeled down.

A very few escaped entirely. They fled unmolested across the camp, and scrambled over the barricade.

The panic spread to those in the jungle behind the upset cage. Fearing a like fate, they scurried away from the infected neighborhood.

The worst was over in a very short time. The wails of the dying grew feebler and feebler. There was less movement in the squirming heap of bodies. Here and there they could be seen crawling painfully away from the spot.

One poor wretch, with a cobra fastened to his naked arm, bit the reptile in the throat, and then fell over dead.

Another, around whose leg was circled a thick, green serpent, sprang, by a spasmodic effort, almost to Marco's feet, and lay there screaming with agony.

But help was out of the question. The little handful of brave men had their own safety to look after. Amid all the horrors, their first thought was for the camp.

Moreover, the serpents were now spreading. In all directions the ugly scintillating forms went hissing and gliding through the trampled grass.

A cobra reared its hooded head within three feet of Marco, and was struck down by Gooloo Singh's rifle. Another was ground to death under Redfield's booted heel.

"Back! back!" cried the trooper. "We can't stay here. There is death in every step."

"We've got to face the serpents," exclaimed Marco. "The camp must be protected. A fresh attack may come at any minute."

"True, sahib," replied Gooloo Singh, "there are three score of the foe left."

With cautious tread the little party of six retreated a few feet. Then they stood in anxious indecision, scanning the sides of the camp.

No one saw the python drag his thick coils over the heap of dead and dying. Indeed, no one remembered his existence.

He had just left the cage, where he had lain stupidly during all the panic. Now he was thoroughly aroused.

He was hungry and ill-tempered. His wicked eyes sparkled as he glided toward the unsuspecting group.

Suddenly Chundra gave an awful yell, and his horrified companions fled to right and left as they saw him in the embrace of the slimy monster.

Two coils encircled the poor Hindoo. His bones cracked with a sickening sound, and his cries ended in a gurgling wail. The python's head darted to and fro, hissing and spitting.

Marco uttered an exclamation of rage. He reversed his rifle and daringly sprang forward, watching a chance to strike.

"Back, sahib, for your life!" warned Gooloo Singh.

"It's too late to do any good," cried Redfield. "Look out! Give me a chance to shoot."

These instructions confused Marco, and threw him momentarily off his guard. That quickly the python's tail whisked alongside of him, and coiled about his legs, jerking him to the ground.

He gave himself up for lost. With a frightful cry, he struggled vainly to escape. He shrilly implored aid.

The sight of the lad's peril goaded Gooloo Singh to desperation. He cocked his rifle, and recklessly ran up to the python's swaying head. He poked the muzzle into the open mouth and fired twice.

Both the balls went through a vital part. The reptile writhed and squirmed in its death agonies, thumping its pondrous coils over the ground. Its eyes emitted sparks; it hissed like a steam valve.

Chundra was silent, but Marco's screams chilled every

heart. Gooloo Singh fired bullet after bullet into the monster.

Meanwhile, Redfield had dashed to the tent. Now he returned with a gleaming ax. He ran at the python, and attacked the thick body midway between the two victims.

Thud! thud! thud! Every stroke told, in spite of the fearful contortions. The ax flashed faster.

Rip! the monster fell apart, cloven fairly in two. Little fountains of blood spurted over the ground, and up to Redfield's middle.

The trooper uttered a cry of satisfaction. He staggered back, panting and exhausted.

At last the monster's vitality was destroyed. Its twin bodies stirred but feebly.

Gooloo Singh's eager hands tore Marco loose. Beyond a slight bruising, he was absolutely uninjured. Happily, the reptile's strength had been most centered on the unfortunate Hindoo.

Chundra was just breathing his last. The body was so tightly wrapped in the slimy coils that it could not be liberated.

Gooloo Singh ran for water, and dashed it over Marco's head. He felt better at once, and in a moment or two had quite recovered.

All were depressed by the sad tragedy. The sultry night seemed to whisper of worse misfortunes to come.

"Five left," said Redfield, huskily. "We're no match for that fiend of a Portuguese. I've little heart to fight against such odds."

"But the luck has really been on our side," said Marco,

with a show of cheerfulness. "The savages have had to retreat every time. They'll hardly make another attack."

"Not of their own free will," muttered the trooper. "I'll grant that. But as long as they obey Garcia's orders there's no telling——"

"Look, sahibs," shrilly interrupted Gooloo Singh. "There—at the end of the camp."

All eyes followed the Hindoo's outstretched arm. They saw an ominous sight. A ruddy glare danced above the barricade. Evidently a lot of dry grass had been heaped against the cage and set on fire.

"We must put it out," cried Marco, dashing toward the spot. "There are eight or nine pails of water left."

"It's madness, lad!" exclaimed the trooper; but nevertheless he followed with the others.

They secured the buckets and fearlessly approached the barricade. Just then a score of forked flames leaped out of the dense yellow smoke. They hissed and crackled about the woodwork of the doomed cage.

"It would take a reservoir to put that out," cried the trooper. "It's all up with the camp now. It's even doubtful if we can save our lives."

"You mean that the camp is surrounded?" said Marco. "Well, I'm afraid you're right. It's hard to die like rats in a trap. And it's my fault, too."

"If it comes to the worst, we'll sell our lives dearly," replied Redfield. "But a bold rush may take us safely into the jungle. Are you ready to try it?"

No one replied; no one stirred. They stood for a mo-

ment in bitter despair. They were blind to their exposed position; for all around them was a bright red light.

The flames spread and crackled. The poor beasts, imprisoned in their cages, roared and screamed at the approaching death.

But, strange to say, the enemy fired no shots at the clearly-outlined little group; not a spear whizzed.

Nor was there any indication of life outside. To all sight and sound the jungle beyond the barricade was deserted.

"I know why the rascals are so quiet," suddenly cried Marco. "They are keeping at a safe distance. That burning cage belonged to Garcia, and among the contents are two cans of powder——"

"Powder?" interrupted Redfield. "Are you sure?"

"Yes; because I opened one of the cans. I had forgotten all about it. But Garcia remembered, and that is why he made the fire."

"He wished to blow the passage free," added Gooloo Singh. "Then they will rush in."

"God help us!" cried the trooper. "And the cage is now wrapped in flames. At any instant the fire may reach the powder. Back—back for your lives! It is death to linger here."

Just then, and before a single one could heed the warning, there came a tremendous explosion that seemed to rend the very earth asunder. A sheet of flame rose heavenward, and immediately afterward the air was black

with shattered timbers and wheels, and iron bolts, and clods of earth, and a host of smaller *débris*.

The force of the explosion hurled the occupants of the camp to the ground, where they lay, dazed and stunned, while the shower of wreckage fell around them, and the suffocating smoke filled their nostrils.

CHAPTER XVII.

A TIMELY RESCUE.

Fortunately, the little group had been far enough away to escape serious injury. A vague sense of impending danger took hold of their reeling brains. They rose dizzily, and looked about them.

Where the barricade had been was now a great black rent in the ground. The cages to right and left of the passage had also been destroyed—or partially so.

In one, a mangled leopard was screaming in agony. From the shattered timbers of the other protruded the dead bodies of the two hyenas; one had been dead before the explosion.

The occupants of all the other cages were making a fearful din. The whole scene was still brightly illumined by fragments of burning wood.

The time during which Marco and his companions stood gazing stupidly about them was in reality very brief, though it seemed long to their dazed minds.

They were roused from their stupefaction by a sudden burst of angry yells. Through the shattered barricade streamed a horde of savages. From the center of the mob towered Garcia's lean figure.

A single glance showed the impossibility of resisting such a charge.

"Run—run for your lives!" cried Redfield.

He dashed toward the rear of the camp, and the others followed as fast as their staggering limbs would carry them.

Close behind pressed the merciless and bloodthirsty hill men. Rifles cracked and spears whistled through the air.

The fugitives were now in deeper shadow. A little more, and they would be safe. Redfield, Marco and Gooloo Singh were slightly in advance. Dalo and the other native, whose name was Pandy, ran a foot or two in the rear.

Suddenly Pandy gave a shrill yell. A cobra had fastened upon his ankle. As the stricken man reeled in agony, a rifleball pierced his head, and mercifully ended his suffering. He fell in a limp heap.

Meanwhile, Marco had imprudently checked his speed to look around, and at the same time Dalo, by a quick spurt, gained the lad's place between the trooper and Gooloo Singh.

Seeing that Pandy was beyond help, Marco dashed on after his companions. But before he had taken three steps, his foot caught in a clump of tangled grass. Down he went, striking his head so forcibly on a tough root as to partly lose consciousness.

In the dim light, the trooper and Gooloo Singh did not discover the substitution of Dalo for the lad. They pushed on at full speed, fearful of being overtaken and butchered.

They reached the end of the camp, and dived under

the nearest cage. Amid deep gloom they fought their way through the hedge of thorns. Bleeding and lacerated, they staggered into the jungle.

Then, for the first time, they discovered the lad was missing.

Let us go back and see how Marco fared. He was roused from his half-stupor by a rush of naked feet that trampled ruthlessly over him.

Smarting with pain, he struggled to an upright position. He was instantly seized from behind, and, turning around, he found himself in the iron grasp of Garcia.

Marco gave himself up for lost. He trembled to think what his fate would be. He was too weak to resist. He was like a child in his captor's grasp.

"Aha! this is rare luck," hissed the Portuguese. "You see, I have kept my word. And it was you I wanted most. I am glad now that my pistol shot failed. I will settle old scores in much better fashion."

"Have mercy," pleaded Marco, as he looked vainly around for his friends. "Don't kill me."

Garcia laughed mockingly.

"Back, you dogs!" he shouted at the fiendish savages, who were swarming around the two. "Leave the prisoner to me. I will glut your hunger for revenge soon enough."

They sullenly withdrew, and went yelling across the camp after their comrades.

An instant later Garcia was joined by two other Portuguese—the same who had escaped from Matlock's party during the fight in the gorge. Their names were Gon-

zales and Towes, and they were every whit as evil-looking as their leader. They glared ferociously at Marco.

"You see I have the lad," said Garcia. "That satisfies me. The others escaped to the jungle, and it is useless to pursue them."

"It is a pity," replied Towes. "They will hurry to the nearest cantonment, and send the cavalry on our tracks."

"And the explosion may have been heard there," added Gonzales, uneasily. "We had better get away from here as quickly as possible."

"Cowards!" exclaimed Garcia. "Still, you are right. But first I will have my revenge. Call back these savages, if they have been foolish enough to pursue the fugitives into the jungle. Be quick, I need you."

However, the hill men had gone no farther after Redfield and his companions than to the end of the camp.

Since their lust for blood could not be appeased, they turned their thoughts to plunder. Some lit torches, and groped among the bodies of the dead, uttering wailing cries,

Others ripped the tent apart, and fell to quarreling over the contents. They discovered several bottles of strong liquor—provided by Matlock for medicinal purposes—and began to drink it greedily.

Towes and Gonzales tried their best to restore order, but with little success.

Then they returned to their leader, who had been waiting impatiently for them, while he kept a tight hold on Marco.

"The wretches are beyond control," said Gonzales. "They won't listen to us."

"Let them alone," cried Garcia, angrily. "I'll attend to them when I finish this business. Here, take the lad. It will cost you your life if you let him slip away."

He turned Marco over to the two Portuguese. Then he snatched a torch from one of the savages, and hurried across the camp.

"This way," he shouted, a moment later.

Gonzales and Towes dragged the lad over to Garcia, who was standing before the cage that contained the Bengal tiger.

The huge beast was pacing restlessly up and down, growling in a low key. He was plainly in a very bad temper, and this was aggravated by the howling of the other animals and the glare of the torches.

On Garcia's face was a smile of deadly hatred and satisfaction. His white teeth gleamed under his parted lips.

"How do you like my revenge?" he asked.

Marco's blood turned chill with horror. He suddenly realized his awful fate. The Portuguese intended to throw him into the tiger's cage.

He first made a desperate effort to escape. Then he pleaded pitifully for mercy, turning from one to another of his captors. His courage could not stand such a fearful test.

"If you must take my life," he implored, "kill me in some other way. Don't torture me."

But the poor lad appealed to deaf ears and merciless hearts.

"Ah! you shudder!" cried Garcia. "You suffer with fear. This is a sweet revenge. You will make a dainty morsel for yonder brute. Look, his jaws are open. The great teeth will crunch your bones."

He signaled the two Portuguese to draw nearer. Then he stepped close up to the bars. Half-a-score of the savages gathered about the spot, yelling exultantly.

The tiger retreated to the rear of the cage. He dropped on his haunches, and uttered a low, ominous growl. His tongue dangled from his blood-red chops.

Towes and Gonzales hauled Marco still nearer, in spite of his frantic struggles and cries.

With one hand Garcia fumbled at the fastenings of the cage; in the other he held up the blazing torch so as to keep the brute back. He slowly drew the sliding door open.

"Quick!" he cried. "Throw the lad in."

As Marco was lifted off his feet by the two Portuguese, he gave a fearful yell, and struggled partly out of their grasp.

Garcia swore savagely, and in his rage he let the torch fall to the ground.

Then quickly the tiger seized the opportunity, and leaped forward with a thunderous roar. He stuck fast for a second or two in the narrow doorway.

There he squirmed and struggled for liberty.

The change of situation was so unexpected that all lost their presence of mind. Garcia sprang to one side, and went over backward. Townes and Gonzales dropped the lad, and started to run.

Smash! rip! the bars of the cage split, and the maddened tiger was free. With a deep roar, he bounded clear over Marco, and pounced upon Gonzales. He shook the luckless man as a terrier shakes a rat, and then vaulted lightly with him across the camp.

Confusion and clamor followed. Marco rose to his feet, scarcely comprehending what had happened.

Garcia's evil eyes caught sight of him, and he fumbled hurriedly in his belt for a pistol. He drew out the weapon, and turned it on the lad.

At this critical moment there was a rustling noise close by. Then—from under the tiger's cage burst Redfield, Dalo and Gooloo Singh.

The latter seized Marco, and jerked him down just in time to escape Garcia's bullet. The other two opened a hot fire on the badly-demoralized savages.

Towes was the first to fall, his death cry ringing on his lips. Garcia was seen to drop, whether purposely or from a wound it was impossible to tell.

The heroic little handful of rescuers stopped short of imprudence. At the first sign of a rally on the part of the savages, Redfield gave the order to retreat.

They crawled swiftly under the cage, and back through the broken hedge, taking Marco with them. They reached the jungle in safety, and sped rapidly on amid the darkness.

Gooloo Singh's faithful arms supported Marco, and lent him strength and courage.

In the rear the hoarse yells of the foe grew fainter and fainter, until they could no longer be distinguished.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A PERILOUS SWIM.

A brief halt was made at a small water hole, which Redfield accidentally discovered by plunging into it. The locality was a dangerous one, since wild beasts could be heard in all directions.

Marco drank his fill, and then bathed his face. He was still nervous from his frightful experience with Garcia. He listened with interest to the narrative of his rescue, modestly told by Gooloo Singh.

"We've had enough of the past," said Redfield. "It's the future that concerns us now. Unless we hurry, those bloody devils will creep ahead, and watch for us at the river ford. Dalo, you are skilled in jungle craft. Can you take us straight to Barakar?"

"Yes, sahib," replied the shikaree, "I can do it. I need neither sun nor stars."

"Go ahead, then. I'm itching to get the cavalry after these savages before they escape to the hills. And I want to see Garcia caught—unless he's dead, which I doubt."

"How about the camp?" asked Marco.

"There won't be much left there worth saving," responded the trooper. "They will probably burn everything. But I hope, for your sake, that they won't, lad." Marco's heart was sad as he followed his companions

through the jungle. He knew that he was really not to blame—that he had defended his trust even beyond discretion. But, nevertheless, he dreaded telling the news to Matlock and Hofstein.

This feeling wore off after a time. Indeed, there was too much else to think of. The fugitives were by no means out of danger.

With their weapons ready for use, they crept along in single file, Dalo at the head. They had to cling to one another for fear of becoming separated and lost.

It was no easy task to pick a way through the fastnesses of the jungle by night. The shikaree made frequent halts. Twice he actually branched off in the wrong direction.

On these occasions he was recalled to the right path only by catching a scant glimpse of the stars through the matted foliage.

Thus valuable time was lost. The flight had lasted for a good hour and a half when the jungle finally fell away, and revealed the misty river swirling on its course to the sea.

The little party halted anxiously at the water's edge.

"I don't recognize the place," exclaimed Redfield. "It's not where Captain Clemson led us across."

"The ford is a quarter of a mile up stream," replied Dalo, pointing to the north. "Come, sahibs, I will quickly take you there."

"Hold on," said the trooper. "It's just as well that we struck the river here. We had best not venture up

above. As likely as not the savages have reached the ford and are watching it."

"But here the water is deep," protested Marco. "We must swim."

"And there are crocodiles," added Gooloo Singh.

"Well," replied the trooper, "we stand a better chance of keeping them off by swimming. We can splash with our feet and scare them. If we wade, that is impossible."

"The sahib speaks wisely," said Dalo. "Look! that will serve to support our arms while we swim."

He pointed to a bare and whitened trunk of a tree, about eight feet long, that lay on the edge of the shore.

"Just the thing," approved Redfield. "It will be a great help in crossing. Once on the other side, we can feel safe. It will soon be daylight now."

With Dalo's assistance, he dragged the log partly into the water.

Suddenly Marco uttered a low cry.

"Wait," he said. "I have just remembered something. There ought to be a boat concealed in the bushes about fifty yards above the ford. Matlock bought it from some natives for the use of Dalo and Chundra when they crossed the river to seek for animals."

"It is still there, sahib," the shikaree reluctantly admitted. "I, too, had forgotten."

It was evident from his manner that he did not wish to remember.

"A boat!" exclaimed Redfield. "That alters the situation. It would be foolish to run the risk of crocodiles

when we can cross in safety. And there is a risk, I suppose."

"A grave one, sahib," admitted Gooloo Singh. "At times the crocodiles are more than usually ravenous."

There was a moment of hesitation. The danger of falling into an ambushade at the ford was not imaginary. There was strong reason to believe that the savages were in hiding there.

Dalo flatly refused to stir. He urged the others to swim across by means of the log.

"I will bring the boat," Marco calmly declared. "I am a good runner, and I know how to slip up stream without noise. When I get near the ford, I will make a detour."

"I will go with you, sahib," replied Gooloo Singh, in a determined tone.

Redfield reluctantly consented.

"I am as clumsy as an elephant," he said, "or I would go with you myself. The savages could hear me fifty yards away. Dalo and I will wait here."

"Well, we won't be long," replied Marco.

"We will paddle out into the stream, and then lie flat while the boat drifts down. In the darkness it will look like a log. It is only a rude dug-out, anyhow."

Without further words, the two volunteers slipped noiselessly up the shore, keeping under cover of the grass and bushes. They made good use of eyes and ears, and were prepared to fire at the first sign of an enemy. Marco knew the exact spot where the boat was moored to an overhanging tree.

The jungle back from the river was intensely quiet. There was no sound of bird or beast. To Gooloo Singh's experienced mind, this was an ominous sign.

All went well until the fording place was about twenty yards distant. Then Marco turned at right angles.

"Here is where we must begin to cut around," he whispered. "I don't believe there is any danger, though."

"But it is not certain, sahib," replied the Hindoo. "Make no noise."

Side by side they crept through the strip of grass and scrub that extended a dozen feet from the water's edge. Then came a scant slope of open ground, on top of which began the jungle.

Marco was the first to mount this slope, and just as he put foot on the level, a dusky figure rose in front of him, scarcely six feet away.

The lad was startled out of his self-possession, and thereby his life was probably saved. He slipped backward, and rolled down the slope.

After him came the savage, brandishing a long spear. He cleared the slope in two leaps, not observing the Hindoo as he passed him.

Meanwhile Marco had risen to his feet. He had dropped his rifle, but there was no time to look for it now. He dashed straight toward the river.

At that critical moment, when the savage was about to drive his spear into the lad's back, Gooloo Singh's rifle cracked. The wretch leaped high in air with a shrill cry, and fell over in a squirming heap.

A rustling noise caused the Hindoo to wheel quickly

around, and he found himself face to face with a second savage who had just plunged down the slope.

At such close quarters it was impossible to shoot. With a lightning-like movement, Gooloo Singh knocked up his enemy's spear, and then struck him with the rifle. The blow shattered the fellow's skull, and he rolled over like a log.

By this time Marco had found his gun, and was ready to take a hand in the fray. But no more of the foe appeared. The two had probably been posted on the spot as sentries.

It was quickly evident, however, that a nest of savages were lurking in the vicinity of the ford, and that the report of the rifle had roused them. The night rang with hoarse cries; a commotion was heard in the jungle.

"Run, sahib," cried the Hindoo. "The boat is lost to us. We must hurry back to our companions and swim the river."

Side by side they sped down the shore, leaping the grass and scrub like deer. The racket in the rear seemed to keep pace with them. Evidently the enemy were in hot pursuit.

When more than half the distance was covered, the fugitives met Dalo and the trooper, who had pluckily started to the rescue.

A brief explanation was given, and then all four hastened on. They reached the spot, and delayed only long enough to throw off their heavier articles of clothing.

They waded eagerly into the water, pushing the log in

front of them. Its top was flat, and afforded an insecure resting place for their rifles.

Now they were swimming diagonally across the current, clinging with both hands to the log, while they splashed vigorously with their feet to scare away the crocodiles.

With fierce cries the savages swarmed down to the shore. They dared not venture into the water. In vain they hurled showers of spears, and discharged matchlocks.

The fugitives swam on and on, growing more confident of safety with every second.

Midchannel was close at hand.

Suddenly Dalo uttered a shrill exclamation:

"Look! sahibs," he cried, hoarsely, as he pointed one hand up stream.

CHAPTER XIX.

A FEARFUL RETRIBUTION.

All eyes were instantly turned in the direction designated by the shikaree. At a distance of probably a quarter of a mile up channel, a bulky, black object was visible on the water.

"It must be a mass of driftwood," declared Redfield. "There was no need to scare us so badly, Dalo."

"It is the boat, sahibs," calmly asserted Gooloo Singh. "The savages have found it, and are paddling after us."

All were convinced that the Hindoo was right. A chill of terror struck every heart.

Nor was absolute proof lacking. A burst of cries from the savages on the shore was instantly responded to by their comrades adrift on the river. The boat was seen to increase its speed; the beat of paddles could be faintly heard.

"Courage," whispered Redfield. "We will outwit these ruffians yet. But don't stop splashing, or the crocodiles may make short work of us."

"The noise will tell our enemies where we are," grumbled Dalo.

"No doubt they see us already," replied the trooper. "We can't expect to remain invisible. Our only hope is in speed."

The fugitives swam on with the log, splashing more vigorously than ever. Owing to the strong current, they drifted half-a-dozen yards down stream to every one that they made toward the opposite shore.

They were now beyond the center of the river, and consequently safe from the foe on the bank. These, however, ran along at a speed that kept them parallel with the log, yelling fiercely, shooting matchlocks, and hurling spears.

By this time the boat was straight up stream from the fugitives. It loomed nearer and nearer in the misty light. The hoarse cries of its occupants told that they had sighted their intended victims.

"The wretches will soon be up with us," exclaimed Marco, glancing despairingly at the yet distant shore. "Unless Garcia is with them, they probably have no weapons but spears."

"And we have four good rifles," replied Redfield, divining Marco's thought. "Suppose you and I straddle the log, lad, and open fire on the rascals before they get within spear range. I'll warrant they will lose no time in getting away from us."

"Is the log heavy enough?"

"Yes, for two. Gooloo Singh and the shikaree can swim alongside."

The trooper's plan was a feasible one, but it was destined to be shattered by an unforeseen disaster.

The ugly snout of a crocodile suddenly appeared on the surface of the water twenty feet distant. Dalo pointed it out with a shrill cry of fright.

"Splash!" yelled Redfield, "splash for your lives!"

In the panic and kicking that ensued, the water was violently agitated. The fugitives threw too much weight upon the log, and, without warning, it rolled entirely over.

All were forced to let go, but the next instant they had taken a fresh hold, and were splashing more furiously than ever.

"We have lost the rifles," Redfield cried, bitterly. "They are at the bottom of the river—every one. That puts us at the mercy of these ruffians."

His companions were thinking less of the weapons than of the crocodile. But when they had drifted on for twenty yards, they felt safer. The monster seemed to have been scared away.

"Here comes the boat, sahibs," said Gooloo Singh. "It is gaining rapidly."

As he spoke, a burst of yells floated over the water. It was caught up exultantly by the savages, who were still racing along the bank.

"Hark to the devils," muttered Redfield. "They know we're in their power. It's hard to die like helpless dogs. We can't strike a blow in defense."

"It is fate, sahibs," replied Gooloo Singh. "There is no chance of reaching the shore, for we are but two-thirds of the way across. We must speedily be overtaken."

Dalo's courage was gone. He uttered a howl of terror, and clung frantically to the log.

For a moment or two, none spoke. They still splashed

and kicked as they drove the log toward the distant shore. The yelling of their blood-thirsty foes rang on the night air.

Now the pursuing boat was within forty yards. It was a long, narrow craft, of very uncouth construction. Its gunwales rested low on the water.

Little wonder, for the boat held eight half-naked savages.

Four were paddling from the stern. The others crouched well forward in the bow, and were armed with spears and matchlocks.

The distance lessened to thirty yards—to twenty-five. Then the fugitives made a slight spurt, and kept abreast of their foes for a moment or two.

In the presence of this greater danger, they forgot the crocodiles. Instead of splashing, they used their legs for powerful strokes under water.

"They'll open fire on us directly," muttered Redfield. "They're surely within range now. If we had another five minutes we could reach the shore."

"I wish we had our rifles," Marco replied, bitterly.

At that instant some one on the rear bank of the river called out, loudly:

"Kill all but the lad. A hundred rupees if you take him alive and uninjured. Don't let a man of the others escape."

The fugitives recognized Garcia's voice. So the fiend had not perished, after all.

An answer came speedily from the boat:

"It shall be done, sahib. The dogs are in our power. We will destroy all but the lad."

This speaker also was recognized. It was the voice of the traitrous native, Ram. He could be dimly seen crouched in the bow of the boat.

There was a brief interval of silence. The log drifted on with its human freight. From overhead the stars shone pitilessly down on the scene.

A look of grim resolve suddenly appeared on Marco's face. His eyes flashed, and he clinched his teeth. His companions did not observe this change in the lad.

Now the boat was less than ten yards away. It came gliding on like an avenging spectre. Dalo whimpered with fear, and splashed to the farthest end of the log.

At this critical moment Redfield exclaimed, eagerly:

"Comrades, we have a chance left. Let us abandon the log, and swim in different directions. The boat can pursue only one at a time. Some of us will escape."

"It is good, sahib," whispered Gooloo Singh. "I will draw the enemy after me, thus." He snatched Marco's cap, and put it on his own head. "They will take me for the young sahib," he added. "I will swim down stream while you——"

"Stop," interrupted Marco; "you shall not sacrifice yourself for me, Gooloo Singh. It is my fault that you are all in peril. But for me, Garcia would not have pursued you from the camp. I have a plan, and if I perish, it is only just. I will save your lives!"

Before the Hindoo could realize what he meant to do,

Marco let go of the log and dived under water. It was done so neatly that the foe saw nothing of it.

The trooper and his companions stared in horror at the spot where the lad had been but a second before. They were convinced that he had committed suicide. Gooloo Singh uttered a bitter cry. He would have slipped from the log had not Redfield caught him.

In the meantime, Marco was swimming straight up stream at a depth of three or four feet below the surface of the river. It was an accomplishment in which he was well skilled, being long winded.

Nothing was farther from his mind than suicide. Before his breath was spent, he struck gently upward until his eyes and nose were out of water.

To his surprise, the boat was not visible. He turned partly around, and saw it six or eight feet below him. He instantly dived, and swam hard with the current.

When next he came to the surface, the stern of the boat was right over his head. He reached one hand up, and caught it. With the other hand he clutched the low-lying gunwale.

Now the daring lad set his teeth, and exerted all his strength in a hard, quick pull.

The heavily-freighted boat lunged to one side, letting a rush of water over the gunwale. Then, without warning, it tipped clear over, and the surface of the river was agitated by howling, splashing savages.

Marco dived like a flash, and swam far to one side before he ventured to the top. Then, with lusty hand-over-hand strokes, he glided down the current and quickly

gained the log, to which his companions were still clinging.

What a welcome he received! Gooloo Singh and Dalo overwhelmed him with praise in true Oriental fashion. Redfield clapped him on the back as he dragged him alongside the log.

"It was a brave deed, lad," he cried; "the bravest I ever saw. You ought to be in the service."

"It was nothing," modestly protested Marco. "I am a good swimmer—the rest was easy."

But all danger was not yet passed. Twenty feet distant the savages were splashing about the capsized boat, which was so heavy that it barely protruded above the surface. They were trying hard to turn it right side up. All seemed able to swim. Few, if any, had succeeded in holding on to their weapons.

Those on shore were by this time aware of the disaster. Above the yelling Garcia's voice rose in shrill, unintelligible commands.

For nearly a minute, while Marco recovered breath after his effort, the fugitives drifted on at an even distance from their enemies.

Then the latter abandoned their attempt to right the boat. Three clung to it. The other five started to swim for the log. They came on with slow, determined strokes, uttering fierce cries.

The traitorous Ram was a foot or two in the lead, bent on earning the hundred rupees offered by Garcia. Between his teeth was a short knife. His greedy eyes sparkled, for he had already singled out Marco.

Three of his ruffianly companions carried spears in one hand as they swam, while the fourth was armed with a paddle.

It was a critical moment for the fugitives. With undisguised alarm they watched the stealthy advance of the five savages.

"Are you rested, lad?" demanded Redfield, anxiously. "Are you ready for another swim?"

"Yes," Marco replied.

"Then we must abandon the log and strike for shore," resumed the trooper. "Our only chance is to outswim these wretches. Quick! they are nearly upon us."

But just then a horrible thing happened. As Ram was within ten feet of the log, he gave a screech of agony. For a second he struggled desperately, and threw up his arms. Then he vanished from sight, and the spot where he had been was slapped into bloody foam and waves by the tail of a monstrous crocodile.

The fugitives were horrified by the well-deserved fate of the traitor. The latter's companions fell into a panic. They turned about and swam desperately toward the farthest shore, where their friends were.

The three on the drifting boat loosed their hold, and struck in the same direction.

But other crocodiles were hovering in the vicinity, and the ferocious reptiles seized the opportunity of gorging themselves.

Here and there amid the swimming savages a scaly snout broke the surface, or a capacious jaw opened wide. Two victims were seized at once, and their death cries

rent the air. Then a third was dragged under and mangled.

It was a terrible retribution that had descended upon the blood-thirsty wretches.

Meanwhile, the fugitives had wisely abandoned the log—which only retarded their speed—and were swimming furiously toward the near-looming and friendly shore.

"We shall soon be there," cried Redfield. "Swim faster, comrades. Don't forget to splash—that will scare the monsters away."

CHAPTER XX.

A STRANGE MEETING.

Side by side the fugitives pushed on with vigorous strokes. Behind them rang the blood-curdling yells of the poor wretches who were battling for life with the swift river and the crocodiles.

Marco, glancing over his shoulder, was horrified to see two black snouts within a dozen feet. His piercing cry warned his companions of the danger.

Redfield wisely changed his course, and swam straight down stream with the current. Gooloo Singh and Marco followed him, but Dalo paddled on against the current.

One crocodile turned clumsily, and struck after the trooper and his companions; the other headed for the shikaree.

Dalo saw his danger, and was fairly paralyzed with fright. He uttered yell after yell, and splashed the water into foam. Then, with a last gurgling cry, as the monster seized him, he vanished forever.

The awful sounds told the luckless man's companions what had happened. The same fate threatened them, for the second crocodile was in hot pursuit.

They headed straight for the shore, and swam with desperate overhand strokes. Faster and faster came the savage monster, his jaws rippling the surface. Now the

shore was but twenty feet away. A few more seconds would decide the race.

All at once the imperiled men touched sandy bottom. They dashed forward waist deep. The water shallowed to their knees—to their ankles.

Panting and exhausted, they stumbled out upon the reedy shore, and, wheeling around, they saw the baffled monster retreat sullenly to deep water.

At last the fugitives were safe. With thankful hearts they crept up the bank, and dropped down for a brief rest. They were overcome with horror. For a time speech was impossible.

It was now that darkest hour of the night which always precedes the dawn. Not a sound came from the river or the farther shore. It was doubtful if any of the boat's crew had escaped.

"What a night this has been," said Marco. "Of all the force at camp, you and I are the only ones left, Gooloo. I mean of those who were in Matlock's employ."

"True, sahib," replied the Hindoo, "and it is the fault of the cavalry officer, Sahib Clemson. He refused to leave a strong guard."

"You've got some ground for your complaint," admitted Redfield, "but I'll warrant you Captain Clemson will make up for it when he gets on the track of these fiends."

"That won't bring back the dead," said Marco, in an undertone. "Poor Dalo! it was hard that he should perish when so near safety."

"Ay, bitterly hard," replied the trooper. "But the dead

shall be avenged. I would give an arm to see that devil of a Portuguese blown from a gun—as our fellows served the Sepoys in the Great Mutiny.”

“Then let us start,” suggested the Hindoo, “for the savages will lose no time in getting back to their mountain fastnesses.”

“And the cantonments are some miles distant,” added Marco. “We must travel rapidly.”

A few moments later the fugitives were pushing on through the jungle. They had drifted a mile or more below the ford, so they had no alternative but to guess at the proper direction.

It was a trying journey. They were unarmed and dripping wet. They were weak from hunger and exhaustion. The danger from wild beasts was by no means slight.

One thing was a constant spur to their jaded limbs—the thought that Garcia and his band of assassins were speeding farther and farther away.

Shortly after dawn the little party stumbled upon a camp of hunters in the midst of the jungle. Two tents were staked by a water pool. In front of them, on campstools, sat four Englishmen. The shikarees were overhauling the guns for the day’s sport, and the camp servants were cooking breakfast.

The fugitives were eagerly welcomed, and when they had briefly told their tragic story, they were supplied with food and drink by the sympathetic Englishmen.

They learned that they were somewhat out of their way, and the offer of a guide to conduct them to the

nearest jungle road was gratefully accepted. This road, the Englishmen said, would lead to Barakar.

After a stay of less than fifteen minutes in the hunters' camp, Marco and his companions found themselves traversing a mere elephant path through the jungle. The guide marched confidently at the head.

Suddenly the loud report of a shotgun was heard close by.

"Hullo, what does that mean?" exclaimed Redfield.

"It is one of my party, sahibs," replied the guide. "He rose early in order to shoot before breakfast."

Just then the sportsman stepped into view a few yards ahead. He was a tall, middleaged man with a coal-black beard and mustache—apparently an Englishman. He wore gray flannels and a sun-helmet. In one hand was his gun; in the other a brace of jungle fowl.

As Marco went by and glanced straight into the man's face, he stopped so abruptly that Gooloo Singh bumped into him.

"What is the matter, sahib?" asked the Hindoo. "Are you ill?"

Marco did not reply. He stumbled on with such a bewildered expression that Redfield looked at him in amazement.

The stranger had been on the point of speaking. But when he caught the lad's glance, his own face turned suddenly pale under the bronzed skin. He fiercely bit his lip, and a cruel light came into his eyes.

He watched the travelers intently until they vanished around a bend in the path.

"I can't be mistaken," he muttered, as he turned toward camp. "It is the lad himself. To think that we should meet in such a place! Worst of all, he recognized me after all these years. I am sure of it. I was a fool to come near India. Well, I must take prompt measures to secure myself, cost what it may."

Meanwhile Marco had recovered his self-possession. He marched on with resolute steps and an impassive face. He allowed his companions to believe that he had suddenly been overcome with weakness.

But the lad's brain was in a whirl of strange emotions. He had recognized the stranger—or at least he thought so.

The face was that of the man who had been his companion on a railway journey to New York years before—who had presumably shipped him on board Captain Jarrow's vessel—who knew the secret of his birth and early life.

Little wonder that Marco was puzzled and startled by such a discovery. The more he pondered over it, however, the less sure he became. He had not observed the stranger's agitation.

Before he had gone a quarter of a mile, he doubted himself.

"It must have been only an accidental resemblance," he reflected. "The face was not so much like his after all. What could that man be doing here in an India jungle?"

When the road was reached, and Marco and his two companions pressed on toward Barakar, he dismissed the

matter from his mind, and thought only of revenge on Garcia and his band.

In the middle of the morning the jungle fell suddenly away to open fields and patches of timber. In the distance appeared the squalid houses of Barakar.

A little later the exhausted fugitives staggered up to the white-walled barracks, over which floated the British flag. The startling news was quickly told, and in less than half an hour two companies of cavalry galloped westward out of the village.

Marco and his companions were unable to accompany the expedition. They broke down when the strain was over, and the military surgeon ordered them to the hospital. Two days of sleep and rest restored them, and on the third morning they were up and about.

On the evening of that day the troopers returned with bad news. They had taken up the track of the savages, and followed them clear to the hills.

"There the wretches scattered in all directions," said Captain Clemson, "and it was useless to pursue them farther. We came back by way of the camp, and found only a circle of ashes. All the cages and property had been burned."

Marco was sorely distressed by this news. He resolved to hurry down to Calcutta, but before he could start, Matlock and Hofstein arrived unexpectedly at Barakar. They had been discharged for want of witnesses and prosecutors.

Their worst fears were realized when they heard what had happened during their absence. They blamed Marco

in no respect. In fact, they heaped the lad and his companions with praise.

Nor, after reflection, did they decide to press any charges against Captain Clemson, whose seemingly harsh action had been only in accord with his duty. Moreover, the officer was sincerely distressed. He promised to communicate with the authorities with a view to capturing Garcia and sending a large punitive force against the turbulent hill men.

Marco and Gooloo Singh parted regretfully from Redfield, and accompanied Matlock and Hofstein to Calcutta, where the tidings of the disaster were cabled in brief to Carl Richter at New York.

CHAPTER XXI.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

Carl Richter was a man of energy and ambition, and his peculiar business had long ago taught him to regard with equanimity either large gains or heavy losses. Moreover, he had the utmost faith in Matlock and Hofstein.

His answer was speedily cabled to Calcutta. It was terse and to the point. He exonerated his agents from blame. He instructed them to purchase new outfits, and start as soon as possible for the province of Assam. Here they were to procure a certain number of wild animals of various kinds—without regard to expense, and bring them in person to New York.

Matlock and Hofstein were delighted, and Marco professed to share their feelings. In reality, he was disappointed, for he wished to return to America and seek out the mystery of his birth.

But he was soon consoled by the thought that the delay would be only for a few months.

A week sufficed for such preparations as could be made in Calcutta. Meanwhile, no trace had been found of Garcia, though the authorities were zealously seeking him in Madras and elsewhere. He was supposed to be still hiding in the mountains of Bengal.

The animal catchers went north by rail as far as Rangamati, on the western border of Assam. As yet no additions had been made to the party. It consisted of Matlock, Hofstein, Marco and Gooloo Singh.

Then they steamed fifty miles up the great Brahmaputra River to Goalpara. Here cages were speedily built, and Matlock hired a dozen natives, including a couple of skilled shikarees.

A camp was made among the rugged hills and jungles south of the village. Wild animals of all kinds were numerous, and day by day the work of filling the cages went steadily and successfully on.

At the very outset, a splendid tiger and two panthers were secured. In three weeks' time the order was nearly filled, and Matlock predicted that they would be ready to return home in another fortnight.

Meanwhile, he had hired a roomy barge at Goalpara from the Assam Navigation Company. In this he intended to transport the animals down to the Bay of Bengal.

Steam power would not be needed until the mouth of the river was reached, for the barge was supplied with great sweeps, by which it could be easily steered through the vast breadth and depth of water.

We must now take the reader back, both in time and distance—back to Calcutta at the date when Marco and his companions arrived there from Barakar.

A different train on that same day brought to the city a tall, black-bearded man in shooting attire. It was the stranger whom Marco had encountered in the jungle.

From the station he hurried to the nearest native barber shop, and had his beard cut off. Then he went to the Great Eastern Hotel, and registered under a false name, that of Cecil Falconer.

During the following ten days Mr. Falconer spent most of his time in wandering about the streets, fashionably attired in white linen and a *sola topee* (sun hat).

Among other matters that he busied himself in investigating was the tragic death of Dan Stapleford, the wild animal dealer.

He readily learned what had become of Stapleford's adopted son, and the latter's presence in the city was doubtless made known to him by the Calcutta papers, which contained full accounts of Garcia's crimes.

But Mr. Falconer did not encounter Marco in any of his walks, nor is it likely that he desired to do so. He was merely waiting events, and every day added to his anxiety. He felt sure that the lad had recognized him in the jungle.

This conviction gave birth to a murderous feeling in Cecil Falconer's heart. At first he shrank from it with horror, but nevertheless it grew upon him. He was playing for high stakes, and could not afford to lose.

So the days slipped by. One night, an hour after dark, Falconer was strolling along the bank of the Hooghly River on the way to his hotel.

He was in a desperate and evil frame of mind. For several hours he had been prowling about Carl Richter's warehouses at the suburb of Kidderpore. But he had

seen nothing of Marco, nor did he know that the lad and his companions had left Calcutta that very morning.

He muttered an angry curse as he quickened his pace. The locality was not a safe one at this time of night.

To his left were gloomy, deserted factories and warehouses, with here and there a dimly-burning lamp post. A few feet to the right flowed the river, streaked, in mid-stream, with rows of anchored vessels.

Straight ahead, less than a quarter of a mile away, were the docks, marked against the sky by a tangle of masts and shipping.

Suddenly a man hove staggeringly out of the gloom, and pulled up in front of Falconer. His age was about fifty, and his nautical dress proclaimed him a sailor. There was light enough to reveal his brutal and bloated face.

"Ho, stranger," he cried, in a thick, unsteady voice, "I've lost my bearin's. Kin you tell me where to find the *Mary Ann*? She's at government dock number ten."

Falconer leaned forward and scrutinized the man keenly.

"Jove!" he exclaimed. "Captain Jarrow!"

"That's me," cried the sailor. "But who in tarnation—by the stars and stripes if it ain't John Hawk——"

"Shut up!" interrupted Falconer, fiercely, "not that name here. When did you arrive at Calcutta?"

"I'd better ask that of you," sullenly returned Jarrow. "I've been in port two days. I'm dead broke, too. These cursed yellow niggers robbed me of three hundred dollars to-night."

"Serves you right, you drunken fool. Look here, Jar-row, I've got a crow to pick with you. You're a dastardly liar. Why didn't you keep me posted about the lad, as you swore to do?"

"Easy now," warned the sailor; "I'm not in a humor for hard words."

"But I am," cried Falconer. "You've put me in a devil of a hole. After Stapleford died, the lad found new friends, and now——"

"Hang the lad!" interrupted Jar-row. "I did as I promised to do—more than your dirty money's worth. See here, my fine gentleman, I want five hundred dollars right now. Fork over, quick!"

Falconer's face blazed with anger. He took a step forward.

"You scoundrel," he roared. "I warn you not to try your blackmail game on me. I've given you too much money already. Not another penny will you get."

"Won't I?" sneered the enraged sailor. "I'll stake the *Mary Ann* that I do. It's a thousand that I want—not five hundred. Unless you fork over I'll lift anchor at daybreak and sail for New York. Once there, I'll soon find the lad's friends, and then——"

"Shut up!" whispered Falconer. "You fool, don't you see there's some one listening?"

Falconer was right. He had that moment discovered a figure leaning against a post within ten feet of the spot—a shaven-faced native attired in turban and white linen. No doubt the fellow had heard every word of the altercation.

Jarrow was too intoxicated to be prudent.

"One of those dirty yellow niggers," he muttered, after a hasty glance. "Quick, the money," he added, loudly and angrily. "Fork over, or I swear I'll blow on you, John Hawk——"

Smack! Falconer, roused to desperation, had struck the sailor a staggering fist blow on the face.

Jarrow reeled—then straightened up. With a fearful cry, he whipped a revolver from his pocket, aimed and fired.

CHAPTER XXII.

A SURPRISE IN THE JUNGLE.

Ten to one an intoxicated man will aim too high when shooting. Jarrow did this, and the bullet whistled over Falconer's head. The latter made a rush for his assailant, but tripped on a cobblestone and fell full length.

Meanwhile, the sailor had reeled backward a few feet to the edge of the river. He was insane with rage and liquor. He cocked the pistol, and took a deadly aim at Falconer's prostrate form.

This shot would have proved fatal, but for the prompt intervention of the native who was leaning against the post.

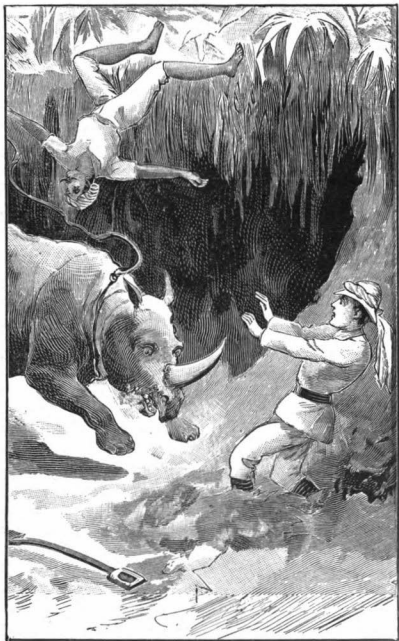
Barely in time, he threw himself in front of the sailor. There was the quick flash of steel, and the report of a pistol exploding on the ground.

Then, with a gurgling cry, Captain Jarrow splashed heavily over the raised embankment of the river and disappeared.

Falconer had seen it all. He slowly rose to his feet, trembling in every limb. He glanced at the blood-stained knife which the native held in his hand.

"Assassin!" he exclaimed, hoarsely.

"Is this your gratitude, sahib?" was the calm reply. "I saved your life. There was no time to spare. But for me you would be lying there with a bullet in your head."



"The rhinoceros made a mad lunge forward." See page 71.

"True," said Falconer, with an effort. "Pardon me; I owe you my life. And yet—and yet bloodshed might have been averted."

He walked to the edge of the river and stared down. Scarcely a ripple was on the smooth, unbroken surface. He shuddered violently as he turned away.

The native picked up the sailor's revolver. He threw it far out in the stream, and cast the knife after it.

From a distance, the bustle of the city came faintly. No one seemed to have heard the two shots.

Falconer wiped cold drops of perspiration from his forehead as he glanced keenly at his strange companion.

"This is a bad business," he said, "but it won't do any good to talk about it. I am not ungrateful for your aid. If you will accompany me, I will see that you are suitably rewarded."

"I desire no reward, sahib," replied the native, in a scornful tone. "It may be, perhaps, that I can aid you in yet another way. That I overheard your conversation was no fault of mine. I was interested because it concerned an acquaintance—a lad named Marco, who formerly lived with a wild animal dealer of Calcutta."

Falconer turned pale.

"How—how much do you know?" he demanded, in a frightened tone.

The man laughed softly.

"Nothing, sahib, as far as relates to you," he replied. "Except that you are interested in the lad. I saw you lurking about Carl Richter's warehouse at twilight. But the boy is not there. He left the city this morning."

The last words came with a hissing sound that denoted suppressed rage.

"Where has he gone?" asked Falconer, who felt compelled to speak in spite of the growing realization of his peril.

"Far north—to the province of Assam," replied the native. "He returns speedily, and then sails for New York."

"For New York?" gasped Falconer, and his face blanched with sudden terror.

"He intends to go there," whispered the native, softly. "But who knows? He may never return from the jungles of Assam."

A light broke on Falconer's mind as he noticed the fellow's bitter and vengeful expression. He noticed several other things at the same instant. Then, like a flash, he felt convinced that he had made a thrilling discovery.

"I think I catch your meaning," he replied. "See here, my friend, I want to tell you something. In the first place I am a man of the world. I have traveled extensively. I have lived for three months in Portugal—in Lisbon. In the second place, I have read the Calcutta papers of the past ten days."

He paused, and looked straight at the man, who returned the glance with an unmoved countenance.

"I am satisfied," resumed Falconer, "that you are a Portuguese disguised as a Hindoo. I can't mistake the features and the accent. I am satisfied, also, that you hate this lad Marco. These two things are easily explained—if you are Señor Garcia."

The man stepped back a pace or two. There was a mocking light in his eyes, but no trace of fear or anger.

"Suppose I admit it?" he replied, boldly. "I am not afraid of you. If I have a secret, you have one also."

Then, in a bitter tone, he added:

"I am a poor man, señor. I have lost my all. I need money badly, in order to escape from this accursed country. If this lad stands in your way——"

"Hush!" interrupted Falconer, savagely. "This is no place to talk. We have lingered here too long for our own safety. Elsewhere I may have something to say that will prove to the advantage of both of us. I can trust you?"

"Yes, I swear it," replied the disguised Portuguese.

Side by side they hastened away from the blood-stained spot, and the darkness, which is ever ready to cloak evil, quickly swallowed them up.

* * * * *

Nearly two months had gone by since the foul murder of Captain Jarrow on the bank of the Hooghly. His body was not found. In fact, the papers merely recorded him as missing, and after a vain search of more than three weeks, the ship *Mary Ann* lifted anchor and sailed away under the command of the first mate.

It was morning in the jungles of Assam. The sun was just beginning to break through the matted foliage. The creaking of wheels and the murmur of men's voices mingled with the chattering of monkeys and parrots.

But early as was the hour, the camp of the animal trap-

pers presented a dilapidated and ruined appearance. Canvas, tent poles and various other luggage lay scattered about.

The expedition had been a complete success. Even more than the required number and variety of wild beasts had been secured.

Matlock and his companions were in high spirits. Within forty-eight hours they expected to be traveling in their barge down the mighty Bramahputra.

On the preceding day seven cages had been taken down to Goalpara. Seven more, hitched to spans of bullocks, were now ready to start.

One by one they wheeled into the rugged jungle road, the native drivers running alongside, goad in hand. Amid creaking and shouting they vanished from sight.

With the last three cages went Hofstein and Matlock. The latter lingered a moment to give Marco some instructions.

"You'll be ready to start in half an hour," he said. "Don't lose the road, lad. You'll likely overtake us before long, for these heavy cages move but slowly."

Matlock's departure left only Marco and Gooloo Singh at the camp. Their duty was to pile the luggage into a cart, and follow after their companions as quickly as possible. The vehicle was a rude concern, with solid wheels of wood. Two fat bullocks were harnessed to the shaft.

The Hindoo and his companion worked with busy fingers. They were glad to leave the camp, though their stay had been, on the whole, a pleasant one. There were no disasters or losses to look back upon.

Both thought of the future with happy anticipations. Marco, because he was going to America; Gooloo Singh, because he was to accompany the lad to that far-distant land. The Hindoo's devotion was like that of a faithful dog.

In slightly more than half an hour the work was done. Where the busy camp had been, was a circle of trampled grass and the ashes of fires.

The two climbed upon the fore end of the cart, and Gooloo Singh pricked the oxen with a long goad.

The sturdy animals lumbered into the narrow path, and the camp slowly faded from view. For a mile the way led through heavy jungle, and then ascended the sloping side of a steep hill.

On the summit Marco halted the bullocks for a brief rest.

But for a haziness in the atmosphere, Goalpara could have been seen, nine miles away. The great mountains on the farther side of the Bramahputra were distinctly visible, their tall peaks gleaming in the sun.

The Hindoo applied the goad, and the cart rumbled on down the hill. It reached the base, and crept into a jungle where the gloom was like that of eventide. Scattered rocks and serried walls of foliage rose from both sides of the path.

"I never saw a more gloomy place," said Marco. "I wish we were out of it. It gives me the shivers—and yet I don't know why."

"There is nothing to fear, sahib," replied the Hindoo, "unless a prowling tiger. The Nagas, who inhabit the

hills to the south, have been peaceful since a British force burned their villages four years ago. Formerly they made many raids, and——”

The sentence was cut suddenly short by the appearance of half a score of powerful, half-naked savages, who rose up, as if by magic, on both sides of the path.

They were armed only with clubs and spears, and their attack was as swift and silent as their approach.

The cart was grabbed and upset before its occupants could seize their rifles. The bullocks broke loose from the shaft, and fled madly. A club stretched Gooloo Singh senseless on the disheveled luggage, and Marco found himself in the iron grasp of three pairs of brawny hands.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BRIDGE OF VINES.

The Nagas—for to these wild people did the attacking party belong—took particular pains to make no noise. With the exception of a guttural word or two, not a sound passed their lips.

Marco struggled desperately to escape, and managed to utter one loud shout. Then he was choked so violently that he partially lost consciousness.

When next he knew anything, the road and the luggage had disappeared, and he was being hurried rapidly through a dense jungle. Two burly savages held him up, one on each side. The others marched in front and behind.

There was no trace of a path. Captors and captive wound through the tangled vegetation with the sinuous and noiseless ease of a serpent.

The leader of the party was a gigantic fellow, wearing leopard skins and a necklet of tigers' teeth. Seeing that Marco had recovered from his stupor, he wheeled around and intimated by gestures that he would kill the lad if he made the least noise.

Marco wisely concluded to keep his mouth shut. He feigned weakness as much as possible, in order to delay the savages, though he had little hope of being rescued.

He knew that the nearest cages must have been a mile or more ahead at the time of the attack.

His thoughts were bitterly sad as he went deeper and deeper into the jungle. He believed Gooloo Singh to be dead, and his heart ached for the faithful Hindoo.

He was at a loss to know why he had been carried off, but he finally concluded that it was for the purpose of ransom. Had he been better acquainted with the Nagas, he would have recognized the folly of such a theory.

For more than an hour the savages went unswervingly ahead. Marco, in spite of his limpness, was dragged along with ease.

Then they halted on the brink of a wooded ravine, fifty feet wide and about the same number in depth. Both banks dropped sheerly down, and they were connected by a shaky bridge of thick lianas, or vines, which were fastened to trees on either sides.

A dozen of these cablelike strands, knotted together, formed the footway. A little higher up were two others for hand-rests.

Marco was among the first to cross. The dizzy structure swayed fearfully, and he narrowly missed plunging into the torrent that swirled through the bottom of the gorge.

All made the passage in safety, however, and then the Nagas hacked away the main cable, letting it drop into the ravine. They did not disturb the hand-rests.

Now Marco was less closely guarded. His captors proceeded more leisurely through the jungle. When they

were possibly a quarter of a mile from the severed bridge they halted by a tall rock.

Apparently they were to meet some one here. The leader placed his hand to his mouth, and gave a peculiar cry. He repeated it twice.

Meanwhile Marco's two guards had placed him against a tree. With half-closed eyes he sat limply, still feigning weakness.

But his brain was active. He watched and waited, determined to carry out a desperate resolve if the chance came.

A minute slipped by. Then the chance did come. The leader's call was responded to from a distance. A noise was faintly heard amid the jungle, and the Nagas, to a man, turned their eyes in the direction of the sound.

Marco was curious to know who was coming, but he could not afford to wait. Quick as a flash, he sprang to his feet, and plunged into the undergrowth in the direction of the ravine.

He ran blindly and swiftly, spurred on by the wild cries that were now ringing behind him.

Remembering the broken bridge, he steered a diagonal course to the left. He hoped to strike the ravine at a place where the bank was less precipitous. The very fact that a bridge existed might have told him his expectation was vain.

He covered the quarter-of-a-mile stretch with an actual gain to his credit. This was due to the fact that the savages had to follow his trail. He heard them yelling to one another.

A few yards more and he staggered out on the brink of the gorge. A glance showed him a sheer-dropping precipice to right and left as far as the eye could reach.

There was no time to lose. One chance was left him—and that a frightfully desperate one. He resolved to take it, and, turning to the right, he dashed up to the brink of the ravine, still cloaked by the heavy undergrowth.

When he reached the bridge, the jungle behind him was alive with savage yells. For an instant he felt faint and sick. Then the weakness passed, and left him strong and cool-headed.

He chose the thickest of the two cables, and, taking a firm hold of it, he let himself swing into space. Hand over hand he worked along, not daring to look down. The sullen voice of the torrent thundered in his ears.

When he was less than half-way across, he heard an outcry, and, looking back, he was horrified to see half-a-dozen of the Nagas on the spot he had just left.

Whirr! came a spear! Another and another! But the violent oscillation of the vines saved Marco, and not a weapon touched him.

On he went, foot by foot, until a greater peril sent a throb of despair to his heart. With spears and clubs, the Nagas attacked the two cables where they were coiled about the tree.

Snap! the frailer one parted, and whizzed by Marco's face. A burst of savage cries rang out.

The lad gave himself up for lost. Still he pluckily

toiled on. Now he was only a dozen feet from the opposite side. Would he reach it? He heard the hacking of the spears and clubs.

His head swam as he moved his aching arms another foot. He looked back, and just at that instant there was the sharp, angry crack of rifles from close by. One of the Nagas toppled head first into the gorge. Another fell among his companions, squirming in the agonies of death.

"Come on, lad," cried a hearty voice. "You're all right."

Marco glanced joyfully toward the near bank of the ravine. There stood Matlock, Hofstein, and three or four natives.

Crack! crack! went the rifles, but Marco did not look to see what effect they were having. He strained every nerve to reach his friends.

Then there was a creaking and quivering of the cable. The lad instinctively divined what was coming. He gritted his teeth, and held fast like grim death.

He was barely ready when the weakened strand parted, and he felt himself plunge down and across the yawning chasm. It seemed a long interval—though it was really scarcely a second—until he bumped violently against—not the hard and cruel rock, but a clump of bushes that grew on the face of the cliff, ten feet from the brink.

There Marco swung, rather faint and dizzy, but otherwise uninjured. He felt spears strike to right and left of him. He heard hoarse yells, and the crack of rifles.

Then he clung tighter to the cable, as he felt himself

drawn upward—up and up, until eager hands pulled him out on firm ground.

The reaction left him weak and faint for a moment, but it soon passed off. He looked gratefully at Matlock and Hofstein, and then turned his eyes across the ravine. The Nagas had disappeared, leaving two dead behind.

"You had a narrow escape, lad," said Hofstein. "We arrived in the nick of time—on the ragged edge, as it were. How do you feel?"

"A little trembly," replied Marco. "I'll soon be all right. But how about Gooloo Singh? Is—is he dead?"

"Not a bit of it. He got an ugly rap on the skull, but, barrin' a headache for a couple of days, he won't be any the worse. He wanted to hobble along with us, but we made him stay at the road."

"It was by sheer luck that we got here in time to save you," chimed in Matlock. "Bad luck we were inclined to call it when the rear cage broke down, owing to a defective axle. Conrad and these trusty fellows came back to help me, and we had barely got started when your span of bullocks came tearing along like mad. I jumped out and caught them, and then——"

"Then we hurried up the road," broke in Hofstein, "and found the cart upset, you missing, and Gooloo Singh just coming to his senses. The shikarees nosed out the trail of the savages, and away we went like a pack of hounds."

"It was a fortunate break-down," said Marco, with a shuddering glance at the gorge. "Come on, I'm ready to start now."

A moment later the little party were retracing their steps through the tangled jungle. They reached the road in an hour, and the meeting between Marco and Gooloo Singh was a joyous and affecting one.

The bullocks had been brought to the spot by one of the servants, and the cart was speedily righted and re-filled. It was driven a quarter of a mile ahead to the broken cage, and, after a brief delay here, the procession pushed on.

Matlock wisely made three armed natives march at the rear, and he himself mounted the cart with Marco and the Hindoo.

The lad's strange abduction was discussed from every conceivable standpoint, but without reaching a satisfactory solution.

"I give it up," said Matlock, finally. "It's a queer go. It's not like the Nagas to carry any one off for ransom. They always kill. If this had happened in any other part of the country, lad, I would say there was an enemy back of it. But here, three hundred miles from Calcutta——"

Matlock ended in a low whistle, and then looked sober for a moment.

"I'm sorry I didn't see who was coming through the jungle at the time I escaped," Marco remarked.

"Yes, it's a pity," Matlock answered. "Got a match about, lad? I want to light my pipe."

After that the conversation took a different turn. Late in the afternoon Goalpara was reached, and the cages were carefully stored with the other seven in an empty

tea-shed, which had been rented for the purpose. After such a tiresome march no one was inclined for more work that day.

In the evening, shortly before sunset, Matlock and Marco were standing on a wharf along the river. The barge was moored close by, with the name, *Assam Tiger*, painted on her stern.

At a little distance was an interested group of natives, planters, and English soldiers.

One of the former approached Matlock, and made a low, cringing bow. His attire was half-native, half-European. He wore cast-off cavalry trousers, a greasy cummerbund and blouse of blue cloth, and a dingy turban. His coppery face was covered with a matted growth of coarse black hair.

"Salaam, sahib," he began. "You are going down the river in yonder boat?"

"Yes, what of it?" said Matlock.

"I am at the sahib's service," replied the fellow, "to be hired cheap. I am a skilled pilot. I know the river clear to the sea."

Matlock reflected.

"The boatmen that I have engaged tell me the same thing," he said, "but I hardly know whether to believe the rascals. You say you are a skilled pilot? What is your name, and how often have you been down the Bramahputra?"

"More times than I can count, sahib," replied the fellow, holding up both hands; "on budgerows, dhingees, steamers and tea barges. I am called Gunga Ra."

"Well, I'll take you," decided Matlock. "Be here early in the morning to help load. "I'll pay you a rupee a day. Is that enough?"

"The sahib is generous," replied Gunga Ra. He made a low bow, and took himself off.

"A rascally-looking fellow," was Marco's comment.

"His looks don't matter if he proves a good pilot," replied Matlock, "and I fancy he will."

CHAPTER XXIV.

GUNGA RA MAKES A SUGGESTION.

At daybreak the loading of the barge began. Gunga Ra made his appearance, and worked with a zest that placed him high in Matlock's estimation. By noon everything was on board—cages, bullocks, luggage, and supplies for men and beasts.

Matlock paid off and dismissed some of his helpers, and settled accounts with the native merchants to whom he was indebted.

Mid-afternoon saw the *Assam Tiger* drifting down the river, while the thatched dwellings and white-walled cantonments of Goalpara faded slowly in the distance.

The barge looked lower than it really was, on account of its breadth and length. Its general outlines resembled the ferryboats that ply on the Hudson and East rivers at New York.

In the center of the deck were the movable hatches that covered the hold, where the animals and cattle were quartered. From the foredeck rose a square and airy little cabin, occupied by Marco, Gooloo Singh and their employers.

Close by a ladder led down to the storeroom. Here, among other supplies, were cases of ammunition, and a fifty-pound keg of powder. The latter had been brought

up from Calcutta for bartering purposes with the natives, but proved not to be needed.

The greater part of the deck was roofed over with sheets of rice-matting. On one side of the hatches were the sleeping quarters of the crew. The other side was fitted for cooking and eating.

The barge was guided from the stern by two great sweeps, like the oar-blades of a raft.

Two men were needed to each sweep, and there were two relays—eight men in all.

The cook, the pilot, and six helpers whom Matlock had retained to look after the animals, swelled the number of natives on board to sixteen, exclusive of Gooloo Singh.

Across mid-deck, above hatches and awnings, was a sort of bridge. Here sat Gunga Ra, with his water-bowl beside him. He commanded a clear view of the river ahead, and could, at the same time, give instructions to the men at the sweeps by word and signal.

The current of the Bramahputra was rather sluggish, and even at this distance from the sea the channel was from one to two miles broad.

There were no snags or shoals, and this fact made Matlock wonder if a pilot was really a necessity. Gunga Ra had little or nothing to do, though he showed his authority by giving an occasional order to the crew.

Through the sultry hours of the afternoon the *Assam Tiger* swung leisurely down the murky water way, keeping well in mid-stream. To right and left were jungle-covered banks, the haunts of innumerable wild beasts.

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Here and there on a cleared hillside glistened the bungalow and factories of a tea or indigo planter.

To the north the blue spurs of the Himalayas could be faintly seen, sixty miles away.

A few craft of various kinds were encountered—native traders' boats, a steam launch flying the French flag, a passenger barge bound for Goalpara, and a troop steamer crowded to the rail with helmeted British soldiers.

At sunset the barge was guided to the left bank of the river, and moored to trees, for Matlock was not inclined to run the risk of navigating in the dark.

Guards were stationed on different parts of the deck, and the night passed without alarm. One little incident occurred to which a special significance afterward attached.

About three o'clock in the morning, while lying half-asleep and half-awake in his bunk, Marco fancied that he heard the ladder creaking which led down to the storeroom.

He rose, and looked out of the cabin. Seeing no person but one of the sentries, he went back to bed.

In the morning he spoke of the affair to Matlock. The latter, on descending to the storeroom, found evidence of a box of biscuits having been tampered with.

"It must have been the sentry," he said. "No doubt the poor fellow got hungry in the night. I won't say anything about it unless it happens again."

Marco was of the same opinion, and gave the matter no further thought.

The second day's journey was uneventful. The *Assam*

Tiger slipped along for mile after mile, under the burning Indian sun.

At frequent intervals Marco, while walking from bow to stern, or *vice versa*, looked up at the bridge, to find Gunga Ra's piercing black eyes fixed upon him with what he imagined to be a fierce and malevolent stare. Each time the Hindoo turned quickly away.

The lad could not shake off the delusion, though he was convinced that it was nothing else. It caused him a vague feeling of uneasiness.

Others on board, unknown to themselves, were favored with that same malevolent stare—notably Matlock and Gooloo Singh.

Meanwhile the Hindoo pilot had fallen under suspicion with the men at the sweeps. They regarded his post as a mere sinecure, and found fault with his Hindustani. They agreed among themselves that he was not what he professed to be—that his knowledge of the river was next to nothing.

No whisper of this reached Matlock or his companions, else the course of events might have been decidedly changed.

Noon came and passed, and the sun dropped slowly toward the west. An hour before twilight Gunga Ra hopped nimbly down from the bridge, and came forward to where Matlock was sitting with Marco and Hofstein.

"If the sahib wishes," he said, making a low bow, "the barge can float through the night with safety. Rangamati is seventeen miles away, and between here and there

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the channel is known to be free from obstructions and shoals."

Matlock first shook his head.

"No," he replied, "we will tie up."

"I am the sahib's servant," persisted Gunga Ra, "but we will surely gain much time. I am accustomed to go long without sleep. I will watch from the bridge until daylight."

Matlock hesitated. Any device that would shorten the journey was worth considering.

"It sounds fair," said Hofstein. "There can't be any damage if we keep to mid-channel. Of course, I don't advise it as a regular thing. But if the stretch from here to Rangamati is known to be safe——"

"It is," broke in Marco. "Don't you remember, when we came up in the steamer, what the captain told us? He said the first twenty miles were safe running by day or night."

"Ah, I forgot that," exclaimed Matlock. "Well, we'll risk it. Go back to your post, my good fellow. I'll see that you get an extra rupee for your loss of sleep."

A moment later Gunga Ra was perched on the bridge peering ahead. When black night shrouded the river lighted lanterns were hung at bow and stern, and the second relay of men went to the sweeps.

While the barge glided down mid-channel between the faintly visible shores, supper was eaten, and pipes were smoked, and the bullocks and wild beasts were made snug for the night.

At midnight all were asleep except those on whom de-

volved the safe guidance of the *Assam Tiger*. No sound was heard but the regular splash and creak of the oar-blades as the men shuffled their naked feet to and fro over the rear-deck. Blind obedience to the instructions of the pilot was imperative, for the glare of the lanterns prevented their seeing further than the rail.

Gunga Ra, perched aloft, had the barge at his mercy. He alone knew whither it was drifting. From time to time a curt word of command dropped from his lips.

An hour slipped by. Shortly after one o'clock there came a tremendous crash—a grinding, quivering jar that sent a shudder through the stout framework of the *Assam Tiger*, and pitched the occupants of the cabins out of their bunks and sprawled them in a tangled heap on the floor.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE WORK OF A FIEND.

Marco was the first to stagger to his feet, and dart out of the cabin. He was followed by his faithful shadow, Gooloo Singh.

They stood on deck for a moment, too dazed and startled to comprehend what had happened. The forward lanterns had been extinguished, and all was darkness in that direction.

But out of the shadows came yell after yell from human throats, and the frightened snarling and roaring of wild beasts. The commotion grew even louder.

There seemed no cause for the fear and panic. There had been no repetition of that first crash.

The barge was now perfectly level, and, if in motion at all, was drifting along serenely.

"Perhaps we are sinking, sahib," suggested the Hindoo.

"I don't know," replied Marco, in sudden alarm. "It is possible. We had an awful collision with something or other."

Hofstein and Matlock just then reached the spot.

"We're not sinking, lad," exclaimed the latter. "I'm sure of that. I know the feel of it too well, having been there before."

"Then the bow is fast, and we are swinging around

broadside," replied Marco, as he shaded his eyes with his hands, and glanced over the rail.

He had hardly spoken when the words were confirmed. There was a grinding noise, followed by a quivering, jarring jerk.

Then the barge held fast, and its only perceptible motion was a gentle swaying to and fro.

Matlock ran to the opposite side of the deck, and stared out on the water. He immediately uttered a cry that drew the others to his side.

"We have swung clear around," he shouted. "The barge is fast, with its bow pointing up stream. But that's not the worst. Look here! What do you make of that?"

Now, for the first time, all eyes discovered the black outlines of the shore within fifty yards. Its reflection stained the waters almost as far as the side of the barge.

"We're aground on the shallows!" cried Hofstein. "Is this deviltry or accident?"

"We must ask Gunga Ra," replied Marco. "Either he ran us ashore purposely or he fell asleep at his post."

"I'll soon find out when I get hold of the rascal," growled Matlock.

He cut loose one of the swinging lanterns, and started up the deck, followed by his companions.

The panic had now almost subsided. Here and there a lantern flamed up from bow to stern, shedding light on the whole scene. The natives ran to and fro, chattering loudly, and an occasional roar came from the hold.

Matlock glanced up at the bridge. It was empty! He peered around in vain for the missing pilot.

"Where is Gunga Ra?" he demanded, angrily.

There was a jabber of voices in reply. No one had seen him.

The men who had been at the sweeps were hastily examined, but they absolved themselves from blame. They had only obeyed orders, they said, and the glare of the lanterns had prevented them from seeing any distance beyond the rail.

Their testimony elicited one important and damaging fact. Gunga Ra had not been asleep. Up to the very moment of the crash he had issued instructions.

Matlock was furiously angry.

"There is some deviltry afoot here!" he cried. "The barge was grounded by design. Search for the scoundrel. He must be on board. He can't escape."

Just then a dusky and bleeding figure crawled painfully out of the dark hold. It was the shikaree, Jafar, who had been acting as nightwatch over the animals. He stood up with an apparent effort. His breath came in short, quick gasps.

"Hullo! what's wrong?" demanded Matlock. "Are you hurt?"

"Truly I am, sahib," was the reply. "That pig of a pilot, Gunga Ra—when the bump came—he fell down—he fell down through the awning, and into the hold—he fell upon me with much heaviness. See—I am hurt here—and here."

He patted his ribs and his nose.

Matlock grimly repressed an inclination to laugh.

"Where is the rascal now?" he asked. "Did he climb upon deck?"

"He rolled away in the darkness, sahib," replied Jaffar, pointing to the hold. "He must be still concealed down there."

"Then we've got him," cried Hofstein. "Bring him up, men. I want to hear what he has to say about this affair."

"A word, sahib," interrupted Jafar. "The cage with the rhinoceros is upset. The beast may break out unless something is done. Hark! he is pounding his horn against the planks."

"Jafar is right," exclaimed Matlock. "Gunga Ra will keep for the present. The brute must be attended to. Come on! all hands are needed for this business."

A stout gate barred the entrance to the hold, which was a sloping plankway, seven feet wide, opening on one of the side-decks of the barge.

Matlock swung the gate back on its hinges. Then, as a sudden thought occurred to him, he stopped. He rapidly singled out four of the natives, and ordered them to stand aside.

"Put these fellows on guard around the hatches, lad," he said to Marco. "They don't need any weapons. At the same time you had better stay up yourself. You see, this rascal of a pilot may slip out of the hold, or he may be already out, and lurking somewhere on deck. I don't want to lose him."

"All right, sir," replied Marco. "I'll keep a sharp lookout."

"Lively now, men," exclaimed Matlock, and, swinging his lantern overhead, he led his party through the gate and down into the hold, where the ill-tempered rhinoceros was still jabbing and prodding.

Gooloo Singh lingered a moment, wavering between duty and inclination. Then he reluctantly followed after the others.

Marco lost no time in placing his four men where he thought they were most needed. He left the foredeck unguarded, since the hatch at this end of the hold was tightly fastened down.

Under the circumstances, it was the proper thing to do, yet Marco was destined to shortly repent of it.

"Now," he said, to himself, "I'm going to search the whole deck for Mr. Gunga Ra. I have an idea that he climbed out of the hold long before Jafar."

But just as the lad started on his tour he had an unpleasant recollection of the pilot's evil glances.

"I wouldn't care to meet the fellow empty-handed," he reflected. "I think I will arm myself."

He hurried forward to the cabin, and took down his rifle from the hooks—a light little weapon, to which he was much attached.

But his cartridge belt was empty, and the shells of the required size were all in the storeroom.

"I don't want to lug one of those things around," he muttered, glancing at the heavier rifles of his companions. "I can put my hand on the box in the dark, and it won't take a minute."

He went out on deck, and stood for a second or two in the yellow glare of the lantern that was dangling overhead. From the hold came creaking, pounding noises, and the jabbering of voices.

Then he stepped to the ladder, and went quickly down the rungs. When he was half-way down from the top, he fancied he saw a flash of yellow light below him. He rubbed his eyes, and looked again. The light had vanished, and all was dark.

Marco reached the bottom. The door opened inward, and he pushed it half-way back on its hinges. He felt a little uneasy about that visionary light, so he took a match from his pocket, and scraped it on the stock of his rifle as he strode boldly into the storeroom.

The lad stood petrified by the sight that the blazing match revealed to him. Most of the cases and boxes had been moved from the center of the floor, and that space was now occupied by the fifty-pound keg of gunpowder.

From the open bung-hole dangled a two-foot fuse, one end of which was charred and burnt. A couple of partly-consumed matches lay near, and not far away was a dark-lantern with the shade drawn.

All this Marco saw in a fleeting glance, and before he could realize the stupendous import of it or dream of danger a pair of bony hands fastened on his throat from behind!

There was no chance to cry out—no chance for a struggle on equal terms. The rifle and match fell, and

Marco went heavily down on top of them, thus plunging the storeroom in utter darkness.

The fall brought the lad's head severely in contact with the floor, and the stunning pain partly disabled him. He struggled weakly to tear the bony hands from his throat. In vain! They only clutched him the tighter.

Now he felt the agonies of suffocation. His brain seemed to be bursting apart. His senses were leaving him.

Suddenly, when his strength was quite gone, the grip on his throat relaxed. He lay still, breathing in painful gasps, and unable to utter a sound.

With impotent rage and fear, he felt his unseen enemy bind his ankles together, and fasten his wrists behind his back. He was conscious of the ruffian's hot breath on his face.

When it came to gagging him, Marco made a feeble resistance, but the wad of cloth was quickly stuffed into his mouth.

Then the weight was lifted from him, and the lad lay there as helpless as a log of wood. He heard the store-room door close softly. He heard muffled footsteps over the floor, and a slight creaking noise.

Next a glare of light shone on him from the unhooded lantern, and he met the evil stare of Gunga Ra.

For an instant he scarcely knew the ruffian, so malignant and full of hatred was the distorted expression of his face.

Marco shuddered with uncontrollable horror. The thought of his helplessness was maddening.

Gunga Ra approached the lad, and looked down on him as a tigress would glare at the slayer of her cubs.

"Ah!" he muttered. "I could have wished for no better fortune. You are already as good as dead, so I will unmask myself. *Diable!* How cleverly I deceived you all! What! You don't know me yet? But how could you with this growth of beard—with these rags of a disguise? I am Señor Garcia!"

Marco started, and turned pale. He recognized the ruffian's voice. A hopeless, terrified look shone in his eyes.

"There is no time to lose," resumed the Portuguese. "Fate has played the game into my hands. At one stroke I shall have a glorious revenge—not only on you, but on your dogs of companions! You escaped me in the jungle the other day, but this time I am sure. No one will come to help you. You will lie here, and watch yonder fuse burn its way to the keg. When the spark reaches the powder the barge and all on board will be in fragments."

"By that time I shall be safe on shore. I made a mistake to-night, and ran the barge aground before I intended to. But it is an easy matter to drop into the water. I am a good swimmer, and a good diver. Hark! your companions are still busy in the hold."

With a truly satanic grin, Garcia scraped a match, and lit the end of the fuse.

"I will leave the lantern so that you may measure your span of life," he added. "I wish you happy thoughts

during the next two minutes. Good-by, my young friend Marco."

The ruffian glanced briefly at the spitting fuse. Then he softly left the storeroom, closing the door behind him. The ladder creaked a couple of times, and all was still.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TRUE HEROISM.

Marco's feelings were such as no tongue or pen can describe. His head seemed on fire with pent-up agony. He first strained every nerve and muscle to break his bonds—to spit the gag from his mouth.

But he could accomplish nothing. He was even too weak to roll himself over the floor. He lay still in a fever of suffering, with his eyes fixed on the keg of powder and the speck of hissing, spitting fire that was creeping closer and closer.

With incredible rapidity, one mental picture after another glided through his mind. He saw the guards standing about the deck, indifferently ignorant of his whereabouts. He saw his companions working away in the hold.

Then—frightful scene—he saw the barge fly to fragments with an awful crash, and strew the river with charred wood and mangled bodies. He saw Garcia's evil face, lighted up with intense joy, peer from the shelter of the jungle.

Again the lad tried desperately to loosen his arms. His efforts to eject the gag made him purple in the face.

Now the fuse was half-consumed. The fire would soon be traveling up the side of the keg.

Suddenly Marco's attention was distracted by a hoarse cry overhead. He heard a rush of footsteps over the deck.

An instant later came more footsteps, and a babel of angry voices, and the sharp crack of rifles.

The lad knew what this meant.

"Garcia has been discovered while leaping overboard," he thought. "Oh, I hope they will shoot him—I hope they will!"

The noise and the firing continued, but no one came near the storeroom. Marco's brief hope died away. He looked at the spitting fuse, and the sight maddened him.

Again and again he exerted his aching muscles, but it was useless to try to break the cords. Then he attacked the gag with tongue and teeth, and it suddenly flew out of his mouth.

For an instant he was faint with joy. But when he tried to cry out he was horrified to find that he could utter only a wheezing sound. The racket still continued overhead, and he realized the hopelessness of making himself heard.

Death was very near. The explosion could not be long delayed. Already the burning end of the fuse was an inch off the floor. The fire was steadily eating its way up the side of the keg to the open tap-hole.

A few seconds went by—laden with frightful agony to the doomed lad. A quavering cry escaped his lips, and he shuddered from head to foot.

Suddenly a last chance flashed into his mind. That

quickly he regained control of his nerves, and became calm and clear-headed.

Summoning all his strength, he rolled himself over the floor. He had to tuck twice before he gained the position that he wanted. Then his head rested against the keg, and the burning end of the fuse was just above him. The sparks dropped upon his face!

Would it be success or failure?

He answered the question by an intense muscular effort that raised his head from the floor.

He opened his mouth, and snapped at the spot of fire. He caught it, and closed his lips tightly, regardless of the burning pain. Then his head dropped back, and he lost consciousness.

Marco knew nothing more until he found himself in his own bunk in the cabin, with friendly faces all around him. Gooloo Singh was rubbing his burnt lips and tongue with some healing ointment.

"Lie still, my brave lad," said Matlock. "You're not able to get up."

"Yes, I am," cried Marco, struggling to a sitting posture. "Did I put it out? Oh, how it burnt! Where is the Portuguese? Did you shoot him?"

He glared wildly around, but was soothed by a touch from Gooloo Singh.

"His mind is wandering," said Matlock, in an undertone. "Yes, you put the fuse out," he added. "It was a brave deed. We found you in the storeroom ten minutes ago, with the fuse still clinched between your teeth. Your

lips and tongue were scorched a little, but the pain won't last long."

"We all owe our lives to you, my brave lad," chimed in Hofstein. "Your heroism saved the barge. I'm sorry Gunga Ra escaped. The guards saw him leap the rail, and gave the alarm. We fired at the rascal, but he dived like an otter. Jafar and four of the men went after him in the small boat."

"It—it was not Gunga Ra," shouted Marco. "I mean, that was not his name. He was Señor Garcia disguised."

When the excitement caused by this statement had subsided a little, Marco went on with his story, telling it briefly and rapidly.

The indignation and wonder of his hearers were beyond description. Matlock grew purple with rage. For a moment speech was impossible.

"I would give every cent I own to get my hands on the scoundrel," he blurted out. "I would tear him limb from limb. To think that his disguise deceived me!"

"He must be a tremendous hater," said Hofstein, "to judge from the trouble he took, following the lad clear up here, and hiring the Nagas to carry him off. And then—when that failed—to get himself actually on board the barge! He is a fiend in human shape!"

Gooloo Singh said nothing, but the snap of his black eyes was more eloquent than words.

At this point the dip of paddles was heard, and a moment later the boat swung alongside the barge. The shikaree and his companions climbed on deck, dragging the light craft after them.

"No luck, eh?" growled Matlock.

"None, sahib," replied Jafar. "The man is safe within the thick jungle, where there is scarce a trail even for beasts."

"We're well rid of him!" exclaimed Hofstein. "I don't think he'll trouble us again in a hurry. He will probably cut for Rangamati, and leave this part of the country by rail."

"Very likely," replied Matlock. "I only hope that he'll cross our path again before we leave India. And now for getting the barge loose. There's only one way, I fear—to fly a distress signal, and wait till some steamer comes along."

"We'll likely wait till daylight," said Hofstein. "It's only two o'clock now. Suppose we turn in for a few hours' sleep?"

"You forget the rhinoceros, sahib," interposed Gooloo Singh. "We left the hold in great haste."

"By Jove! that's so!" cried Matlock. "We got the cage up all right, but it is too much strained for safety. It must be strengthened at once."

"Better lose no time," warned Hofstein. "I hear the brute prodding at the planks. He has been in the very devil of a humor for the past two days."

"Come on, then," replied Matlock, picking up the lantern. "Jafar, slip down to the rear deck, and bring me some of that teakwood planking."

The shikaree had gone but a dozen steps on the errand when a ripping, crashing noise broke out in the hold, mingled with angry grunts.

"There!" cried Matlock. "Old Ugly is loose. Get the nets and ropes, quick!"

Old Ugly was the name bestowed upon the brute at the time of his capture, and he now showed himself fully worthy of it.

Scarcely ten seconds after the first there came a second crashing, rending noise. Then followed a babel of angry snorts and shrill, blood-curdling yells.

The commotion rose to a high pitch, and now all the beasts and bullocks joined in.

There was a hasty running to and fro on the fore-deck, as Matlock issued order after order. Marco forgot his burns, and jumped out of bed.

"Lively, men!" cried Hofstein. "Old Ugly is playing the old Harry with the other cages. Don't do any killing unless it's necessary."

It was comical to see the scramble for guns, netting and ropes—most of which supplies had been conveniently stacked in the cabin.

There were no cowards on board, and every man was at Matlock's heels when he led the way forward. In truth, they might well have quailed at the awful sounds now echoing from below.

Matlock was in front, with two shikarees, bearing a great net. Just as the party came within three feet of the entrance to the hold, two spotted tiger-cats, with eyes aflame, leaped out of the black space, screeching hideously.

"Look out!" warned Matlock.

The shikarees flung the net, but it fell short of the

little animals. They turned tail, and fled toward the rear-deck.

Before the storming party could recover from the temporary confusion, Old Ugly came snorting and pounding up the plankway leading from the hold. He struck the closed gate like a stone from a catapult, and shivered it to fragments.

The clumsy brute narrowly missed striking the rail and plunging into the river. He instantly wheeled about, and charged full tilt at the men!

No one delayed to test rope or net. With shrill cries, all speed back to the foredeck, closely pursued by the evil-tempered brute.

Marco rushed blindly into the cabin, followed by Gooloo Singh and Hofstein. Matlock and the shikarees tumbled down the ladder to the storeroom, while the rest of the party wheeled around, and fled toward the rear-deck.

Old Ugly naturally followed the bent of his lowered horn, and that led him straight to the side wall of the cabin.

Crash! head and shoulders went through the frail planking like an egg shell. The brute stuck fast for an instant.

Then he wedged himself on, and squeezed clear into the cabin, just as Marco and his terrified companions bolted out by the door.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A LIVELY SIEGE.

"Run, sahibs!" cried Gooloo Singh. "We must seek safety on the rear-deck."

"Ho—hold on!" panted Hofstein, whose corpulent body was nearly out of breath. "Help me—or I'm—a goner!"

Marco and the Hindoo grabbed him, and then they ran along the side of the barge, thoroughly convinced, by the crashing noise in their rear, that Old Ugly was in hot pursuit.

They discovered otherwise when they reached the rear-deck, where eight or ten of the natives were congregated.

"The brute may be trapped in the cabin," said Marco. "We had better go back and see."

"It sounds that way from the racket," assented Hofstein, doubtfully. "Hullo! where is Matlock? I thought he came in this direction."

"No, sahib," replied Gooloo Singh. "He and the shika-rees——"

An angry screech drowned the Hindoo's voice, and out from a dark corner of the deck popped the two tiger-cats.

The little beasts were disposed for attack. They crept slowly toward the group of men, spitting and snarling.

Gooloo Singh still had a net bundled up under his arm.

He and Marco hastily unrolled it. They advanced a few steps, and made a quick cast.

One of the animals escaped by wheeling about and leaping upon the rail; then it sprang to one of the sweeps, and crawled down toward the water.

The net descended squarely on the second tiger-cat. The beast squalled like a fury, and struggled so violently as to speedily entangle itself in the stout meshes.

Among the sweep-men was a gigantic fellow, with muscles of iron. He made a sudden dart forward, and fastened both his hands on the scruff of the tiger-cat's neck. He lifted the animal, net and all, carried it to the nearest hatch, and dropped it into the hold—a performance that excited the admiration of all.

Meanwhile the rest of the party were passing through an equally lively experience on the foredeck.

When Matlock and the two shikarees ventured to crawl up the storeroom ladder they saw Old Ugly's head peering at them from the cabin doorway.

"We've got the brute this time," cried Matlock. "The rascal has trapped himself. Wait till I noose this rope and drop it over his neck. Then you and I will hold him fast, Jafar, while Jung slips in by the rear window and drops the net over him."

It was a very feasible plan, provided the sanction of the fourth party was obtained. At first the rhinoceros made no objections. He looked about him with his wicked little eyes, and grunted softly. He seemed quite pleased with his cozy quarters.

But just as Matlock crept near, rope in hand, Old

Ugly snorted with rage, and dashed forward. Crack! went the door timbers, and, in less time than it takes to tell, the brute was outside the cabin.

Matlock hastily cast the rope, and missed. An agile spring to one side was all that saved his life. Then he ran to the covered hatch, which was close by, and leaped upon it. Jafar did the same.

Jung fled clear around the cabin, hotly pursued by the vengeful brute, and on the second lap he managed to join his companions.

Old Ugly was madder than ever. He butted the raised end of the hold a couple of times, and thus gave Matlock a chance to slip the noose on his neck.

Then he backed away, dragging the end of the rope free before Matlock and the shikarees could get a good hold on it.

After a turn or two he pricked up his ears, and pranced down the side-deck with the rope dangling about his hoofs.

The brute's advent on the rear of the barge was just a moment or two after the tiger-cat had been dropped into the hold.

The group of sweep-men was made a target for Old Ugly's charge. Five of them, in panic and desperation, crawled hastily out on the two great oar-blades—three on one and two on the other.

Of course, the blades dipped deep, and the tiger-cat, at the first touch of the water, gained the rail by a flying leap over the men, and, dodging past the rhinoceros, raced up the deck.

This diversion gave Marco and his companions a chance. They turned the corner of the hold, and fled to the foredeck, with Old Ugly grunting after them.

Hofstein climbed to the low roof of the cabin, followed by Marco and Gooloo Singh. The others clambered upon the hatch, thus crowding it to a very uncomfortable degree.

Old Ugly arrived on the scene a second too late. Finding his enemies out of reach, he ambled leisurely to the rail, and peered inquisitively down at the rippling water. Possibly he was thirsty after his exertions.

"This is a nice fix," growled Matlock. "We're in a regular state of siege."

"Don't you think we had better shoot the brute before he does any more damage?" called out Hofstein, from the cabin roof. "We won't have a better chance than now."

"Not a bit of it," replied Matlock, emphatically. "That animal is too valuable to lose. Wait a little until his temper cools down. Then we'll manage to get the nets over him."

"If we had another rope around his neck we could make a rush, and pull on him from two directions," suggested Marco. "I have a rope here now."

"We'll try it after a while," replied Matlock. "Have patience."

A minute or two went by, and then Old Ugly turned away from the rail. He seemed to understand that he was master of the barge. His little eyes twinkled with malicious enjoyment.

Hearing a sound from the stern, he wheeled about, and trotted in that direction. The watchers on the hatch and cabin could follow his progress by the glow of the lanterns that were strung along the barge from end to end.

They saw the sweep-men, who had by this time climbed back to the deck, hasten back to the shelter of the oar-blades, as the brute lunged at them.

Old Ugly, now monarch of all he surveyed, shuffled leisurely forward again. He paused beside the cabin, and Marco hastily cast his rope.

The brute provokingly turned his head in time to escape the noose. He then moved nearer the hatch, and the shikarees succeeded in flinging a net partly over him.

This roused Old Ugly's sleeping wrath. Shaking the net off, he trampled it under his sharp hoofs, and quickly rent it to shreds.

At this luckless moment the tiger-cat came slinking around the corner of the cabin. The little beast was evidently badly scared by its strange quarters. It mewed in a low, quavering tone, and fixed its shiny eyes on the huddled group that occupied the hatch.

There was a sudden rush—a chorus of grunts and squeals, and the tiger-cat lay lifeless on the deck.

Not content with this, Old Ugly trampled the body, and mangled it horribly with his curved horn. The sight and smell of blood seemed to rouse him to a pitch of fury hitherto unattained.

He glared around him, snorting shrilly. Then he charged full tilt at the hatch, and recoiled against the

tough timbers. This added to his wrath. He snorted, and wheeled his clumsy body about.

With amazing swiftness, he shot straight at the cabin! There was a splintering crash that made the structure reel, and down fell Marco, right upon Old Ugly's hind quarters.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OLD UGLY AND THE PANTHER.

Almost before Marco rolled off the back of the rhinoceros to the deck his companions on hatch and cabin were shouting confused orders to him. More than one rifle was pointed at the brute, but no one pulled trigger.

The lad sprang to his feet with a nimbleness that showed him to be uninjured. He turned and made for the hatch. Old Ugly turned as quickly, in a fine rage, and the brief race that followed was nip and tuck.

The snorting of the beast magnified the danger to Marco's ears. He leaped upon the hatch in such eager haste that he could not check himself. He stumbled over Jafar's crouching figure, missed Matlock's outstretched hand, and plunged head first into the yawning depths of the hold.

There was a simultaneous cry of horror from all. Old Ugly stopped short, evidently not knowing what to make of it. But Marco had happily alighted upon a bale of grass-fodder.

"Don't worry," he called up to his companions. "I'm not hurt a bit."

"Be careful, lad," replied Matlock. "It's not safe to venture out now. Wait until the brute goes to the rear-deck."

"We had better end the siege with a rifleball," exclaimed Hofstein. "Things are getting serious."

"Stop—no you don't," he added, as he caught Gooloo Singh's arm.

The Hindoo wanted to join the lad in the hold, and it was with extreme difficulty that Hofstein induced him to abandon the rash intention.

Indeed, it would have been simple suicide, for Old Ugly was now prancing between hatch and cabin, alternately butting them with his horn.

Meanwhile Marco seized the opportunity to look about him. It was a scary place, and he naturally felt rather nervous and timid.

The animals in the surrounding cages were uttering all sorts of rasping cries. The bullocks were partitioned off by themselves. Many of them were loose in the pen, and all were bellowing loudly.

Marco's eyes had scarcely gained power to penetrate the gloom when he stepped on something soft, and was greeted with a ferocious yell.

He sprang clear off his feet, horribly scared. Then he laughed, as the little tiger-cat, still tangled in the net, rolled away from him, snarling and spitting.

"Say, lad," called out Matlock, "I'm coming down. I want to see if we can't block the entrance to the hold. If Old Ugly gets in there again he'll play the very devil."

"We might do it," replied Marco. "There's an empty cage here, and some stout planks."

Matlock lowered himself over the edge of the hatch, and dropped lightly beside the lad. Had they started the

proposed undertaking at once they would probably have spared themselves some very troublesome times.

But their attention was drawn to the tiger-cat, and, by the aid of a strip of canvas, they grabbed the little beast at both ends, and dumped it into its cage. The latter was hastily made secure by nailing a couple of planks over it.

Meanwhile, Old Ugly had been prowling about the foredeck in a very sullen humor, which found vent in occasional attacks on the hatch and cabin.

Suddenly it occurred to his wicked mind to investigate the noises in the hold, and off he went in that direction.

Knowing that his friends were in deadly peril, Hofstein took a hasty shot. He aimed to kill, but the bullet merely grazed Old Ugly's fore-shoulder, and threw him into a terrible rage.

The report of the rifle and the clamor of their companions gave Matlock and Marco all too brief a warning of what was wrong. The next instant the rhinoceros came pounding down the plankway into the hold, with passion in his glittering little eyes.

"Dodge him," yelled Marco. "Jump to one side."

"This way, lad," Matlock shouted.

He clambered upon the empty cage—which was conveniently near—and hauled Marco up beside him.

Crash! came Old Ugly's horny snout, and the cage reeled under the shock.

The fugitives sprang quickly to the adjoining cage, in which was confined a huge black panther. Fortunately, the edge of the hold was now within reach overhead, and, with a little dexterity, they reached the deck.

The escape of his intended victims turned Old Ugly's rage in another direction. With a shrill snort, he charged with tremendous force at the black panther's cage.

Thump! thump! down fell the cage from its wheeled truck. For an instant the noise of splitting timbers and blood-curdling yells was deafening. Old Ugly's snort of triumph rose above it all.

Then the black panther leaped clear out of the hold at the rear end. He struck the deck just as the five sweep-men, who had profited by Old Ugly's absence to seek more comfortable shelter, rushed forward with Marco and Matlock.

The two latter, with three of the sweep-men, took refuge on the roof of the cabin. The others climbed the already covered hatch.

The next act in this impromptu drama was destined to be an intensely thrilling one.

The panther was now squatting on deck midway between hatch and cabin. He was in a frightful rage, and that meant considerable for a beast of his muscular, squat dimensions.

His restless tail thumped the hard boards, and he turned his flaming eyes from side to side, as though debating where to attack.

"I value that fellow more than the rhinoceros," said Hofstein, "but I'm afraid we'll have to shoot him. He'll likely jump among the men on the hatch."

"Wait—don't fire yet," exclaimed Matlock. "Let's try the net first. We have one up here."

He rose to his feet, and Hofstein did the same. They

took the net between them, and hastily gathered the ends in their hands.

But just when they were ready to make the throw a pounding and snorting was heard, and Old Ugly galloped on the scene.

The battle opened without a second's delay. The rhinoceros grunted viciously, and charged. The panther sprang to one side with a rasping cry, and Old Ugly's head struck only the side of the cabin.

The larger animal made three more charges in quick succession, all equally futile. He was now boiling over with wrath.

The panther was just as mad, and showed no desire to retreat. In cunning and agility he was far more than a match for his enemy. He crept around and around the rhinoceros, dodging charge after charge.

Then the opportunity came, and it found the panther ready. He flashed through the air, and landed on Old Ugly's hind-quarters. With his sharp claws he drew blood from the tough hide.

The big brute plunged and pranced, and snorted with rage and pain. All at once the panther lost his hold, and slipped to the deck.

He was quickly out of reach of his enemy, and for several minutes the drawn game went on—the rhinoceros charging and the panther dodging.

The spectators looked eagerly on, indifferent to all else but the thrilling and fascinating sight before their eyes.

But the end was very near. By a swifter rush than usual, Old Ugly drove his enemy against the cabin.

Thus cornered, the panther escaped impalement by leaping fairly on the head and neck of the rhinoceros.

There was an instant of fearful squealing and grunting and struggling. Red drops trickled down on the planks.

Then, by a vigorous effort, Old Ugly shook his assailant off. The panther struck the deck with a thump, rolled over twice, and plunged tail first down the open trap leading to the storeroom.

A couple of wailing cries were followed by silence. Either the beast was injured, or he had no inclination to renew the fight.

Old Ugly stared about him, evidently puzzled by the unlooked-for disappearance of his enemy. Then it seemed to dawn upon him that he was a victor. Anxious for more conquests, he shook his clumsy body, spattering the deck with drops of blood, and trotted slowly toward the entrance of the hold.

"Good gracious! that will never do," cried Matlock. "He will smash every cage we've got. I must kill the rascal."

He lifted his rifle, and took careful aim.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Marco. "I've just thought of something. Perhaps I can save him for you, and put an end to the siege. There's shallow water all around us, you know. Wait, I'll show you."

Before his companions could check him, the lad dropped lightly down from the cabin-roof. Snatching the door, which hung by one hinge to the shattered frame,

he dropped it over the trap leading to the storeroom, thus safely imprisoning the panther.

Then, paying no heed to the entreaties of his companions that he should return, he dashed after the rhinoceros, who was just turning down the plankway to the hold.

At a distance of ten feet he stopped short. He shouted, and waved his hands.

Old Ugly changed his mind at sight of the daring lad. He wheeled about, and charged with an angry snort.

Marco turned, and ran like an arrow to the extreme end of the foredeck. Then, within a foot of the rail, he faced his pursuer, who was lunging straight forward.

A simultaneous cry of horror went up from the spectators on the hatch and cabin.

But Marco had all his wits about him. He had never been more cool and collected in his life. He knew just what he was doing.

When the rhinoceros was only five feet away, the lad jumped nimbly to one side.

The daring ruse was a perfect success. Old Ugly could more easily have taken wings and flown than checked his mad rush at such short range. With a dismal snort, he smashed into the rail, swept it aside like an egg-shell, and went plunging down to the murky waters of the Bramahputra.

The tremendous splash that followed fairly shook the barge.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN ANXIOUS CONSULTATION.

"There," cried Marco, with pardonable pride, "I thought I could do it."

His companions came leaping down from cabin and hatch, with words of warm praise and congratulation.

"You have ended the siege," declared Hofstein.

"And came pretty near ending yourself," added Matlock. "It was a most daring thing to do."

"All's well that ends well," said Marco, laughing. "And now for the rhinoceros. We don't want to lose him."

Everybody crowded to the rail, and looked down. In the dim light they could see Old Ugly swimming clumsily toward the shore. He was grunting and splashing, and seemed in no wise injured by the fall.

At a distance of ten feet from the bow of the barge he struck shallow water, and began to wade slowly.

"If we are quick we'll get him," cried Matlock. "Launch those two boats. Lively, men; there's no time to lose."

The boats were hastily lowered, and a crew of six dropped into each. Matlock and Hofstein were in charge of one, and Marco and Gooloo Singh of the other. Both parties had an ample supply of ropes.

By the aid of lanterns the two boats were pulled into position at an equal distance of eight feet above and below the rhinoceros, and in a very short time the brute was securely lassoed from both directions.

The cold bath seemed to have cowed him, and he submitted to capture very gracefully.

Three natives from each craft now jumped out into the shallow water, and while they kept the ropes drawn taut the boats pulled back to the barge.

The entrance to the hold, luckily, faced the shore, and the gangway—which was more than ordinarily long and heavy—was lowered from in front of it. Three of the heaviest sweep-men climbed partly down, so that the lower end rested on the bottom of the river.

While this was being done under Matlock's supervision, Hofstein and Marco hastily repaired Old Ugly's cage, and wheeled it into the required position.

The next step proved less difficult than was anticipated. The six men in the river wheeled Old Ugly around, and dragged him toward the barge. His clumsy body was cleverly guided onto the gangway, and thence up to the deck.

Several minutes later the vicious brute—now as gentle as a lamb—was safe behind the bars of his cage.

"The worst is over," exclaimed Matlock, in a tone of great relief. "The panther comes next."

He gave orders to prepare nets and ropes, and heat irons.

"The animal's cage is too badly smashed for use," said Marco.

"Then we'll take the empty one," replied Hofstein.

When the necessary preparations were completed, the door was lifted off the trap, and the panther was seen crouching at the foot of the ladder.

Jafar instantly cast a noosed rope about the animal's neck, and a dozen strong arms pulled him to the deck, where he was quickly netted.

The hot irons were not required, since the panther was too nearly suffocated to make much of a struggle. He was easily dragged into his cage, and locked up.

Then the work of restoring the barge to shipshape condition again was rapidly proceeded with. The natives tossed the mangled body of the tiger-cat into the river, and scrubbed the deck.

Marco and Gooloo Singh repaired the gate leading to the hold, and put a new rail on the fore-end of the barge.

Matlock and Hofstein tinkered at the badly-shattered cabin, and succeeded in making it look quite respectable.

Morning dawned shortly after the tired men ceased work. However, not a craft of any kind was in sight up or down the river.

Matlock lost his temper at the prospect of further delay, and used some language which very likely made the absent Garcia's ears burn.

But at the moment when the situation looked blackest an unexpected piece of good fortune changed gloom to rejoicing.

The murky waters of the Bramahputra assumed a deeper yellow tinge, and the current was seen to flow more swiftly. Owing to the sudden swelling of its

tributary mountain streams—which was a common occurrence at this time of the year—the river was on the rise.

“Hurrah! we’ll soon be free,” cried Matlock. “This is rare good luck.”

“Don’t be too sure,” replied Hofstein. “The flood may not rise high enough to lift us off.”

“The sahibs need have no fear,” confidently declared Gooloo Singh. “I know the signs. This is only the beginning.”

The Hindoo’s prophecy was verified. Higher and higher crept the yellow waters. Their rise could be plainly noted on the sides of the barge and along the jungle-clad shore.

An hour after daylight the barge began to creak and tremble, and a minute or two later it slid off the bottom with a crunching noise, and drifted rapidly down stream.

Amid the glad confusion and cheering, Matlock’s voice rang out distinctly in rapid words of command.

The sweep-men hurried to the oar-blades, and worked with a hearty zest. They swung the *Assam Tiger* clear around, and soon had it well out on the broad bosom of the Bramahputra.

Then breakfast was prepared for the hungry men, and the bullocks and beasts were fed and watered.

Gooloo Singh assumed the duties of pilot, and mounted the bridge where Gunga Ra had planned his diabolical treachery.

But there was little need for such a post now. The

river was broad and deep, and passing vessels were very infrequent.

Long before noon Rangamati hove in sight, and the barge was moored at one of the town wharves. This, it will be remembered, was the place to which Matlock and his companions had come by rail, and where they had commenced their water journey to Goalpara.

Matlock and Hofstein went into the town, and, after purchasing a quantity of supplies and ordering them to be sent to the barge, they visited the police authorities, and warned them to be on the lookout for Garcia.

The English inspector promised to do all in his power. He expressed the opinion that the ruffian would make his way to Rangamati, and try to get down country by rail.

By two o'clock in the afternoon the *Assam Tiger* was once more adrift. Before evening it passed the right-angular bend of the Bramahputra, and was borne due south on the swollen yellow flood.

For a week there was little to break the monotony of the journey, save passing steamers and the tie-ups at night along shore. Gooloo Singh shared the duties of pilot with his companions, who quickly "learned the ropes."

This part of the Bramahputra was wild and lonely. In a distance of one hundred miles there were only one or two squalid settlements of half-savage people.

Meanwhile, the river had been growing wider and wider, and on the sixth day the barge entered that lower portion of the stream which assumes a different name, and is called the Megua.

Here, in the increased current, much better speed was made. Instead of tying up at night, the *Assam Tiger* boldly pursued her course, displaying an abundance of warning lights fore and aft.

On the ninth day after leaving Goalpara, the barge was drifting down midstream. The Megua was now fully twenty miles broad, and the shores to right and left, each ten miles away, were but dimly visible.

Here and there on the waste of waters was the white sail of a budgerow, or the smoking funnel of a steamer.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and on the fore-deck sat Matlock and three companions. For the time being no pilot occupied the bridge.

Matlock held a well-thumbed chart in his hand, and it was evident that a consultation of a serious nature had been taking place. A greater or less degree of perplexity was marked on every countenance.

"As I understand it, then," said Hofstein, "we are now only forty miles from the Bay of Bengal, and that forty-mile stretch is attended with a certain amount of danger."

"Danger, unless we are taken in tow by a steamer," added Marco.

"Exactly," replied Matlock. "We shall need the steamer anyhow, since there is a sea voyage before us of nearly two hundred miles, from the mouth of the Megua to Calcutta. I confess I did not calculate upon needing it so soon."

"But you will, sahibs," declared Gooloo Singh. "I do not warn you idly. I know something of this lower part of the river. Storms are frequent, and a very bad one

will wreck the barge upon the shore, or drive it far out into the bay, where tremendous waves will make an end of it."

"It is hard to believe in storms under such a sky," said Marco.

"And yet I can feel in my bones that one is coming," replied the Hindoo. "The air tells of it—this perfect calm. And look, sahibs, not a vessel is in sight. The native pilots are wise, and note the signs."

"Then we will make for the left shore at once," said Matlock, decidedly, "and find a safe harbor, where we can lie in wait for one of the tug-steamers that come up from the bay."

"It will require hours to swing across ten miles of current," muttered Hofstein. "Can we beat the storm?"

"Who knows, sahib?" replied Gooloo Singh, as he strode to the rear-deck to give the necessary orders to the sweep-men.

A moment later he was perched aloft on the bridge.

CHAPTER XXX.

SWEPT AWAY.

It was, as Hofstein had said, a most laborious task to propel such a clumsy craft as the *Assam Tiger* diagonally across a ten-mile stretch of rapidly-flowing water—for the current of the Bramahputra had grown much more swift in the past few days.

The barge slipped down stream two miles for every half-mile that was gained in the direction of shore. Moreover, the river seemed to be constantly widening as it drew near the Bay of Bengal.

Four o'clock found the great expanse of water still deserted. There was a shuddering calm in the air, and the sun was fearfully oppressive—even under the awnings.

An hour later the distant shores were enveloped in a murky, pearl-colored haze. The sky had a strange, weird look that was reflected on the surface of the river.

That these signs meant something terrible could no longer be doubted. Down in the hold the bullocks lowed hoarsely, and the wild animals uttered restless cries.

The sweep-men jabbered ominously to one another, as they shuffled to and fro at their work. Gooloo Singh sat on the bridge like a piece of bronze statuary. He rarely moved, except to glance up at the sky.

Matlock and his companions anxiously paced the deck.

There was nothing for them to do but watch and wait. They realized the helplessness of the situation.

Just at sunset the great change came—so swiftly and violently as to strike terror to every heart. A purple darkness blotted out the shores and the sky overhead, and strode rapidly over the water from all directions.

The gloom of midnight fell on the barge, and the very lanterns seemed to shed a bluish light.

There was a brief moment or two of this condition, and then a pelting shower of rain fell, mingled with flashes of forked lightning.

"The wind will be next, sahibs," Gooloo Singh shouted down from the bridge. "Make ready for it."

So Matlock collected all hands, except the relay of men at the sweeps, and led them into the hold. They hurriedly lifted all the cages off the trucks, and arranged them as securely as possible.

Then they came upon deck, and fastened all the hatch-covers down, and stretched oilskins over the entrance of the hold to keep the water out.

"Where are we?" exclaimed Matlock, trying to peek into the gloom.

"Half-a-dozen miles from shore at the least," replied Hofstein. "We can't make it. We must trust to——"

The rest of the sentence was drowned in an awful roar, and quickly the hurricane struck the barge.

At the first blast those on the foredeck threw themselves flat, to prevent being blown away. Gooloo Singh, who had lingered too long on his perch, made a quick

jump, and landed on the hatches just as the ruins of the bridge clattered about his ears.

He gained the deck, and crawled over to Matlock and his companions.

"Stick fast, sahibs!" he shouted. "It is an awful storm. One of the sweep-men was blown overboard. I saw him by a flash of lightning."

This news was received with less horror than it would have been under other circumstances. The barge was now pitching and reeling dizzily, and great waves were slapping its sides.

It was a fearful thing to lie there on the exposed deck, and listen to the creaking, whistling fury of the destructive gale.

Rip! rip! Away went the awnings, whirled aloft like so many huge, flapping birds.

Bang! jingle! One by one the lanterns were blown into the river, or dashed to fragments on the deck. Not a light was left. In the purple gloom the outlines of hold and rail could be faintly seen.

The rain had ceased, but the lightning flashed an accompaniment to the wailing of the hurricane.

Suddenly there was a tremendous crash, and the cabin, rent to fragments, vanished from the deck, carrying a section of the rail with it.

The cook had foolishly taken refuge there, and his agonized face was visible for a brief instant in a glare of lightning. Then he disappeared forever.

Matlock uttered a loud cry, and warned his companions not to move. He could scarcely be heard, for the roar of

the tempest was mingled with a hubbub of shrill noises from the poor beasts confined in the hold.

"Surely this can't last long," shouted Hofstein.

"No, sahibs," shouted the Hindoo, "these storms are seldom of great duration. But the worst peril is yet to come. The river will be lashed into mighty waves. They will rise higher and higher, and may sweep over the barge."

"That's a pleasant prospect," cried Matlock. "There are life-preservers in the stateroom. We ought to have them."

He started to crawl forward, but Marco, who was nearest the trap, stopped him.

"Stay where you are," he shouted. "I'll get them."

The plucky lad crept to the ladder, and the moment he was below deck and out of the gale, the feeling of relief was tremendous.

He quickly found the life-preservers, and, after putting one on himself, he carried three loads up the ladder, and threw them to his companions.

Then he crawled back to his place beside Gooloo Singh.

For a few minutes the hurricane increased in violence, and the two boats were blown off the deck.

Finally the wind abated a little. Matlock loaded himself with life-preservers, and crept from one end of the deck to the other, distributing them to the scattered crew.

"It looks as though the worst was over," he said, when he came back. "We have lost two men—the cook and

one of the sweep-fellows. We can't do any more steering, though. Both the sweeps are gone."

"That doesn't matter much," replied Hofstein. "It is all the better that we are far from shore. The main thing now is to weather the waves."

"I hope we can do it," resumed Matlock. "It would be terrible to lose another convoy of animals. But the *Assam Tiger* is a stanch craft. I think we'll pull through."

Gooloo Singh said nothing, but the expression of his face showed that he was far from sharing the confidence of his companions.

During the next hour the wind fell more and more, while the violence of the river increased in the same ratio. The barge plunged and careened in every conceivable direction.

Matlock and his companions made their way to the hold, and clung in an upright position to the raised end. At every flash of lightning they could see the dusky figures of the crew standing in similar attitudes all along the hatches.

Once a shrill whistle and a puffing noise were heard close by. Some vessel was in the vicinity, but nothing could be seen of it through the inky darkness.

Several minutes of dreadful suspense followed. All waited and listened for the deadly collision that they feared. At Matlock's suggestion they shouted half-a-dozen times.

But the crash did not come, and, after a while, the whistle was heard faintly at a great distance.

The chances now looked far brighter, but the calm proved to be only a forerunner of the dangers that Gooloo Singh had predicted.

The gale increased, and cyclonic winds shrieked on all sides, spinning the barge about in half-circles. The waves rose higher, and their white tips broke over the deck in swirling pools of foam.

Then drenching torrents of rain pattered down, and forked lightning blazed over the inky sky.

Nor had the storm yet reached its limit. Each ravenous wave was larger and more violent than the last. Every now and then a sharp snapping noise told that the rail was going piecemeal.

Water rolled over the deck and dropped sullenly down into hold and storeroom. The figures clinging to the hatches were knee-deep half the time. The spray continually slapped them in the face with stinging force.

Suddenly the foreend of the barge rose high up, and at the same instant a grinding, splashing noise was heard from the stern, accompanied by shrill cries.

"Look!" yelled Hofstein, as a lightning flash lit up the scene. "A great wave has washed over the rear-deck, and swept away some of the poor fellows."

"Heaven help us!" cried Matlock. "We can't hold out much longer."

A moment later the position of the barge was reversed. The bow settled deep down in the angry river, and before it could rise a veritable mountain of water was seen rolling forward from the left.

"Here it comes," warned Hofstein, in a shrill voice. "Hold fast, for your lives!"

Fearing that Marco's slim form would be swept away, Gooloo Singh clung to the hatch with only one arm, while he threw the other about the lad's waist.

It was a fatal change. The monstrous wave rolled clear across the deck, and when its fury was spent, Matlock and Hofstein found themselves alone.

A cry of despair came to their ears from far out on the black river.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BURNING VESSEL.

In that awful moment when they were swept from the deck of the barge, Marco and Gooloo Singh held fast to each other. The crest of the wave carried them far out, and then they seemed to shoot down to the bottom of the river.

As they came up once more, chilled with cold, and half-suffocated, a flash of lightning showed them the barge at a distance of several hundred feet.

Then the thick, black darkness settled down, and for five minutes it was a desperate struggle for breath amid the angry waves. But for their life-preservers, the cast-aways must have succumbed at once.

Still clinging to each other, they were spun around like egg-shells, now high up on the crest of the billows, now deep down in a watery trough.

They were soon bruised from head to foot, but, after the first chill, they did not feel the cold so much. The rain was making the water warm.

The hurricane now seemed to have spent its fury. The violence of the waves subsided, and a choppy rain beat down with stinging effect.

"Have courage, sahib," said Gooloo Singh. "The worst is over."

"It doesn't matter much," replied Marco, despondently. "We've got to go to the bottom sooner or later. I'm giving out, Gooloo. I feel a sort of numbness coming over me."

"I will save you, sahib," declared the Hindoo. "See! I can hold you up. We will drift until morning, and then there will surely be vessels in sight."

"Morning!" gasped Marco. "Ah! that—is hours—away. It's no—use—no use——"

The words ended in a husky groan, and the lad drooped limply against the Hindoo's breast.

They drifted on and on, while the waves still spun them about, and lashed them savagely.

The lightning played incessantly over the dark river, but no trace of the barge could be seen. Either it had gone to the bottom or had been blown widely apart from the castaways.

But a more vivid flash than usual revealed something that was almost equally welcome—a small boat, tossing bottom up among the waves.

The Hindoo waited eagerly for the next flash, and when it came he saw the craft within a dozen feet.

More by chance than skill he managed to clutch the bow with his disengaged hand, and in this position he remained for a moment, recruiting his exhausted strength.

The boat was evidently one of the two that had been blown off the *Assam Tiger*. It must have drifted parallel with the barge for three or four miles.

Finally, the Hindoo managed to lift the only half-conscious body of Marco onto the bottom, and there he held

him fast for nearly an hour while they rode on among the turbulent waves.

By this time the rain had ceased, and the wind had dropped to a gentle breeze. The darkness was as impenetrable as ever.

Suddenly Marco lifted his head, and looked around.

"Where am I?" he muttered. "Oh! I remember now. Are you there, Gooloo?"

"Yes, sahib," replied the Hindoo. "Have no fear. We are safe, and the storm is over."

He briefly went on to explain about the boat.

"It's lucky we ran across it," said Marco. "The last thing I remember is an awful pain in my head while you were holding me up among the waves. Then it all seemed to fade away."

He rubbed his forehead with one hand, and then added:

"No wonder I had a pain. There's an ugly bruise over my left eye."

"You must have struck the rail when we were washed off the deck," suggested Gooloo Singh.

"Yes, that's just it. I didn't feel the blow until afterward, and then it made me weak all of a sudden——Hullo! what's that, Gooloo?"

As the lad spoke the boat lurched forward on the crest of a wave, and the next instant there came a grinding shock. The castaways felt bottom under their feet, and saw a dark blot just in front of them.

"An island!" cried Gooloo Singh, and, taking hold of Marco, he dragged him onto firm ground. Then he

plunged back into the shallow water, and hauled the boat far out of reach of the waves.

With thankful hearts, the rescued ones scanned their surroundings as well as the gloom permitted. The spot on which they had providentially run aground was indeed an island in the middle of the Brahmaputra.

At the normal stage of the river it was probably of some extent, for in all directions the tops of trees and bushes could be seen sticking out of the water.

Now only the ridged top of the island rose above the flood. This space, however, was thirty feet long and half that in width. It was covered with low bushes, and in the very center was a great mass of boulders.

Between these rocks the castaways discovered a triangular crevice, plenty large enough to hold them both.

"Very nice place, sahib," said Gooloo Singh. "We will be comfortable here until morning."

"It would be a good deal snugger place if we had a fire," replied Marco. "I have matches, but I don't know that they will do us any good."

He took a little waterproof metal box from his pocket, opened it, and scraped a match on the lid. The tiny flame showed the rear end of the crevice to be choked with driftwood that had lodged there during past floods.

"Hurrah! here is fuel in plenty," cried Marco; "nice and dry, too. Grab a lot of it, Gooloo, before the match goes out."

The Hindoo quickly collected a double armful of the wood, and Marco was just about to apply the match to some of the smaller fragments, when three sharp reports

were heard in rapid succession. The sound came faintly down the river and died away in long echoes.

Marco let the match fall, and the crevice was plunged in utter darkness.

"What was that?" he cried.

"Gunshots, sahib," replied Gooloo Singh. "They seemed very near, but they were really at a great distance. There is but little wind now, and sound travels far over the water."

"I wonder what it means," muttered the lad, and as if in answer, a blaze of red flame suddenly illumined the dark night.

The Hindoo's usual stolidity vanished at the sight, and he rose to his feet in great excitement.

"A vessel on fire, sahib," he cried. "It is at least four miles up stream, and lies off toward the left shore."

"It can't be the *Assam Tiger*?" exclaimed Marco, anxiously.

"No, sahib, that is impossible. The barge is by this time far down the river, and no doubt our friends are safe."

"It's queer about the shooting," said Marco. "The fire is more easily accounted for."

The Hindoo shook his head gloomily.

"Strange and terrible deeds are sometimes committed on the lower parts of this river," he replied. "More than one vessel has been captured and sunk by piratical natives."

"And do you think that is what is going on up there now?" asked Marco.

"Who knows, sahib?" the Hindoo answered, mysteriously. "But look, the flames are going down."

He was right. Fainter and fainter grew the ruddy glow, in spite of the tongues of fire that occasionally leaped up as though loath to abandon their prey.

At last the glare dwindled to a tiny spark, and then vanished altogether, leaving no trace on the dark night.

"It is over," said Gooloo Singh. "The vessel must have sunk gradually."

"Or else they managed to put the fire out with the pumps," suggested Marco.

The Hindoo shrugged his shoulders doubtfully, and sat down.

"If your view of the matter is right," resumed Marco, "some of the crew may have escaped in boats. If we light the fire now, it will guide them here."

"They will find the main shore much closer," replied Gooloo Singh. "Still, we must have the fire for ourselves, sahib. And the light may shine through these rocks, and be seen by our friends down the river."

"That's so," exclaimed Marco, eagerly. "When morning comes, we'll take the boat and paddle after the barge."

A moment later a blazing fire was crackling at the mouth of the crevice, and casting a red gleam far out on the swift waters.

While the Hindoo pulled the boat higher into the bushes, for fear of a further rise, Marco gathered a great heap of dry wood and stacked it neatly.

Then they sat down with their backs against the rocky walls, and listened to the soft moan of the breeze, and

the sougling of the waves on the shores of the island. There was little trace left of the recent hurricane.

The warmth of the fire gradually dried their clothes, and then a feeling of intense drowsiness stole over both. For a time, without knowing why, they struggled against it.

Finally Marco's eyes closed, and he slipped down from his rigid position. He was sound asleep.

Gooloo Singh placed fresh wood on the sinking fire, and crouched comfortably beside the lad. A moment later he, too, was slumbering.

Little did they dream to what ill-omened voyager their blazing fire was proving a beacon of refuge.

From far up river a boat was moving steadily toward the light—a small, graceful craft, painted blue and bearing in white letters the name of *Pearl of Delhi*.

In the stern crouched a hideous figure, paddling alternately from right to left with one oar.

To all appearances he was a half-naked, bearded Hindoo. On each wrist was a heavy iron bracelet, and from each bracelet dangled six inches of chain. One eye was swollen half-shut, and on his left cheek was a raw, bleeding wound, looking as though recently ploughed by a rifle ball.

The man shivered in his wet, blood-stained garments. The shiver may have meant cold or fear. Probably the latter, for he frequently glanced into the blackness behind him.

"Bah! what a fool I am," he muttered. "There's no danger now. I've given them the slip neatly. The fire

kept them busy, curse them! Why did they get it out? The steamer must be anchored. I suppose the water disabled the machinery. Well, I must make the most of my chance. If I'm caught now it means——"

He broke off with a curse, and turned for another look behind.

"Murder!" he resumed, "and a bloody one, too. But it couldn't be helped. The fool wouldn't submit."

He paddled harder than ever, steering straight for the fire, which loomed larger and nearer every instant.

"Yonder light must be the shore," he muttered. "I can't be deceived in that. And once safe in the jungle, I defy capture. I'll have my revenge yet—ay, and the money that was bargained for. Then I'll slip away from this accursed land. But I'll keep good track of him. He shall be my banker, and a generous one, too."

Ten minutes later the boat was so close to the fire that the rocks and bushes could be plainly seen.

The stranger held the oar stationery, and swore fearfully under his breath.

"An island!" he hissed. "Sacre! it is my usual luck. And who can be there? Shall I stop, or go around it?"

He hesitated a moment. Then he changed the boat's course, and dipped the oar with noiseless strokes. He made a wide detour beyond the firelight, and swung in at the lower end of the island.

A moment later the boat was grounded in the mud, and the stranger was creeping through the bushes toward the clump of rocks.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ATTACK.

Gooloo Singh slept the deep, dreamless sleep of utter exhaustion, but it was otherwise with Marco. The painful bruises on his head, combined with all that he had suffered lately, filled his brain with troubled visions, and suddenly he opened his eyes and sat up.

He was wet with perspiration from head to foot, and his heart was beating rapidly.

He glanced at the Hindoo, and then at the fire. He was about to put some fresh wood on the still ruddy embers, when he heard a sharp sound near by, exactly like the snapping of a dry twig.

The lad instantly became alert and watchful. He was so anxious to discover what the noise meant that he dared not awaken Gooloo Singh, for fear of scaring the intruder away.

The sounds came closer and closer, and whether made by man or beast, it was as yet impossible to tell.

Marco slipped behind a projecting rock on the opposite side of the crevice, where he could command a good view of the opening without being seen himself.

He had hardly taken this position when the stealthy footsteps drew very near. It was now evident that the unwelcome visitor was human.

Marco felt a sudden thrill of terror. He and his companion were absolutely unarmed; there was not even a pocketknife between them.

A stone as large as his two fists caught the lad's eyes, and by an indefinable impulse, he picked it up.

The next instant a shadow darkened the mouth of the crevice, and the glow of the embers shone on the stooping figure and evil, bearded face of the false Gunga Ra—of Senor Garcia.

The blood fairly froze in Marco's veins. For the moment he was powerless to move.

As the Portuguese crept closer, peering sharply into the space behind the fire, he drew a long, keen-bladed knife from his belt.

The ruffian had now spied and recognized the Hindoo, and intended murder was written on his ferocious face.

He slipped by the fire, and paused beside the slumbering man. The knife, clutched in his right hand, rose for the deadly stroke.

Another second would have seen the blade buried in Gooloo Singh's breast.

But just then Marco leaned forward and threw the stone. His aim was as sure as his purpose. The missile hit the knife, and knocked it out of Garcia's hand. Stone and weapon flew against the wall, and fell to the ground on the farther side of the Hindoo.

This unexpected attack was too much for the ruffian. He lost his head and bolted out of the crevice with a harsh cry.

Out dashed Marco likewise, shouting lustily to Gooloo

Singh. The lad's blood was up, and he was reckless with passion.

Too reckless, perhaps, for he had gone less than ten feet when he plumped into the arms of Garcia, who had immediately wheeled around.

The knowledge that his enemy was unarmed gave Marco courage to offer a valorous resistance.

But, as on previous occasions, the wiry Portuguese proved himself much the stronger of the two. His tactics were merciless and swift.

After partly throttling the lad, and beating him on the face, he hurled him roughly forward.

Garcia's intention was to place the one enemy *hors de combat*, so that he might be free to encounter the other. And he succeeded admirably.

Marco tumbled into the boat belonging to the barge, and struck his injured forehead violently on the gunwale. The ugly bruise was split open, and the lad became utterly helpless with pain and dizziness.

This brief encounter had transpired in far less time than it takes to tell.

Garcia had scarcely faced around when the awakened Hindoo burst from the crevice, boiling over with rage.

There was light enough from the fire to show Marco's ghastly, bleeding face peeping from the boat, and the sight acted on Gooloo Singh like a red rag on a bull.

Unfortunately, he had known nothing of the knife, and so he was unarmed. With a hoarse shout, he dashed at Garcia.

The ruffian knew better than to come to close quarters

with a man so much larger and stronger than himself. When his assailant was almost upon him, he dropped suddenly on all fours.

It was a risky trick, and one that fails almost as often as it succeeds.

But this time it proved all right—for Garcia. The Hindoo tripped over the kneeling body and landed half-a-dozen feet away.

Then quickly the ruffian was up, and speeding like a deer toward the crevice. He vanished between the rocks, and when he emerged, an instant later, the knife was in his hand, and a satanic smile wreathed his face.

By this time Gooloo Singh had risen, and was close to the crevice in pursuit of his tricky enemy. He saw the knife, and an instinct of prudence checked the reckless attack that he meditated.

So the Hindoo turned, and ran toward the point of the island, looking vainly to right and left for stones or anything else that would serve for defense. Garcia followed quickly and warily.

As the Hindoo passed him, Marco staggered to his feet, but sank down again, overcome by pain and weakness.

"Be careful!" he cried, faintly. "Look out for the knife."

Gooloo Singh shot an anxious glance at the lad, and sped on. He reached the point of the island, and there he saw what he wanted—a stone four or five times as large as his head, imbedded in the soil at the water's edge.

It was enormously heavy, but it was that or nothing. There was no time to delay.

The Hindoo stooped, and tore the rock loose. As he turned around, he lifted the heavy burden in both hands straight above his head.

Garcia was but six feet distant, with upraised knife.

"Your time has come, fiend," cried Gooloo Singh. "See, I can crush your bones. Cast down the weapon and surrender."

The ruffian answered with a devilish snarl that was more like a wild beast than a human being. He slackened speed a little, but still came on, watchfully and savagely, creeping from side to side.

Marco's swimming brain only half comprehended the situation, but he realized that a moment more would settle his own fate. Was it to be life or death?

Gooloo Singh had the advantage, but he was destined to lose it in a very sudden and unexpected manner. Just as he was about to make an unerring cast, the heavy weight overbalanced him, and dragged his arms behind his head.

He tried in vain to recover himself. Then he reeled backward, and stone and man came down together in the shallow water with a mighty splash.

The Hindoo staggered upright, submerged almost to the waist, and that instant Garcia was upon him with a bound like a tiger.

There was a brief struggle in the water; there were snarls and curses, and panting cries.

"Die—die, you dog!" hissed Garcia.

The knife flashed briefly in air, and found lodgment in a human breast.

The sorely-wounded Hindoo threw up his arms, uttered a gurgling moan, and fell back among the waves. The current snatched him and whirled him swiftly down along the shore of the island.

The assassin waded out on land, still clutching the blood-stained knife. With a brief glance at the lad he ran along the water's edge, and followed with his eyes the drifting body of his victim.

When he saw it sink beneath the black waters at a point opposite the cluster of rocks, he uttered a grunt of satisfaction, and turned back.

By this time Marco was mercifully oblivious to the fate that threatened him. With sickening horror and anguish, he had witnessed the murder of his faithful friend, and after that he fainted away.

It was but a brief respite, however. When the lad came to his senses, a few moments later, he was propped in a sitting posture against one of the rocky walls of the crevice. His arms and legs were tightly bound with ropes fashioned from his captor's belt and blouse.

His wrists were drawn overhead, and secured to a projection of the rock. A heavy slab of stone rested on his feet and ankles, so that it was impossible to move them.

Worse still, a mass of dry wood—all that the crevice contained—was heaped on the slab and around both sides of him.

Worst of all, the Portuguese squatted in front of the

lad, leering horribly at him, and glancing sideways at the still ruddy embers of the fire in a very significant manner.

What these preparations foretold was easy to guess, and in spite of stupefying dizziness and racking pain, Marco realized that he was doomed to be burned alive.

He made a feeble attempt to break loose, but he could not move even a limb.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

STRANGE RESCUERS.

"It is useless," cried Garcia, mockingly. "You will tug in vain. Ay, and in vain will you beg for mercy. At last my revenge is sure. I will burn you alive. I will sit here and enjoy your agonies."

The ruffian laughed brutally, and snapped his fingers. Then he raked the burning embers all around the wood that covered the lower part of Marco's body.

He knelt down and blew hard upon them until little red flames leaped up, crackling and hissing, in half-a-dozen places.

Marco felt the heat and the smoke. The mental agony of that moment was awful. Never had life seemed sweeter to him. He tried to cry out, but his tongue seemed to stick fast to the roof of his mouth.

Morning was now at hand. A pale gray light was streaking the outer blackness. Garcia suddenly discovered the fact, and it warned him not to linger.

With a savage oath, he raked the wood closer together, and satisfied himself that the flames had gained a good headway.

"You dog!" he snarled. "I must leave you to die by inches. May you suffer torments until the setting of the sun. May you——"

His voice fairly choked with rage. He cast a last look of hatred at his victim, dashed out of the crevice, and disappeared.

Marco saw the flames creeping nearer, and felt their scorching breath. He shouted again and again, though he knew it was useless. He tried hard to free his arms and legs.

Just as he abandoned hope, and let his head fall weakly on his breast, there was a scuffling noise in the rear of the crevice, and through a narrow fissure crept Gooloo Singh.

His face was deadly pale, and the bosom of his blouse was saturated with clotted blood.

He uttered a low cry of joy, and feebly crawled nearer. With his naked hands he tore away the burning sticks and scattered them right and left.

Then he caught sight of the knife, which Garcia had ignorantly dropped, and with a few quick strokes he liberated Marco's feet and arms.

The effort was too much for him. He toppled over on his back, faintly muttering the lad's name. His wound broke out afresh, and a crimson pool slowly gathered on the ground.

Marco stretched his cramped limbs. The pain and dizziness seemed to leave him all of a sudden. He sank on his knees beside the faithful Hindoo.

"Thank Heaven!" he cried. "You came just in time. I thought you were dead, Gooloo. Where is Garcia? Have you seen him?"

"No, sahib," was the husky reply, "but beware. His

boat lies—behind—the rocks. I floated down—with the—current—and swam—to the island. Then I crept up—through the bushes. It is—too late. I am—”

The words ended in a hollow groan. His eyes closed, and his head fell back. He lay as one dead.

Marco burst into tears.

“Gooloo, speak to me,” he cried. “Look up. Oh! don’t leave me—don’t leave me.”

There was a heavy footstep outside the crevice, and Garcia’s evil face peered in.

Like a flash Marco seized the knife and sprang to his feet. He looked like a fury as he stood between the rocks, brandishing the long-bladed weapon.

“Keep back, you devil,” he yelled, ferociously. “Keep back. It is my turn now. Come a step nearer, and I will plunge this knife into your black heart.”

The ruffian was actually cowed by the lad’s valor and rage. He swore fearfully as he dodged from side to side, watching for a chance to slip into the crevice.

Finally he retreated a few steps, keeping his face toward the lad. He was evidently looking for stones.

Just then a splashing noise was heard up the river. There was no mistaking the sound. It was the regular dip of oars.

Garcia shot a quick glance over his shoulder, and in the gray light of morning he saw a dark object coming swiftly toward the island.

His face blanched with terror, and he stood undecided for a moment.

“Help! help!” shouted Marco, at the top of his voice.

A response floated back over the water, and the oars were heard to dip faster.

Garcia realized that the game was up. With a snarl of rage, the baffled ruffian fled around the angle of the rocks.

Marco staggered weakly after him, but he was too late. When he reached the lower side of the rocks, Garcia was already adrift and paddling furiously down the river.

The lad made his way back to the upper point of the island just as the boat landed.

Two men, armed with rifles and revolvers, sprang out. One was clean-shaven, and the other wore a heavy beard.

"The Portuguese!" demanded the latter; "where is the assassin, my lad? Have you seen him?"

Marco briefly related his thrilling story, and it caused the strangers great excitement.

"So you and your companion belong to the *Assam Tiger*," exclaimed the smooth-faced man. "That's odd."

"Come on," interrupted the other. "The lad can go with us. We must pursue Garcia at once."

"Plenty of time," replied his companion. "The river is twenty miles broad here, and it will soon be daylight. The rascal has only one oar, so he can't possibly escape. This brave chap needs attention right away."

He peered closely into Marco's face, and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"I've seen you before," he muttered. "I'll swear to it. And yet it can't be. No, it's only a resemblance—a mighty odd one, though."

Marco fancied that the stranger's voice was familiar, but he was in no humor for such things then.

He hastily led the men to the crevice, and after a brief examination, they tenderly carried the unconscious body of Gooloo Singh to the boat and placed it in the stern.

"He's not dead," reported the bearded man, "and I should say he has a fair chance, though the knife made an ugly thrust between his ribs. He'll get good attention before long."

By this time Marco was on the verge of fainting, but after his wound was washed and a swallow of brandy had gone down his throat, he felt marvelously stronger.

"I'm ready," he declared. "Don't wait any longer, or Garcia may escape."

The men had no intention of lingering. They shoved the boat off, sprang to their places, and plied the oars with long, muscular strokes.

Marco sat on the stern seat, supporting Gooloo Singh's head and shoulders between his knees.

It was now broad daylight, and the sky was clear and cloudless. The Portuguese was in plain sight nearly a mile down the river. He was evidently relying on the current of midchannel, instead of trying to reach the distant shore.

"He's a-goner," declared the smooth-faced man, who sat facing Marco. "We'll soon overhaul him, and then——"

He finished the sentence by gritting his teeth and scowling savagely.

"I forgot we ain't introduced yet, lad," he added.

"My name is Batley, and the other gentleman is Captain Pratt, of the passenger steamer *Pearl of Delhi*. Up there she lies now."

Marco turned his head and saw a large vessel some four miles up stream.

"Garcia was captured at Rangamati," Batley resumed, "and when the steamer touched there an officer brought him on board. He was going to take him to Calcutta. But last night, just after the worst of the storm was over, Garcia broke his handcuffs and butchered the officer. Then he set fire to the steamer, chucked a small boat overboard, and jumped into it. We shot at him, but it was no good."

"You see the fire kept us busy," added Captain Pratt, "and when we got it out, the engines were damaged. But by this time they ought to be working all right again."

"The captain and I concluded we'd push ahead with the boat," interjected Batley, "though we hadn't much hope of overtakin' the assassin. His stopping on the island will cost him dear."

Meanwhile, the sun, in its upward progress, had been slowly scattering the banks of pearly mist that still obscured the lower reaches of the mighty river.

Marco suddenly started forward from his seat, and extended a trembling arm.

"Look there!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"THE BEGINNING OF THE END."

Batley and Captain Pratt jerked their heads quickly around, supposing that the lad's excited cry had something to do with Garcia. What they saw was a big, square-shaped object resting on the water a long way down the river.

"It's the *Assam Tiger*," cried Marco. "They're all safe. Hurrah! hurrah!"

"You are right, my lad," said Captain Pratt. "Have your friends got a small boat on board the barge?"

"No," replied Marco, "they were blown off last night."

The pursuers pulled steadily on, and in twenty minutes they gained nearly half a mile on the fugitive.

"Look here, captain," said Batley, "what do you say to stopping at the barge and dropping the Hindoo? The poor fellow needs attention badly."

"It's a good idea," assented the captain. "We can easily make up for lost time. It's impossible for the rascal to give us the slip on this big stretch of open water."

So, much to Marco's relief, the boat was turned toward the *Assam Tiger*. It drew rapidly near, and now a taut chain, running downward from the rear deck, showed that the barge was at anchor, and not aground.

Just then Matlock and Hofstein recognized Marco, and hailed him with lusty shouts.

Brief explanations were made, and then the still unconscious body of Gooloo Singh was lifted to the deck, and comfortably arranged among blankets.

Hofstein, who had some knowledge of surgery, hustled about in search of brandy, and bandages, and sponges.

Matlock seized his rifle and lowered himself into the boat, where he shared the stern seat with Marco.

"Hallo! Hofstein," he shouted, after a few moments. "Raise the anchor and drift along behind us."

An instant later the boat was skimming swiftly away from the barge. But Garcia had gained a start, and before they came within range they saw he was nearing the rugged coast of an island.

Batley and Captain Pratt pulled like madmen. Marco's face was a blending of hope and despair.

Crunch! the sound was plainly heard as the assassin's boat grounded on the head of the island and held fast.

Then, quickly, Garcia bounded up and out, and leaped madly toward the shelter of the dense jungle, which was only six feet away.

For a brief second his slim figure was in plain view, and in that brief second retribution came. Matlock's rifle cracked vengefully, and when the smoke lifted, Garcia was seen to reel, and toss up his arms. Then, with an awful imprecation on his lips, the guilty wretch fell like a log.

As soon as the boat touched the island, its occupants sprang out. They found Garcia mortally wounded, but not dead.

"We will take him to the barge, and let him die in peace," said Matlock.

No objection was offered, and after placing the unconscious man in the boat, all embarked and pulled up stream.

Twenty minutes later they were on the deck of the *Assam Tiger*, which had meanwhile been drifting slowly down the river.

By this time the *Pearl of Delhi* was in sight, beating her way down mid-channel under full steam.

Matlock and Captain Pratt held a brief consultation, and the latter agreed, for a certain sum of money, to take the *Assam Tiger* to Calcutta.

So, as soon as the big passenger steamer came within hailing distance, she slackened speed and backed up in front of the barge, to which she was speedily secured with half-a-dozen stout cables.

Then the huge side paddles of the *Pearl of Delhi* churned the water into foam, and the two vessels plowed on toward the Bay of Bengal.

The steamer's passengers were eager to crowd on the barge, but Captain Pratt ordered all back except two.

The favored ones were an English surgeon and a tall, handsome man, about fifty years of age, whose accent proclaimed him an American. He wore a brown, pointed beard and mustache, and was dressed in a manner that indicated wealth and refinement.

The surgeon examined Gooloo Singh, and declared that with careful nursing he would recover.

Then he moved over to the Portuguese, but at the first glance he shook his head.

"I can't do anything here," he said. "This fellow will cheat the hangman. He is nearly gone now."

Marco was stirred by a sudden impulse of pity. He knelt beside the dying man, and moistened his lips with a damp sponge.

The heavy eyelids unclosed slowly.

"I'm done for," he said, faintly. "I'm glad I didn't kill you, lad. Look here, I'll do you a service before I go. You have an enemy. He hired me to murder you, and I was to have a thousand dollars. His name is—is Hawkhurst, and—and you'll—find him——"

A rattling sound ended the sentence, and a change came swiftly over Garcia's face. He tossed up his hands, and fell back—dead.

Marco pressed his hand to his brow in bewilderment.

"Hawkhurst! Hawkhurst!" he muttered. "I have heard that name before. But where?"

Then his eyes met Batley's, and in that instant the veil of the past was partly lifted, and he recognized him.

Batley was even more agitated. He rushed up to Marco and threw his arms about him.

"By Jove! I know you now," he cried, huskily. "You're little Horace Medford. To think that we should meet again in India! I was right, then, to mistrust that scoundrel Hawkhurst. Don't you remember me, lad? Don't you remember the circus, and the menagerie, and how we traveled about the country——"

"Oh, yes, I remember now!" exclaimed Marco. "It all comes back to me. My father died, and this Hawkhurst took me away, and put me on Captain Jarrow's vessel.

Why did he hate me, and why did he want Garcia to kill me? I don't understand it."

Just then the American, who had been standing too far away to hear all of the conversation, came quickly forward, seized Batley's arm, and fairly dragged him apart from the others.

"I beg your pardon, my good fellow," he said. "But I must see you at once. I 'accidentally overheard you addressed as Batley. Is that your name, and were you recently the owner of a small tea plantation along the Brahmaputra, thirty miles above Goalpara?"

Batley looked curiously at the stranger, whose manner betrayed great agitation.

"I'm the man," he replied. "If you want to buy the plantation, you're too late. I've sold it to——"

"I don't want the plantation," impatiently broke in the stranger. "I want you. I came clear from the United States to find you. I was at the plantation, and the new owner told me you had gone to Calcutta——"

"I stopped off at Rangamati for a while," interrupted Batley. "Then I took passage on the *Pearl of Delhi*——"

"And we were fellow-passengers for three days," said the stranger. "Now, by mere chance, I have found you out. I don't suppose my name will tell you anything. I am Mr. Philip Leyburn, of Boston."

Batley shook his head, and glanced toward Marco and the others, who were looking curiously on.

"Years ago you were traveling in the United States with Santley's Circus, were you not?" resumed Mr. Leyburn.

"I was," replied Batley.

"And with the same circus were a certain Horace Medford and his son," said Mr. Leyburn, turning suddenly pale. "Ah! my unfortunate brother! I dread your answer to my next question. Where is my nephew—the little lad known as Horace Medford? You alone can tell me."

Batley uttered a gasping cry, and stared for a moment in open-mouthed wonder. Then he took hold of Mr. Leyburn, and dragged him up to Marco.

"There is your nephew," he cried. "My lad, this is your uncle."

A brief glance satisfied Mr. Leyburn that Batley was speaking the truth.

"He has Horace's face," he cried. "At last, thank Heaven!"

He threw his arms about Marco, and drew him tenderly against his breast.

"Batley," said Mr. Leyburn, after Marco had told his story, "I should like to hear what you know. It may not be much, but, nevertheless——"

"It is very little, Mr. Leyburn," interrupted Batley. "To begin with, I joined Santley's Circus in eighteen hundred and eighty, and Horace Medford was then attached to it as lion-tamer. Marco, here, was with him—a little bit of a chap four years old. While we were performing in Philadelphia, Medford got a letter that took him away for a couple of days. He left the boy in my care. The very day he came back he was fatally trampled by a loose elephant. Before he died, he told me his

father had left him a legacy, and that he was going to appoint an old friend of his, named Hawkhurst, as guardian for his boy.

"Hawkhurst and a lawyer came just an hour before Medford died, and I believe they got the proper papers written and signed. I mistrusted Hawkhurst's looks right away, but didn't dare say anything. He took the little fellow away with him the next day, and that was the last I have seen or heard of either until to-day. You see, in the next winter an uncle of mine died up here in Assam, and left me a bit of a plantation. I thought I'd like to run it myself, so I came out on the first steamer, and I've been here ever since. Then I got tired and sold out, and now I'm on my way back to the Stars and Stripes."

CHAPTER XXXV.

CONCLUSION.

"Now it is my turn," said Mr. Leyburn. "My brother Horace and I were the only children of James Leyburn, a wealthy merchant of Boston. Our mother died when we were quite young, and our father retired from business before either of us was ten years old. Horace was two years my junior.

"We went to college, and in his second year Horace got into a scrape that led to his expulsion. He returned home, quarreled bitterly with my father, and then ran away in a fit of anger. Years later he wrote from England that he had married a friendless orphan girl, whose father had been the proprietor of a traveling caravan of wild animals. This news my father considered a blot on the family name. He at once wrote to Horace, disowning him, and cutting him off without a penny. No answer was received, and for seven years we learned nothing.

"Then we discovered accidentally that Horace's wife was dead, and that he and his young son were traveling through the United States under the assumed name of Medford. Three years later my father died. At the last his heart was softened, and he bequeathed Horace the sum of one hundred thousand dollars.

"That legacy was claimed a month later. I believe

Horace came to Boston and received the amount in the shape of a check from our family lawyer. Meanwhile I had gone abroad, and it was a full year before I heard of my brother's death.

"During the years that followed I traveled about from sheer restlessness, living at intervals in nearly every large city on the continent. Twelve months ago I came home to Boston. I remembered Horace's child—my only living kinsman—and I determined to find him.

"I need not weary you with the details of that exhaustive search. Santley's Circus was broken up, and many of its old employees were dead. Finally I obtained the clue that brought me to India and up the Brahmaputra in quest of Batley. Of Hawkhurst I only know that he was a college chum of my brother. It is my impression that he was a dissolute and unprincipled lad. For his crimes and the base betrayal of his trust he shall assuredly be made to suffer. And in conclusion let me say that I shall devote my future life to the welfare and happiness of my dear nephew, whom Heaven has mercifully permitted me to find."

Mr. Leyburn paused, and softly placed his arm around Marco's shoulders.

* * * * *

A week later the *Pearl of Delhi* and the *Assam Tiger*, still moored together, dropped anchor in the Hooghly River at Calcutta. A statement of Garcia's death and burial was presented to the proper authorities, and as neither Matlock nor his companions would take the re-

ward, it was given to the family of the murdered officer, who resided at Rangamati.

Thanks to a strong constitution Gooloo Singh was rapidly mending, and was able to be moved to the English hospital.

Mr. Philip Leyburn and Marco—for by that name our hero shall be known to the end—went straight to the Great Eastern Hotel. Mr. Cecil Falconer had left there only two hours before, having read in the papers of the arrival of the *Pearl of Delhi*, and the stirring adventures she had encountered on her passage down the Brahmaputra. Twenty-four hours later he was on board a fast steamer, bound for home.

Under Richter's instructions Matlock chartered a portion of a comparatively fast steamer for the convoy of wild beasts. As Marco was anxious to be with his friends, the same vessel carried Mr. Leyburn and his nephew away from the shores of India.

At Southampton they delayed only long enough to engage passage on another steamer, and after a quick run they arrived safely at New York.

The surprise of Mr. Leyburn and Marco may be imagined when they found the papers teeming with full accounts of the rascality of the very man whom they had vainly sought in Calcutta, and ascertained that he had been arrested, and was out of custody under heavy bonds for trial.

The explanation was very simple. Captain Jarrow had been pulled out of the Hooghly River by some native boatmen, and taken to a hospital, where he hovered be-

tween life and death for some weeks, unable to give any information about himself.

When he recovered he returned to New York in search of his vessel, and there he stumbled upon Hawkhurst, who had just arrived. He had the villain arrested at once, and made public the whole plot.

To make a long story brief, Hawkhurst jumped his bail, and fled to South Africa, where he will probably drag out a miserable existence to the end of his days. He left real estate property in Philadelphia, which was legally attached, and yielded to Marco nearly the equivalent of his stolen fortune.

As Captain Jarrow had shown himself to be really penitent for his share in the plot, he was not prosecuted. He made a full confession to Mr. Leyburn, telling how he had kept Marco on his vessel for some years, and had finally turned him over to Dan Stapleford at Calcutta. During these years he was constantly in receipt of hush-money from Hawkhurst.

Having taken a fancy to Matlock and Hofstein, Batley concluded to enter the employment of Carl Richter.

Gooloo Singh went with Marco and Mr. Leyburn to their Boston home, and there the services of the devoted Hindoo will always be highly prized and appreciated.

And now we must leave our young hero in the full enjoyment of the new and bright life that has opened before him. His first aim is a thorough education, and assuredly no money will be spared in the pursuit of it.

Later on, when he reaches the threshold of manhood, he and his uncle will probably spend much time in travel,

for both have imbibed a fondness for strange and wild countries. Of course, Gooloo Singh will accompany them, and perhaps, in the course of their wanderings, they will some day chance upon the friends of Marco's earlier years—the intrepid wild-beast hunters of the Indian jungles.

THE END.