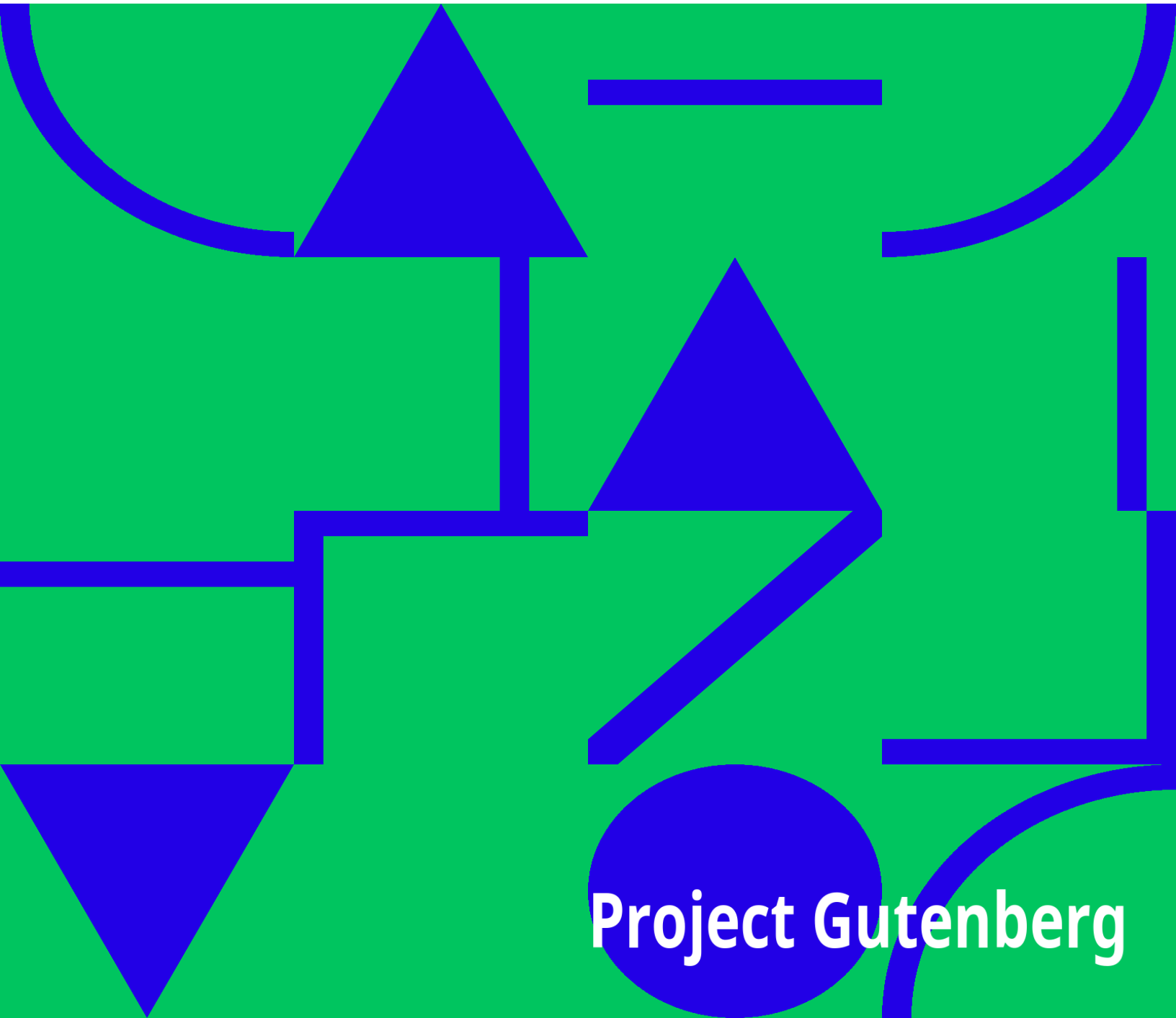
# Jack Haydon's Quest

John Finnemore



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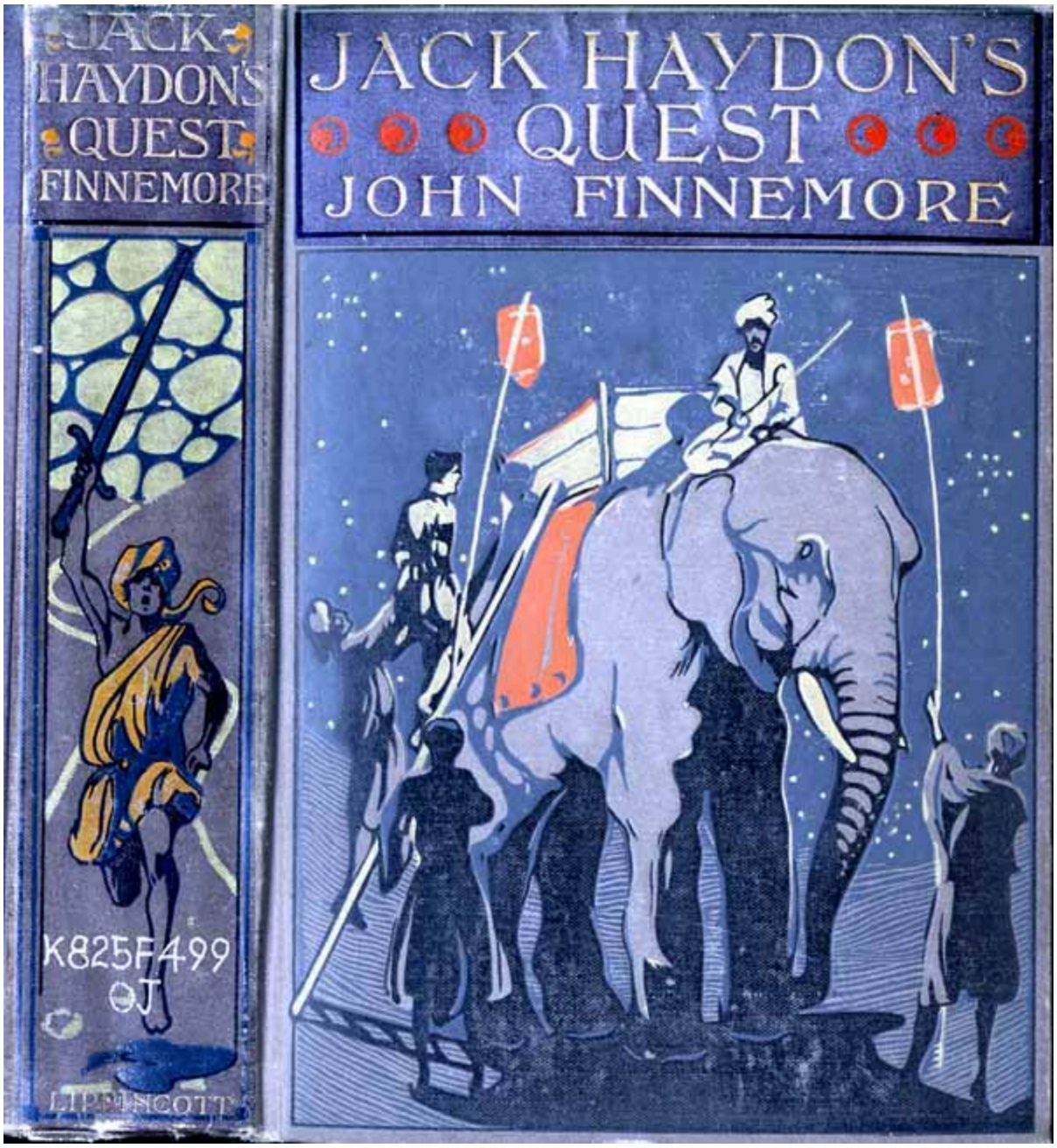
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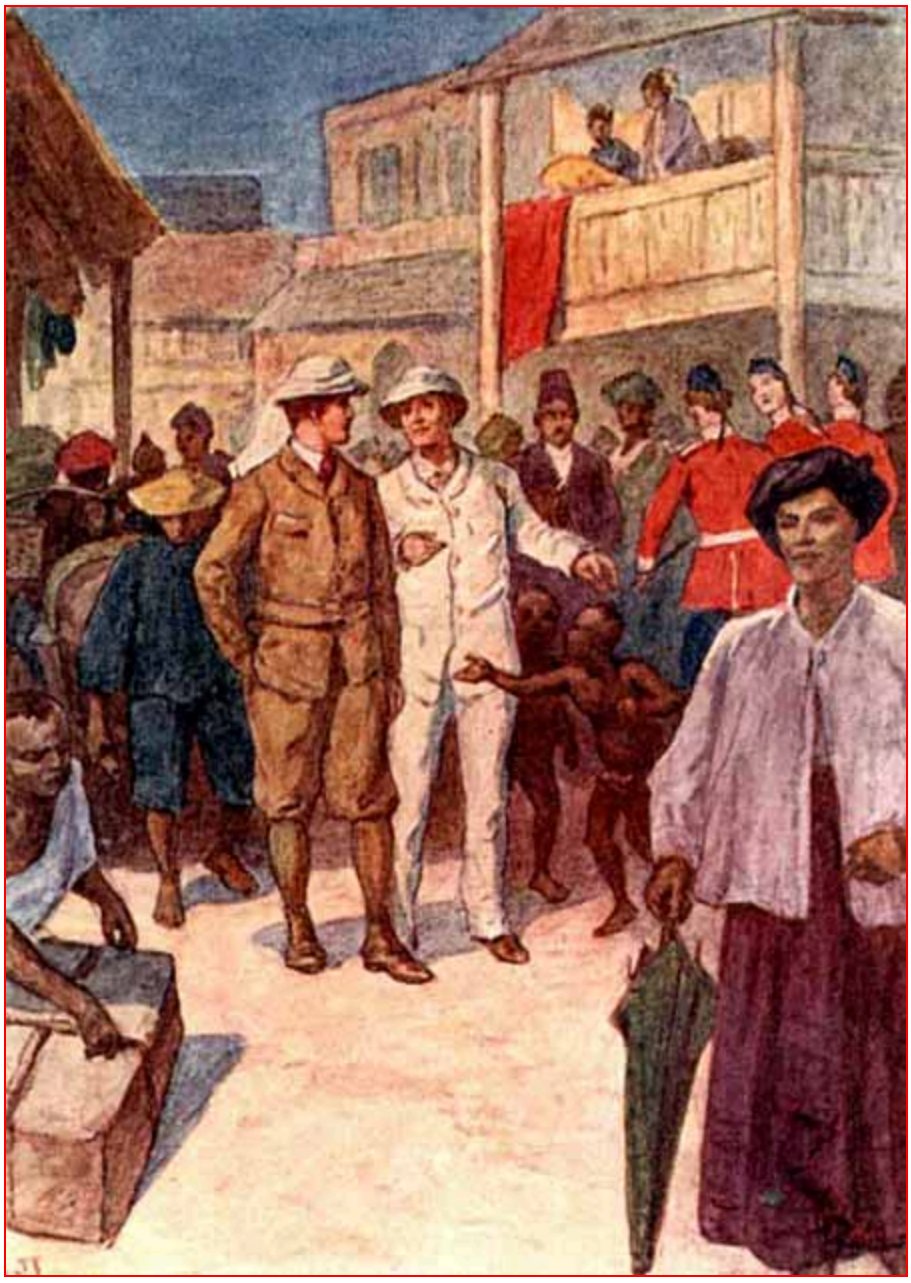

**IN RANGOON.**

# JACK HAYDON'S QUEST

**BY**

# JOHN FINNEMORE

*CONTAINING EIGHT FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR FROM DRAWINGS BY J. JELLICOE*

**PHILADELPHIA**

**J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY**

**LONDON: ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK**

**1907**

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# JACK HAYDON'S QUEST.

# CHAPTER I.

## THE ATTACK ON THE HEATH.

Jack Haydon, prefect of Rushmere School and captain of the first fifteen, walked swiftly out of the school gates and turned along the high road. He had leave to go to the little town of Longhampton, three miles away, to visit a day-scholar, a great friend of his, now on the sick list.

He was alone, and he swung along at a cracking pace, for he could walk as well as he could run, and a finer three-quarter had never been known at Rushmere. He was a tall, powerful lad, nearly nineteen years of age, five foot ten and a half inches in his stockings, and turning the scale at twelve stone five. At the present moment he carried not an ounce of spare flesh, for he was in training for the great match, Rushmere *v.* Repton, and his weight was compact of solid bone, muscle, and sinew. As he stepped along the highway, moving with the easy grace of a well-built athlete, he looked the very picture of a handsome English lad, at one of the finest moments of his life, the point where youth and manhood meet.

The road he followed was called a high road, but the name clung to it from old use rather than because of present service. Eighty years before it had been a famous coaching road, along which the galloping teams had whirled the mails, but now it had fallen into decay, and was little used except by people passing from Rushmere to Longhampton. A mile from the school it ran across a lonely, unenclosed piece of heath, the side of the way being bordered by clumps of holly, thorn, and furze.

Halfway across this desolate stretch of country, Jack was surprised by seeing a man step from behind a thick holly bush and place himself directly in the lad's way. As Jack approached, the man held up his hand.

"Stop," he said, "I want to speak to you."

Jack stopped in sheer surprise, and looked at the speaker in wonder. What could the man want with him? At a glance he saw the man was not English,

though upon closer examination he could not place the type. The stranger's skin was darker than an Englishman's, but not darker than many a Spaniard's. His eyes were large and black and liquid; their look was now crafty and a trifle menacing; his hair was lank and intensely black. In build he was very slight, with thin arms and legs. Jack's idea was that if he had been a little darker he might very well have been a Hindoo.

"And what, my friend, may you want with me?" said Jack genially.

"This morning you received a letter from your father," said the dusky stranger.

"How under the sun do you know that?" asked Jack; "and what if I did? I don't see where your interest comes in."

"I wish to see that letter. You had better hand it over at once."

"Don't you ever apply for a further stock of cheek, my little man," said Jack, "for you've got all you need, and a little bit over."

"The letter is almost certainly in your pocket," said the stranger in perfect English, yet pronounced with a curiously odd lisp and click, "and I must see it."

"It's in my pocket all right, confound your cheek," replied Jack, "and there it will stay. Come, get a move on you, and clear out of my way."

"I shall not get out of your way," said the other. "I shall stop you until I have read the letter."

"I don't know what lunatic asylum is short of your cheerful presence to-day," remarked Jack, "and if you don't clear out quick I shall certainly rush you. In which case, I beg you to observe that I am, even if I say it myself, a pretty stiff tackler, and about three stone heavier than you."

The man laughed mockingly and waved his hand, as if making very light of Jack's purpose.

"I assure you," he said in a soft voice, and giving once more his laugh of light mockery, "that it would be much better for you to hand over the letter

at once. I do not wish to hurt you, but I have not the least objection to do so if it becomes necessary."

Jack's warm blood was fired at once, and he pulled himself together for a swift charge which would fill this stranger with surprised regret for what he had brought upon himself. But, for a second, something checked him; a strange, mysterious feeling came over him as he wondered what lay behind all this. He stood, though he knew it not, at a great parting of the ways. Behind him lay his happy days of triumph on the football meadow and the cricket field. How was he to know that this dark, slight figure before him meant that a strange, new life was opening out to him, a life of wild adventures in far-off lands, in lands where the memory of English meadows would seem like thoughts and dreams of another life. Jack Haydon knew nothing of this; yet he paused for a moment as some strange prevision seized upon him and held him in its grip. Then he brushed away this odd influence, and was back at once in the present.

"For the last time, clear out," said Jack. The man laughed, and Jack made a swift leap at him. They were not three yards apart, but Jack never reached his man. Without a sign, without a sound, someone sprang upon him from behind, flung a cord over his head, and seized him in a strangling grip. Jack was as strong as a young bull, but in this awful, noiseless clutch he was helpless. He fought madly to throw off his unseen assailant, but he fought in vain. He felt a noose close upon his throat, and his eyeballs began to start out and his head to swim. In front of him stood the mysterious stranger, who had moved neither hand nor foot, and Jack's last conscious recollection was of the quiet, smiling face, and the mocking laugh once more rang in his ears. Suddenly the frightful, strangling clutch seemed to tighten, the blood drummed madly in his ears as if every vein was bursting; then he knew no more.

When Jack Haydon came to himself, he found that he was in the same spot, and that someone was chafing his hands and pouring water on his face. He gave a deep sigh, and a well-known voice said: "Thank God, Haydon's coming round. Whatever could have been the matter with the poor lad? What does this mark round his throat mean?"

Jack opened his eyes and saw Dr. Lawrence, the headmaster of Rushmere School, bending over him. Near at hand stood Colonel Keppel, a gentleman residing in the neighbourhood. The Colonel had been driving Dr. Lawrence back from Longhampton, and his trap stood close by. At the present moment the Colonel held a hat from which water was dripping. He had fetched it from a pool near at hand.

Jack gulped once or twice, then began to speak. The two gentlemen heard his story with the utmost surprise.

"Garrotters!" cried Dr. Lawrence, "I never heard of such an outrage in this neighbourhood before. What a frightful thing! Yes, yes, that explains the mark on your throat. Their object must have been robbery. What have they stolen from you, Haydon?" But the mystery now deepened. Jack's watch and chain, his purse, everything he had worth stealing, were perfectly safe and untouched. Suddenly Jack started up and thrust his hand into his pocket. "The letter! the letter!" he cried. He drew out several letters and looked over them. "My father's letter has gone!" he said.

"What's that?" said Colonel Keppel, pointing to a sheet of paper fluttering over the heath about thirty yards away. He ran and fetched it. "This is the letter," said Jack, "the letter I received from my father this morning."

"But what an extraordinary thing that you should be attacked in this manner, Haydon, in order that this man may read a private letter. Is there anything in it, may I ask, to explain such a strange proceeding?"

"Nothing, sir, that I know of; nothing in the least. My father says nothing there but what anyone may see. I beg that you and Colonel Keppel will glance over it; you will then see how ordinary it is."

The two gentlemen demurred, but Jack insisted, and they ran their eyes over what Mr. Haydon had written. "Purely and simply an ordinary letter from a father abroad to his son," said the Doctor; "it seems madness to go to such lengths to gain a glimpse of such a letter."

"All the same, young Haydon was quite right in not giving up his father's note to such rogues to read, whatever their purpose may have been," remarked the Colonel.

"Oh, quite so, quite so," agreed Dr. Lawrence. "They had no right whatever to see his private correspondence. By the way, Haydon, I see your father is on his way home. This is posted at Cairo. In what part of the East has he been staying lately?"

"He has been in Burmah for some time, sir," replied Jack, "but I do not know exactly what he has been doing. I rather fancy he went out to survey some ruby-mines for a big London firm."

"Quite so," said the Doctor, "I have seen him referred to many times as a famous ruby expert."

At this moment Colonel Keppel came towards them with something in his hand. He had started away after concluding his last speech, and had gone in the direction where he had seen the letter fluttering. Now he was returning.

"Here is something they dropped, something which throws a flood of light on the affair in one way, and makes it much stranger in another," he remarked in a grave voice, holding up his find. It was a curiously-plaited thong of raw hide, with faded strips of silk worked into the plaits.

"The cord with which Haydon was garrotted!" cried Dr. Lawrence. "They dropped it."

"Yes," said the Colonel slowly, "but this does not mean common garrotters. The fact that they stole nothing really disposes of that. This means a much darker and more terrible business."

"And what is that?" cried the headmaster.

"Thuggee," said Colonel Keppel very gravely.

"Thugs, Colonel!" said Dr. Lawrence in a tone of stupefaction. "Are you serious? Thugs on the heath here, in our quiet, familiar country?"

"This is a Thug noose, at any rate," said Colonel Keppel. "I know it very well. I served twenty-seven years among the hill-tribes of northern India in one capacity and another, and once I served in a Thug country, and I shall never forget it. The way young Haydon was handled suggests Thuggee. No common garrotter could have overcome such a fine, powerful young fellow in that fashion. But the skill of these Thugs is a thing truly diabolical. I

remember one instance well. One night, just upon dusk, two men of my regiment were entering the gate of the cantonments. The guard saw them pass, and one was relating a story to the other. The man telling the story expected his comrade to laugh at the conclusion of the anecdote. Hearing nothing, he turned and found that he was walking alone and talking to the empty air. Thinking his comrade had slipped aside and played a trick upon him by leaving him to himself, he went on to the barrack-room. Later the second man was missing, and inquiries were made. A search followed, and the dead body of the unfortunate man was found under the wall of the cantonments. He had been seized and strangled by Thugs when actually walking beside a comrade, and the latter had known nothing of it.

"That shows frightful skill and cunning, Colonel," said Dr. Lawrence.

"It does indeed," said the other, "and I could relate a dozen such stories. But why Thugs should be here and attack Haydon seems a most extraordinary mystery. How do you feel now, Haydon?"

"Much better, sir," replied Jack. "My throat's a bit stiff, but for the rest I am none the worse."

"You've had a wonderful escape, my boy," said Colonel Keppel; "there are not many who have felt a Thug noose and lived to say what it was like. But now, Doctor, what are we to do? There must be some inquiry made into this."

"Of course, of course," agreed Dr. Lawrence. "You are a magistrate, Colonel; what do you recommend?"

"We must put it into the hands of the police at once," said Colonel Keppel. "The fellows cannot have got far. We saw no sign of them on the road, so they must have slipped away over the heath, very probably as soon as they heard the sound of wheels in the distance. Now, Haydon, jump up at the back of the trap. The cob will soon run us up to the constable's cottage in Rushmere."

All three climbed into the Colonel's dog-cart, and away went the brown cob at a slashing pace for Rushmere. Tom Buck, the Rushmere constable, was just returning from a round, and he touched his hat respectfully to the

gentlemen. Colonel Keppel told the story, and Buck slapped the gate-post with his open hand.

"Well, gentlemen," he said in surprise, "then they are the very men I've just been hearing about."

"What's that?" said Colonel Keppel. "Where have you heard of them?"

"From Parsons, the postman, he drives the mail-cart, you know, sir, from Longhampton. This morning, just after six, he was coming through the Chase, the wood beyond the heath, when two men slipped out o' the trees before him and made a dash at the horse's head. There was hardly light enough to see 'em, an' they'd ha' stopped him as easy as could be if he hadn't been drivin' a young, fresh, chestnut mare. She's that wild he daren't use a whip to her, but seein' these suspicious characters, he snatches the whip out and gives her a cut as hard as he could lay it on. Off she went like a shot, took the bit between her teeth and bolted. As for the men jumpin' at her head, it was all they could do to save themselves from being run down and trodden underfoot. Parsons luckily managed to keep her on the road, and after she'd galloped a couple o' miles or so, he managed to pull her in all of a lather."

"Then those rascals meant to raid the mail-bags to find your letter, Haydon," said Colonel Keppel. "They seem to have been thoroughly posted as to its time of arrival. Missing the postman, they hung about, and a strange chance delivered you into their hands."

"It's certainly a most mysterious business, sir," replied Jack. "But why they should want to see so simple and ordinary a letter, who they are, and what they're after, are altogether beyond me."

"We must try to get hold of them," said Colonel Keppel, "then we shall perhaps be able to fathom the mystery." He gave orders to Buck, who went off at once to follow, if possible, the track of the strangers across the heath, to inquire at cottages, and do his utmost to trace them.

"For my part," said Colonel Keppel, "I shall drive back at once to Longhampton, and see the superintendent. The railway must be watched, and every constable for miles round be warned by telegraph to keep a look out for the rascals."

"You are very kind to take so much trouble, Colonel," said Dr. Lawrence.

"I'm working for myself as much as anyone," laughed the other. "My wife and daughters use that road continually, and very often they are driving alone in a pony-carriage. It is imperative that the neighbourhood be cleared of such desperate characters."

He drove away at once, and Dr. Lawrence and Jack walked up the hill to the school. Jack had given up the idea of his visit to Longhampton.

"If I were you, Haydon," said the Head, "I should go and rest a little. Sit down quietly in your study for an hour or two; you must feel badly shaken by your awful experience."

"Thank you, sir," replied Jack, "I will do as you say, though as a matter of fact I am practically recovered now. Luckily, I'm in first-rate condition, I'm not bothered with nerves."

"No," smiled Dr. Lawrence, "I suppose not. Still, I should be careful for a time if I were you."

At the Doctor's gate they parted, and Jack went to his own study and sat down. He could not keep his mind from his extraordinary adventure. Why had those fellows seized him, and what did they want? Would they be caught, and then would their secret be discovered? His mind worked over these points again and again, like a squirrel working the wheel in his cage.

# CHAPTER II.

## A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

Four days later Jack Haydon was in his study, his heels on the mantelpiece, his eyes fastened on the pages of a novel, when there was a tap at his door and a telegram was brought in. He broke open the envelope and read the contents in growing surprise and wonder. Then a look of uneasiness came into his eyes. It was a cablegram from Brindisi, and ran, "Come at once. Most urgent," and was signed "Risley." Jack went across to the Doctor's house, sent up his name, and was bidden to go up to the study. Here he laid the cablegram before the Head.

"Who is Risley, Haydon?" asked Dr. Lawrence.

"My father's man, sir," replied Jack. "It seems to me that they must have got as far as Brindisi on their way home. I feel wretchedly uneasy. Something tells me that things have gone wrong with my father."

"Oh, I hope not," said Dr. Lawrence. "There is no word of ill-news here. The urgency may be quite on another score."

"I should like to start at once, sir," said Jack. "I know my way about the Continent very well. I have spent two or three vacations in Italy."

"Quite so, quite so," said Dr. Lawrence. "Have you plenty of money for the journey, Haydon?"

"I don't need more than sufficient to carry me to London, sir," replied Jack. "I shall go there to Mr. Buxton, my father's friend, who manages all his business affairs, and he will supply me with funds."

Jack was on fire to be off to Brindisi and see what was wrong. He made short work of his packing, and within an hour he was driving to Longhampton to catch the London express. He caught it with scarcely two minutes to spare, and was soon whirling towards the great city. A short distance from Longhampton, he caught a glimpse of Rushmere School in

the distance on its hill, and the strip of heath country running up to the foot of the slope. This brought to mind his adventure, which remained as mysterious an affair as ever. The police had been most active, stations had been watched, inquiries had been made in every direction, but all to no result. The Thugs had vanished and left no trace behind. But the thought of his encounter on the heath soon faded from Jack's mind. It was crushed out by the pressing question of the moment. What was the matter at Brindisi? Why had Risley cabled and not his father? Had something happened to his father? Jack felt wretchedly uneasy, for he and his father were bound together by no ordinary ties of affection.

In the first place, he had, as far as he knew, no other living relation. His mother had been dead for many years, and his father was the only close friend that Jack knew. Then the elder Haydon had always been a great hero in his son's eyes. His profession of mining engineer had carried him into many wild corners of the world, and the store of marvellous tales which he would pour forth for the boy's delight had made Jack's holidays a time of intense pleasure. Mr. Haydon had always made a point, if it was possible, of keeping himself free for such times, and he and Jack had spent the weeks joyously, until the day for return to school had become a Black Monday indeed in the boy's eyes.

As Jack mused over memories of other days, his anxiety to know what was wrong at Brindisi grew moment by moment, and the flying express seemed to crawl, so great was his impatience to be in London, where he expected to get further news from Mr. Buxton. But he was destined to learn something long before he saw Mr. Buxton. The express screamed into an important junction and pulled up for five minutes. Three fellow-passengers got out, and left Jack to himself. A boy came along the platform shouting, "London Pay-pers," and Jack bought a *Daily Telegraph*.

He turned to the football news, and was reading it, when the train pulled out and shot forward once more towards London. But the accounts of his beloved sport failed to interest him, and he turned the paper over listlessly, idly scanning one big sheet after another. Suddenly the word imprinted on his brain caught his eye. "Brindisi"—here was some scrap of news from Brindisi.

What was it? Jack folded the paper, and then a second name seemed to leap at him from the sheet. His own name! Haydon, Brindisi. What now? His eyes darted over the paragraph, and he drew a long, gasping breath. This, then, was the explanation of the cablegram. Over and over again Jack read the paragraph, striving to grasp what it all meant, striving to seize the inner meaning. The paragraph was short and to the point. It ran:—

"STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

"FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.

"Brindisi, *Tuesday*.

> "There is much stir here over the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Thomas Haydon, the famous mining expert and engineer. He arrived here on Sunday, and it was believed that he intended to travel to England by the mail-train. He went for a walk on Sunday evening, but did not return to his hotel, where his man and his baggage were awaiting him. Since he left his hotel there has been no sign of him, and the authorities are making a diligent search."

His father had disappeared? How? Why? Jack could make nothing of it, and he stared at the paper with pale face and perplexed eyes. It was so contrary to his every idea of his father, this extraordinary disappearance. Thomas Haydon was the last man in the world to set tongues wagging and to give anxiety to friends by such a trick. There was something very strange at the back of this, and Jack struck the paper with his open hand. "Foul Play!" he murmured to himself, and then, for he was alone in the carriage, he said it aloud, "Foul Play!"

Jack glanced at his watch. The train was due at St. Pancras in an hour. How slowly that hour dragged! Now that he knew this momentous piece of news, Jack burned more fiercely than ever to be in the midst of affairs and doing something to clear up this strange mystery which had gathered about his father's name. At last, with a thrill of joy, he heard the engine give its warning shriek as it ran into the big station. He had brought nothing but a Gladstone bag with him, and he had it in his hand, and the door of the carriage open, before the train drew up. He made a leap at the first hansom,

and shouted, "Lincoln's Inn. Drive fast," and away he rattled into London streets.

There was a good cob in the shafts, and little time was lost on the way. Jack paid the man double fare for the excellent speed he had made, then bounded upstairs to the landing upon which Mr. Buxton's chambers opened. In answer to his knock, a tall, thin man with a long beard came to the door, and Jack gave a cry of joy. "You are at home, then, Mr. Buxton. How glad I am! It has been my one terror that you might be away in the country."

"No, Jack, I'm here," said Mr. Buxton, shaking hands. "I've been expecting you every knock I've heard. I suppose you've seen the papers."

"Yes," cried Jack, "I saw the *Daily Telegraph*. Are there any further particulars in the others?"

"No," replied Mr. Buxton, leading the way into his sitting-room. "The *Telegraph* has as much as anyone."

"Have you heard anything? Do you know anything?" cried Jack eagerly.

"Nothing but what I've seen in the papers," replied the other. "I'm altogether at sea. I can't fathom in the least what it all means. What have you had?"

"Nothing but this cablegram," said the lad, and handed it over. Mr. Buxton read it aloud slowly, and nodded. "From Risley," he said. "Of course he wants to get you on the spot at once."

"I shall start without any delay," said Jack. "Isn't there a boat-train to-night?"

"Yes," said Mr. Buxton, glancing at a clock on the mantelpiece, "but there's plenty of time for that. Sit down and talk it over, and besides, you must have something to eat."

He rang the bell and ordered the servant who answered it to set out a meal in the adjoining apartment: he gave Jack a chair beside the fire, and took one opposite to him and began to fill a pipe.

"Mr. Buxton," said Jack earnestly, "there's something out of the common in this. My father has met with foul play. Before I know anything else I feel

sure of that."

Mr. Buxton struck a match and puffed out several clouds of smoke. Then he tossed the match into the fire, and nodded through the tobacco clouds. "I agree with you, Jack," he said. "This is the queerest thing I ever came across in my life. I've known Tom Haydon, boy and man, this forty-five years, and he's as straight as a gun-barrel. If they expected him back at that hotel, if Risley expected him back, then he meant to come back. And if he didn't get back, it was because he was interfered with. I'd stake a hand on that."

Jack nodded with glistening eyes. "And I'm going to see why he didn't come back," said the lad.

"I'd come with you if I could," said Mr. Buxton, "but at present I can no more leave London than the Monument can. I'm as fast by the leg, held by press of work, as a bear tethered to a stump. How do you stand for funds?"

"I've only got a sovereign or two in my pocket," said Jack. "I was depending on you."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Buxton, "of course you were. I made time an hour or so ago to run over your father's accounts. There's plenty to draw on." He went over to his desk and ran his fingers through a bundle of papers. "Here it is," he remarked. "At the present moment your father is worth the respectable sum of forty-seven thousand two hundred and nineteen pounds eighteen shillings and fourpence; so he certainly hasn't run away from his creditors."

Jack nodded. "I'll start straight for Brindisi to-night, Mr. Buxton. I can't lose a minute till I get on to the spot and talk with Buck Risley."

Mr. Buxton nodded. "I quite understand your feelings, Jack," he replied. "I've wondered whether the matter might not have a very simple explanation after all. One thing struck me. Has your father ever said anything about his health to you? You know he's been a great deal in India and Burmah. It's a very easy thing to get a touch of the sun, and that will often cause a man to lose the sense of his identity and get lost for a time."

Jack shook his head. "I've never heard him mention such a thing," he said. "He's always been perfectly fit whenever I've seen him."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Buxton, "and whenever I've seen him, too. He has a wonderful constitution. But, you know, the possibility crossed my mind, and I mentioned it."

At this moment the servant announced that the meal was ready, and Jack did his best to eat something. It was a very poor best, however, for he was too anxious to be on his way to be able to eat, and he was relieved when Mr. Buxton said it was time to start and sent the servant for a cab.

On their way to Charing Cross they did not talk much: conjecture was a pretty useless thing, and, in their present state of utter lack of information, conjecture was the only thing possible.

The bustle of getting a ticket and finding a seat occupied most of the ten minutes they had to spare before the train started, and, as the swift express glided out, Mr. Buxton waved his hat to Jack leaning through the window, and cried, "Good luck!"

Of Jack's swift scurry across the Channel and over the Continent it is not necessary to enter into details. He made the journey with the utmost speed, and chafed at every delay. At last the train ran into the station of Brindisi, and Jack hung half out of the window, his eyes searching the crowd for Risley, to whom he had telegraphed his time of arrival.

"Hullo, Buck," sang out Jack, as a middle-sized, stiff-built man of five and thirty ran up to his carriage door.

"Glad to see you, Jack," said Buck Risley, as they shook hands. "Very glad to see you."

"Any news?" snapped Jack.

"Not a word," replied Buck gravely, "not a word. Is this your bag?"

"Yes," said Jack sombrely, for he was very disappointed. He had been hoping to hear that something had been found out, or that his father had returned.

Buck took Jack's gladstone, called a carriage, and gave the name of the hotel. He did not speak till they were rattling along the streets of Brindisi.

"Say, Jack, this beats the band," he said. "I can't make a guess what's happened to the Professor."

Mr. Haydon and Buck Risley had first met in a "wild-cat" mining camp in Dakota. *The Lone Wolf Clarion* had introduced the English engineer to the local community as Professor Haydon, and Mr. Haydon had been the Professor ever since to his part-comrade, part-servant.

"Tell me all about it," said Jack, and Buck began his story. It was soon finished, for there was very little to tell. They had been four months in Burmah, and Mr. Haydon and Buck had gone up to Mandalay, and then on to the Mogok country. At Mogok Buck had been seized with a sharp touch of fever, and had been compelled to remain in that famous mining town while Mr. Haydon went up country, accompanied only by a few natives who had been with him in other journeys. He came back after an absence of five weeks to Mogok, found Buck better, and announced that they would return to England at once. They had packed and started forthwith, and returned by the usual route.

"Did my father seem quite himself, just as usual in every way, Buck?" asked Jack.

"No," said Buck thoughtfully. "He didn't quite. There was somethin' on the Professor's mind, I'm sure o' that."

Jack put forward Mr. Buxton's suggestion, but Buck waved it aside.

"Touch o' the sun," said he. "Oh, no, nothin' like that. The Professor was as fit as he always was, right as a bull-frog in a swamp. No, it was a sort of anxiousness there was about him. He was that careful that you might almost call him fidgetty."

"Fidgetty!" said Jack in surprise, as he remembered the perfectly equable manner of his widely-travelled father.

"Yes, that's as good a word as any I can jump on at short notice," replied Buck. "He seemed as keen on getting back to London as some o' these globetrotters who have got sick o' foreign parts."

"That was rather strange," commented Jack. "You've been with my father twelve years now, Buck. Did you ever see him like it before?"

"Never in my knowledge of him," said Buck, shaking his head. "As a general rule the Professor was as calm an' easy campin' in a jungle as another man in a front seat at a circus. It was all one to the Professor, let things come how they might. But this time he seemed as if his only idea was to get back. Not that he said much about it. The most I ever heard him say was, 'Well, Buck, I don't care how soon I get into Lane & Baumann's office,' an' he only said that once when he was fretted at losing a day by missing a boat at Rangoon."

At this moment the carriage drew up at the door of the hotel. They had scarcely entered the door when the hotel clerk came forward with a cablegram. It was from Messrs Lane & Baumann, asking if anything was yet known of Mr. Haydon.

"If he was anxious to see them, they are just as anxious to see him," said Buck, handing the form to Jack. "Every day they wire, an' sometimes twice a day, to know if I've got hold of any news."

"I wish I'd been to see them before I left London," said Jack. "I might have got some useful information from them. What do you believe has happened to my father?"

"I dunno what to think," said Risley, "except that some o' these Dagoes got him in a corner and went for his pocket-book. He'd got plenty of money with him."

"But if he'd been attacked by thieves," argued Jack, "the police would have found something out before this. He could not have been hidden away from them."

Buck shook his head. "Some o' these Dagoes are very sly and deep," he replied. "I've heard queer stories about 'em at times. They say there are brigands around."

"Yes, yes," said Jack, "in Sicily and in some of the wilder parts of Calabria, but not in Brindisi, Buck, not in this big port."

"Well, I give it up," said Buck, "but there's a queer twist at the bottom of it somewhere. The Professor ain't the sort o' man to worry us by goin' into hiding somewhere, and lyin' low."

"Of course he isn't," said Jack. "My father was prevented from returning to the hotel, that's clear enough; and we've got to find how."

"Say, I'm your man, Jack," returned Buck. "I shan't feel easy till I've had a glimpse o' the Professor with his old, quiet smile on him. We'll hunt every hole there is."

For two days Jack and Buck hunted every hole about Brindisi, and, stimulated by the promise of handsome rewards, the police, too, did their utmost, but all was in vain; the missing man had disappeared as though the earth had opened and swallowed him. Absolutely the only thing out of the ordinary that the police could discover was that a fisherman's skiff was missing one night, and was found the next morning a couple of miles down the coast, floating idly about. But the painter was drifting astern, and it might easily have happened that it had been carelessly fastened, and the rope had slipped from the mooring ring and allowed the skiff to drift away.

On the afternoon of the second day Jack announced his decision. "Buck," said he, "I'm going back to London. I want to see Lane & Baumann. It's quite possible that some information may be gleaned from them which would give us a basis to go to work upon."

"It's no good stopping here," said Risley. "When shall we start?"

"To-night," said Jack, and, being near the station, they turned in to look up the time of the fast express. Jack glanced along the platform, and soon found what he sought, one of Cook's interpreters. "I want to ask some questions of the booking-clerk," he said to the man, slipping several *lire* into his hand, "you might come and interpret for me."

"Yes, sir," said the man at once, and followed the tall young Englishman to the office. In three minutes Jack had learned what he wished as to the shortest route and fastest trains; then he and Risley set out to return to the hotel. Suddenly Jack remembered another point, and crying, "Half-a-minute, Buck," he rushed back to the office. He thrust open a swing door and saw that the interpreter was still there, and was now in conversation

with a smaller man. Jack stepped forward, and the smaller man looked up and gave a short, quick cry of alarm. For a second Jack stood with widely-opened eyes and parted lips, an image of wild surprise. Then darting forward at full speed, he seized the second man by the throat, and clutched him as a lion clutches his prey.

# CHAPTER III.

## THE BIG RUBY.

Jack had known the fellow at once, had recognised him instantly as the small, dark man who had stood in front of him upon Rushmere Heath and demanded that he should produce his father's letter. An instant conviction had darted into Jack's mind that these things were connected, and that this man knew something of his father's disappearance.

"I've got you this time," cried Jack, and was upon him in a second. But a most astonishing thing happened. The small, slight man offered no resistance to Jack's fierce rush, instead, he seemed to give way before it as a reed gives way before the wind. Then he bent slightly and laid one small, sinewy hand on Jack's knee, and, in some mysterious fashion or another, the lad felt that his hold was torn away, and that he was flying through the air over the little man's head. All in a heap Jack landed on the dusty floor. As he fell, he caught a glimpse of Buck's head thrust through the swinging door as he followed his young leader, and saw the look of surprise on Buck's face.

"Seize him!" roared Jack, and Buck darted forward as the dark stranger shot through another door and vanished into a crowd which swarmed on to the platform from a train which had just drawn up. Jack gathered himself together, and sprang to his feet, and rushed after his companion. He soon found Buck, who was hurrying through the groups, looking about on every hand, and they searched together, but searched in vain; the mysterious stranger had gone to earth safely amid the ample cover provided by the mass of bustling passengers. At last they pulled up and looked at each other.

"No go," said Jack, "he's lost in the crowd. He may be far enough away by now."

Buck's look of wonder and surprise was striking to behold.

"See here, Jack," he said, laying his hand on his companion's arm. "How in thunder do you come to know Saya Chone, and jump on him at sight like a hawk droppin' on a chicken?"

"You know him, Buck?" cried Jack. "You know his name?"

"Know him all right," replied Buck. "But what under the sun is he doing this distance from home? What brings Saya Chone in Brindisi? The last time I set eyes on him he was coming into Mogok with a little bag of rubies to sell to U Saw, the chap they call the Ruby King."

"He comes from Burmah, where you have been?"

"Sure thing," said Buck, nodding his head. "He's a half-caste. Says his father was a British officer, and prides himself on talking Number One English."

"He talked English as easily as we do," said Jack, "but with an odd click of the tongue."

"That's the native strain in him," returned Buck. "But where did you run up against him and hear his English?"

Jack told his story quickly, and Risley listened with a knitted brow of attention.

"Say, there's business at the back o' this," murmured Buck, "but where it fits in beats me at the moment. We don't know enough, Jack, to be sure which way we're moving."

"We do not, Buck, you are quite right," replied the lad, "and we'll make a bee-line for London and see the firm for whom father was working."

"Let's go and see what tar-brush was talking to the interpreter about," suggested Buck, and they went at once and found the man, who had returned to his post on the platform. The interpreter readily told them that the half-caste had offered him a liberal sum in order to learn what Jack was doing, and what route he intended to follow on leaving Brindisi, but the man declared that he had made no answer, had, indeed, been unable to reply to the questions before Jack was on the scene and making his rush.

"Is it worth while to stop here and put the police on the search for this fellow, I wonder?" said Jack, as he and his companion returned to the hotel.

"I doubt it," returned Buck. "There are such numbers of foreigners of all kinds passing through the port that the police can't keep track of them all. Besides, it would take time, and if there's some queer game in the wind, we've lost a good deal now. If you could learn, Jack, how matters stand between the Professor and the firm that sent him out to Burmah, it might give you a line to go on. At present we're snuffin' the wind and pickin' up no scent."

"You're right, Buck, we'll get the baggage together at once."

Again Jack rushed across Italy, France, and the Channel, never pausing for one instant on the way. It was a little before noon on a Thursday morning when he saw London again, and, at the terminus, he parted with Buck.

The latter went with the baggage to Lincoln's Inn to report to Mr. Buxton, while Jack, too anxious to lose another moment, jumped into a cab and drove straight to the offices of Messrs Lane & Baumann in Old Broad Street. He sent his name in, and was shown at once into a large room where Mr. Lane, the senior partner, sat at his desk.

"Ah, Mr. Haydon," said he, "you have, I hope, come to give us some news about your father."

"Unfortunately I have not," replied Jack. "I have been in Brindisi making every inquiry possible, but I have been able to gather no information whatever as to his whereabouts. I have come here in hopes that you may give me some idea of what his arrangements were with you, and from that I might plan a course of action."

"I think my partner had better join us," said Mr. Lane, taking up a speaking-tube. For a few moments nothing was said. The business man went on with the letter he was writing, and Jack looked about him. The office was large and splendidly fitted up. Jack knew nothing of Lane & Baumann, but it was plain on every hand that it was a large and wealthy firm. Mr. Lane himself was an elderly gentleman, irreproachably dressed, and the picture of an important man in the City.

The door opened and the other partner came in. Jack saw that Mr. Baumann was much younger, a fat, heavy German with clean-shaven face and big, round spectacles, through which little, thick-lidded eyes peered.

"Has he brought some news?" asked Baumann quickly. "What does he say?" His accent at once betrayed him, though his English was excellent.

"No," said Mr. Lane quietly, "he has brought no news. He comes to learn of us."

"To learn of us," said Baumann slowly; "and what is it you wish to learn?" he demanded of Jack.

The latter eyed the German keenly. At the first word he detected an enemy. Mr. Lane had been gravely polite and non-committal in his manner. This man showed hostility at once.

"I wish to learn anything that will aid me in discovering the reason for the mysterious disappearance of my father," replied Jack, firmly.

"Mysterious disappearance," repeated the German, with a sneering stress upon the words. "*Ach Gott!* it is no mystery to me when a man with such a gombanion as that disappears." He was becoming excited, and his German accent began to thicken.

"Companion," repeated Jack, "I do not understand you. My father had no companion except Buck Risley, his man, who has now returned to London with me."

"Had he not, indeed?" said Baumann. "But he had a very close gombanion, one who might easily lead him astray. *Himmel*, what was it not worth? I think about it night and day."

"Gently, Baumann, gently," said Mr. Lane. "You are mystifying Mr. Haydon, and I shall explain to him what you mean. He clearly does not understand you, and I do not think it is right to keep him in the dark. Mr. Haydon, do you know why your father went to Burmah for us?"

"I understood that he was going to survey some concession you had gained," replied Jack.

"My goncession," cried Baumann. "I went over there and saw the place, and I said to myself, *Himmel*, here is the for rubies, yes, fine rubies, and I got all rights to dig there."

Mr. Lane quieted his excited partner and turned once more to Jack.

"Exactly," he said; "your father went to survey a concession for us. My partner had been over the ground, and had returned convinced that there was a fine field for ruby-mining. We sent your father out to look carefully over the ground on our behalf, and a short time ago we received some very startling news from him. He cabled to us that in a fissure of the rock, where, as everyone knows, the finest rubies are found, he had made a most marvellous find. He had come across a ruby of priceless quality, and, as his work was done, he intended to return at once, bringing the ruby with him in order to place it himself in our hands."

"And now he has mysteriously disappeared," sneered Baumann. His meaning was very plain, and Jack leapt to his feet with pale face and shining eyes.

"Sir!" he cried. "Do you dare to hint that the ruby is the cause of my father's disappearance?"

The German smiled, and Jack's anger grew.

"It is impossible!" he cried. "My father is the soul of uprightness and honour. And do you think he would be tempted by a mere stone, whatever its value? He has handled rubies a hundred and a hundred times."

"Ay," snarled the German, "but not such a ruby as this. What did he say himself? What was in his cablegram? 'The finest ruby by far that I have ever seen or handled!' He says that. He, Haydon, the first living expert on rubies, the man who knows everything of every big specimen in existence. *Himmel, Himmel*, what a stone was that! And what time are we losing! I would set every police of the world on his track. And we do no nothing, nothing!"

"Gently, Baumann, gently, you know very well that I do not agree with you," said Mr. Lane.

Jack turned eagerly to the senior partner. He felt that the whining German was below both his anger and contempt.

"Sir," said Jack earnestly, "if my father had in his charge a stone so immensely precious, I fear he has met with foul play."

"Who knew of it?" said Mr. Lane. "Had he mentioned anything about it to his man?"

"No, he had not," said Jack, and narrated at once what he had heard from Buck Risley.

"Yes," said Mr. Lane, nodding, "it was the possession of the great jewel which made him uneasy."

"Who can say what it was worth?" broke in Baumann fiercely. "A big ruby of perfect colour and without flaw, remember, he said its like did not exist, is of all stones the most precious. Diamonds, poof! This ruby was worth a score of great diamonds."

"And if my father had with him so wonderful a stone," urged Jack on Mr. Lane, "is it not almost certain that someone has learned of its existence? and again I say that he has met with foul play."

"But who should know of it?" said Mr. Lane. "It is most unlikely that he should mention it to anyone; and you say, moreover, that his own companion knew nothing of it."

"But," cried Jack, and thought this point was a clincher, "he cabled home to you about it, and word of it got abroad, perhaps, from the telegraph office."

Mr. Lane shook his head. "He cabled to us in cipher," he said; "a cipher which he had composed himself and wrote down for us before he started. The paper has been safely locked up in our strong-room, and it was the only copy in the world, for he told us that, for himself, he should carry the cipher in his memory."

This was puzzling and baffling, and Jack was silent. In a moment he put forward another point.

"But we are not sure the ruby has disappeared with my father," he said; "it may be packed away in his baggage."

Mr. Lane shook his head once more. "No," he said, "that is very unlikely. Your father would be certain to carry a thing so small and so valuable on his person. He would never part with it night or day."

Again there was a short interval in which nothing was said. Into this silence suddenly broke the grumbling roar of Baumann's great voice. The German had been brooding over the disappearance of the great stone until he was beside himself.

"*Ach Gott*," he cried furiously to Mr. Lane. "You are foolish. You still believe in the man and trust him. Me, I do not, I tell you plainly he is a thief. He is to-day perhaps in Amsterdam, cutting that noble and splendid stone into many smaller ones, and each of them still a fortune. Yes, he is a thief!"

"You liar!" roared Jack. "My father is not a thief. How dare you take such words on your dirty lips in respect of such a man!"

He had bounded to his feet and clenched his fists. Mr. Lane sprang between them.

"Now, Mr. Haydon," said the elder man, "you must keep the peace. Baumann is speaking very wildly. I do not agree with him. I know your father too well."

Respect for Mr. Lane held Jack back, and nothing else. He would dearly have liked to plant his fist on the German's foaming mouth, but he commanded himself with an immense effort, and tried to speak calmly.

"The man is mad to say such things," said Jack with trembling lips. "Why, the whole facts of the case are against any such monstrous idea. If my father had wished to steal the stone, would he have cabled to you full particulars and started home? What would have been easier than to pocket it at once, and say nothing?"

"He was not a thief at first," vociferated the German. "He was honest when he cabled. But the jewel, the great, big, beautiful jewel itself corrupted him.

He looked at it, and looked at it, till the love of it filled his heart and he could not part with it. *Himmel*, I have felt it all. I know what happened as well as if I had been at his side all the voyage."

"Look here, you foul slanderer," cried Jack. "I'll prove you a liar out and out. Listen to me. I'll find my father if he still remains in existence, and I'll prove that you wrong him by your unjust suspicions." The lad turned to Mr. Lane with flushed face and shining eyes. "I thank you, sir," he said, "for the trust you still retain in my father. I will do my very utmost to prove to you that it was well placed. I cannot promise you anything save that I will do all that lies in my power to trace your great ruby and discover my father's fate at the same time."

Jack could say no more. He held out his hand and Mr. Lane shook it, and the tall English lad strode from the office.

# CHAPTER IV.

## BUCK SEES LIGHT.

Jack walked rapidly through the city, and, free from the presence of Baumann and his vile insinuations, began to cool rapidly and survey the situation with a steadier eye.

"This needs talking over," he said to himself. "Here's a big new development." He hailed a cab and was driven to Lincoln's Inn. He found Mr. Buxton's sitting-room littered with the baggage they had brought home, and Mr. Buxton himself in close confab with Buck Risley.

"Hullo, Jack," said the elder man, rising to shake hands with him; "how have you been getting on with Lane and Baumann? You look excited."

"Rather, Mr. Buxton," said Jack. "I have been learning a great deal." He struck into his story at once, and the two men listened with great interest.

"He had an immense ruby of incalculable value in his possession," said Mr. Buxton slowly, when Jack had finished. "I say, this changes the whole situation. I'm afraid, Jack, something very serious has happened to your father."

"Then that's what was on the Professor's mind," cried Buck. "I knew very well there was something. It was big enough to make even him feel uneasy."

"It's an odd thing he didn't mention it to you, Risley," said Mr. Buxton. "I've always understood that you were privy to all his business movements."

"That's all right, Mr. Buxton," said Risley cheerfully. "You've got that quite straight. In a general way the Professor hid nothing from me. But this time he did hide it about the big stone, and I'm goin' to show you how right, just as usual, the Professor was. You must remember," went on Buck, "that when he picked me up at Mogok on the way home, he found only a dim and distant shadder o' the party now talkin' to you. I'd been on my back for

weeks with fever, and was as weak and nervous as a kitten. I've picked up wonderful on the voyage home. Well, if he'd told me o' such a thing as he'd certainly got at that moment in his belt, it would ha' rattled me to pieces. I should have been certain to give the show away in my anxiety for fear anybody should get to know about it, and do him a mischief. So he said nothing at all. But it puts everything in a new light, everything."

"Buck!" cried Jack. "What about that fellow who stopped me on Rushmere Heath and then turned up in Brindisi? Can he have something to do with it?"

"Now you're talking, Jack," said Risley, nodding at the young man. "'Twas all runnin' through my mind. It all hangs together, as straight as a gun."

Buck knitted his brows in deep thought, and stared into the fire. Mr. Buxton was about to speak, but Buck held up his hand for silence, and the quiet remained unbroken till the American slapped his knee with a crack like a pistol-shot, looked round on them, and nodded briskly.

"I've worked it out," said Buck. "The Professor's been kidnapped, and I'll lay all I'm worth I can spot the parties who have boned him."

"Kidnapped!" The cry burst in irrepressible surprise and excitement from the other two.

"Sure thing," said Risley. "Just listen to me. That half-caste Saya Chone comes from up-country somewhere in the direction the Professor headed for after leaving Mogok. That's the starting-point for the whole business. He's mixed up in it from first to last, that's plain enough, by his showing up at Rushmere and then followin' Jack to Brindisi as he must have done. What brought him trackin' us all this way if he didn't know about the big ruby and was in with the gang that's carried off the Professor?"

"But why are you so sure that they have carried Tom Haydon off, Risley?" asked Mr. Buxton. "Perhaps they—" Mr. Buxton paused, unable to put into words the terrible thought which filled his mind.

"Say it right out, sir," said Buck encouragingly. "You can say it out, for I don't believe it's the least bit true. You meant, suppose they've murdered the Professor for the ruby?"

Mr. Buxton nodded, and Jack went white about the lips.

"Well, that's all right," said Buck cheerfully, "they ain't done that, anyway. First thing, if so we'd ha' found the Professor, for all they wanted was the stone; they'd no use in the world for his body. But there's a lot more in it than that. They want the Professor himself. It's a dead sure thing that where that big stone came from there's a lot more, and they intend to make him show them the place."

"Ah," said Mr. Buxton, "there's a good deal in that, Risley. I hadn't thought of that."

"Then, Buck," cried Jack, "you think that my father has been seized and is being carried back to Burmah?"

"I'm as sure of it as I am that we are in this room," said Buck solemnly.

Jack drew a long breath of immense relief. To feel that his father might be alive, and possibly could be rescued, was to bring a bright gleam of hope into the darkness of this strange affair.

"How have they carried him away?" cried Jack.

"By sea," replied Buck. "Couldn't be done by land, nohow. But you can get a quiet road by sea easy enough. I wonder how much that boat that disappeared from the harbour had to do with it. They might have nailed him, pulled him out in it to a vessel waiting off the harbour, and then sent it adrift when they'd done with it."

Mr. Buxton had filled his pipe and was smoking thoughtfully. Now he took the pipe out of his mouth, and spoke.

"I can see another thing which, in the light now thrown upon the affair, seems very possible," said he. "How many letters did you receive from your father, Jack, when he was on his way home?"

"Only one, Mr. Buxton," replied Jack. "The one he sent me from Cairo was the first I had had from him for a long time."

"Isn't it possible," went on Mr. Buxton, "that those who were following him up knew of that letter being sent, and were anxious to read it, hoping that he

would describe where he had been and what he had been doing? Then, even if they failed to secure him and the big stone, they would know the spot where he had discovered the ruby-mine."

"Say, Mr. Buxton, you've hit the bull's eye," remarked Buck. "That's about the square-toed truth."

"And that's why they threw the letter away when they had read it," cried Jack. "There was no hint of any such thing in it."

There was silence for a few moments, while all three pondered over the strange events which had taken place. It was broken by Jack.

"Oh, Buck," he said, "I suppose there is no chance of such a precious thing being in the baggage after all."

"Not it," replied Risley. "I packed every consarned thing with my own hands. I had just enough strength for a job like that."

"And you feel convinced, Risley, that Tom Haydon has been spirited off back to Burmah by a gang who have learned of his wonderful find, and mean to seize it for themselves?" said Mr. Buxton.

"Dead sure of it, sir," replied Buck.

Jack sprang to his feet and paced the room excitedly.

"Then we'll go ourselves, Buck," he cried, "and run them to earth."

"Sure thing," said Buck calmly. "I'm on at once for a look into what's happened to the Professor."

"It will be a dangerous quest," said Mr. Buxton slowly; "a very dangerous quest, among wild lands and savage peoples. I know that much. Do you think the Government authority extends over the district where the discovery was made, Risley?"

"No, it don't," replied Buck. "They're all savage Kachins and Shans up there, as ready for a scrap as any you ever met. It's all the authorities can do to hold 'em off the settlements."

"A dangerous quest indeed!" repeated Mr. Buxton.

"But one that must be undertaken," cried Jack earnestly. "Would you have me leave my father's fate a matter of uncertainty, Mr. Buxton? I know very well it's a long journey on the chance of Buck being right in his suspicions. But so many things point that way, and if Buck is willing to guide me to the country where the search ought to be made, I will gladly go."

"Oh, I'm with you, of course, Jack," sang out Buck Risley. "We'll have a look into things, anyhow, an' I know more than a bit of that country. I've been three times up the river, an' made all sorts o' little side-trips."

"Thank you, Buck," cried the lad. "I knew you'd be willing to help me. We'll start as soon as possible. You'll find us plenty of funds, won't you, Mr. Buxton?"

"Oh, yes, Jack," said Mr. Buxton, "I'll find you all the money you want for such a purpose."

# CHAPTER V.

## THE SPY.

Three days later, about four o'clock in the afternoon, Jack and Buck walked into Lincoln's Inn, and knocked at Mr. Buxton's door. They had been staying at a hotel near at hand, and nothing was said until Jack had carefully closed the door of the inner sitting-room, where Mr. Buxton was at work among his papers.

"So you're off to-morrow?" said Mr. Buxton, laying down his pen.

"No, to-night," said Jack.

"What?" returned Mr. Buxton in surprise. "Have you got all your luggage ready?"

"Yes, sir," said Buck. "We've got it with us."

"Oh, your cab is outside?" he said.

"No, sir," replied Buck, with a twinkle in his eye. "You see it all on view."

Mr. Buxton scratched his head. "Do you mean to say that you're going to start for Burmah with an umbrella apiece?"

"We do, Mr. Buxton," replied Jack. "We're going to slip off quietly. Buck thinks we're being watched."

"Watched!" cried Mr. Buxton. "By whom?"

"Can't say that," said Buck. "But there's someone takin' a deep interest in us I feel certain. I should venture to spec'late as the ruby gang want to know what we're up to."

"And you mean to start off for the other side of the world equipped merely for a stroll through the Park?" cried Mr. Buxton.

"Why not, sir?" asked Buck. "You've found us plenty of money, and we can rig ourselves out whereever there are shops. Best for us, too, to pull out on this business with as little show as we can make. If we don't, we may find ourselves pulled up mighty soon and mighty sharp. I tell you this is a deep an' cunning gang we've got to fight. An' they've got a big pull of us. They know us and we know very little of them. I can tell you there are wily birds east of Suez. They are up to all the tricks, both of East and West."

The two visitors did not stay five minutes with Mr. Buxton. They wished their visit to have the air of a mere passing call, and when he had shaken hands with them and wished them good luck, they left his rooms, strolled into Chancery Lane, and went gently up towards Holborn as if they had nothing to do but stare at the sights of the town like country cousins.

"Jack," said Buck softly, "let's pull up and look at this shop window, the panes have just got the bulge I want."

Jack, wondering a little what his companion meant, stopped, and they stared into a print shop where photographs of eminent judges and K.C.'s were set out in rows.

"Say, this is bully," murmured Buck. "Move a bit on one side, Jack, so that I can see the street behind us reflected in the glass. Now, come on, I've seen all I want. Don't turn your own head or you'll spoil the show."

They walked on together, and Buck muttered in deep satisfaction: "I've spotted the man following us; a stout chap with a double chin and a look like a fat policeman out o' work. I reckon I've tumbled to this game. I've seen him outside our hotel."

"Is it one of the gang?" asked Jack.

"Oh, no," replied his companion. "More likely to be one o' these private detectives hired to watch us. Now we've got to throw pepper into his eyes, an' then make a break for the station."

Buck raised his hand and hailed a growler. They got in, Buck said "Marble Arch," and away trotted the horse. Buck now set himself to keep a watch out of the little window at the back of the cab, and soon gave a chuckle of satisfaction.

"He's coming," he said, "he's in a hansom about fifty yards behind. This makes it a dead cert that he's our man. It would be a bit too much of a coincidence for him to be outside our hotel last night, following us up Chancery Lane to-day, and now tracking us along Oxford Street."

"How will you drop him?" asked Jack.

"As easy as tumbling off a log," replied Buck. "We'll use Connaught Mansions. Do you remember its two entrances? We'll pop in at one and out at the other."

Jack laughed, and understood at once. His father had a flat at Connaught Mansions, a huge block of flats near Lancaster Gate, which served as Mr. Haydon's London home between his journeys. They had made no use of it during the few days they had been in town, preferring a hotel near Mr. Buxton's rooms, but now it would be of service to their plans.

As they neared the Marble Arch, Buck gave the address to the driver. He handed up a couple of half-crowns at the same time.

"We may be detained at the place you're driving to," he remarked. "Wait a quarter of an hour at the door, and then if we don't send any message to you, you can go."

"Very good, sir," said the cabby, and on rolled the growler, and soon turned into the courtyard of Connaught Mansions, and pulled up at the main entrance. Jack and his companion left the cab at once and went into the lobby, where the porter came out of his office.

"Hullo, Mr. Risley, you are back again," said the porter. Then he caught sight of Jack, whose face was very well known from frequent visits to his father. The question which had plainly been on the porter's lips was at once checked. He had been eager to talk to Buck about the disappearance of Mr. Haydon, but Jack's presence put a barrier upon that.

The cloppety-clop of the feet of a passing cab horse now came in through the open door of the vestibule. Jack glanced out and saw the stout man passing in his cab. The spy seemed to be very busy reading a paper, and the whole thing looked as innocent as could be.

"Well, I'll nip upstairs an' get what I want," said Buck to the porter, and he and Jack rang for the lift, and were shot up to the fifth floor. Upon this landing there was one projecting window, which commanded the front of the great building, and the two comrades went cautiously to it and peeped out.

"There he is, there he is," whispered Jack.

"Sure thing," chuckled Buck.

Far below them they saw their cabman sitting idly on his perch and waiting for his quarter of an hour to pass. The Mansions looked on to a square, a long narrow strip of gardens, filled with lofty bushes rather than trees. The spy's cab had taken a sweep round these gardens and was now drawing up on the other side, exactly opposite their cab. As they looked they saw the stout man leave his cab and move to and fro till he found a space through which he could look across the gardens and watch the entrance to the great building. From their lofty standpoint Jack and his companion had a splendid bird's-eye view of everything.

"Off we go now," said Jack. "For if our cabman makes a move he'll become suspicious."

"We've got ten minutes yet," murmured Buck; "but as you say, Jack, off we go."

They turned and crossed the landing swiftly, and ran down the stairs, flight after flight. They did not wish to call attention to their movements by ringing for the lift; besides, they were making for the back of the place, where a smaller entrance opened on a quiet side street. They gained this and were once more free to strike where they wished, leaving the baffled spy to watch the main entrance in vain.

# CHAPTER VI.

## IN RANGOON.

"Now for a start in earnest," said Buck, as the two comrades hurried swiftly through the quiet streets, moving westwards in order to put as much ground as possible between themselves and the baffled spy. "I propose, Jack, that we make for Harwich and cross over to the Continent, avoiding the usual English routes and English steamers. We want to get there as quietly as we can. It wouldn't be healthy to arrive in Upper Burmah thumping a drum to let 'em know we were on their track. They've got ways of their own of gettin' rid o' people they want to see the last of."

Jack nodded. "Then we must head for Liverpool Street," he remarked.

"Yes," said Buck. "We're not far from Queen's Road Station. We'll hit the Twopenny Tube and dodge back east, now."

They went into the station and were just in time to jump into an east-bound train, as the conductor was about to shut the gates of the carriage.

"Nobody followed us there anyway," remarked Buck. "We were the last to board the train."

They went right away to the Bank, plunged into the City, and threaded the narrow streets and busy crowds in every direction, gradually working their way towards Liverpool Street. They timed their arrival there five minutes before a fast express pulled out, and were soon on their way. As they rushed through the Essex flats Buck detailed his plans, and Jack listened and agreed.

"From Harwich we'll make for Hamburg," said Risley. "There we can buy an outfit and take passage for Rangoon in a German boat which does not call in England."

Our story now moves on to a point nearly five weeks later, when, as evening fell, a big German steamer slowly moved up to a wide quay of Rangoon, and took up her berth. Over her side leaned two figures we know, one looking at the scene with eyes which noted the familiarity of it all, the other drinking in every detail with eager interest and curiosity.

Jack was too absorbed in the scene to utter a word; the minarets of the mosques, the vast spire of Shway Dagon, the famous pagoda, its crest of gold glittering in the last rays of the sun; the crowd of masts, the native boats, the swift little sampans darting hither and thither, the quaint up-river craft, the Chinese junks—all was so new and strange and wonderful that he could not gaze enough upon the scene. And above all, he felt that this was the land whose wildest recesses he must penetrate upon his quest, and his mind turned strongly upon that.

"Do you know, Buck," he murmured to his companion, "that the sight of all these strange new things makes the whole affair very visionary to me?"

"I think I tumble to what you mean," replied the other. "I had a touch of it myself when I first came to these queer parts. You feel as if you were ramblin' about in a dream."

"That's it, exactly," said Jack. "It seems impossible that this is workaday life in which we have a definite task."

"You'll soon shake that off," replied Buck; "the sight o' these places makes every tenderfoot moon a bit; and we've got a straight enough job before us. We'll have to rustle some before we've got the Professor out o' the hands o' these people who want to jump his claim."

"You feel certain my father is here, Buck?"

"Three times as certain as when we started," replied Risley. "Mr. Buxton's kept the search going, and found nothing. Very good. That makes it all the surer the Professor is in front of us up this river;" and Buck threw his hand northwards, pointing to the broad flood which slipped past the quays of Rangoon to the sea.

At different points of their voyage they had received cables from Mr. Buxton giving the news of the search, which was going on in vain.

The steamer took up her moorings, and the stream of landing passengers began to flow swiftly to the quay. Jack and his companion stepped ashore, each with a large kit-bag in hand. They had travelled light, and all their luggage was with them. Buck held up a finger, and a Chinese coolie darted up to them, his rickshaw running easily behind him. The two bags were pitched into the light vehicle, and Buck bade the man follow them by a gesture.

"This way, Jack," said Risley, and led his companion up a broad street, which, now that the dusk had fallen and the sea-breeze was blowing, was filled with a strange and busy crowd.

"Everybody turns out for an hour or two, now," remarked Buck. "It's pleasant and fresh after the day. This is Mogul Street, about the liveliest street in the city."

Jack looked upon the crowd with wonder, the first Eastern crowd of which he had ever made a part. The thronging pavements were a kaleidoscope of the East—long-coated Persians; small, brown, slant-eyed Japanese; big, yellow, slant-eyed Chinamen; a naked Coringhi, his dark body shining in the lamp-light, and the rings in his nose jingling together; Hindus of all ranks, from the stately Brahmin to the coolie bearing loads or pulling a rickshaw; Burmese; and, to Jack's pleasant surprise, three straight-stepping English soldiers, swinging along with their little canes, their lively talk sounding pleasantly familiar amid the babel of Eastern tongues.

At a narrow opening Buck turned and left the main street. Fifty yards along the side street he stopped the rickshaw and paid off the coolie, each taking his own kit-bag. Next Buck plunged into a dusky, ill-lighted alley, and Jack followed, wondering.

"I'm making for a friend's house," murmured Buck, "an' I'm takin' a shy road. We've got to keep our eyes skinned from now on."

"Do you think the gang will be on the look-out for us in Rangoon, Buck?" asked Jack.

"Likely enough," replied Risley. "No harm in takin' care, anyway."

The two gained a narrow lane beyond the alley, followed it some distance, then turned into a wider street. Here Buck paused before a shop whose windows were closed, but rays of light were streaming through chinks in the shutters. He tried the door and found that it was not fastened.

"Nip right in," said Risley, and the two entered briskly, and closed the door behind them. Behind the counter stood a tall, elderly man taking a rifle to pieces by the light of a brightly-burning lamp. He was surrounded by weapons of all kinds, and a single glance told Jack that he stood in a gunsmith's shop.

"Hello, Buck," said the tall man calmly. "Slidin' in like a thief in the night, eh? What's wrong, and who's your friend?"

"This is the Professor's son, Mr. Jack Haydon," replied Buck, answering the last question first, as he put down his bag and shook hands with his acquaintance.

"Pleased to know you, sir," said the gunsmith, offering his hand to Jack in turn. "Me and your father have known each other a long time and done a lot of business together. Perhaps you've heard him mention me, Jim Dent?"

"Yes, Mr. Dent," said Jack, "I've heard your name many a time."

"I'm very sorry for you, sir," said Dent. "This is a queer business about the Professor. Knocked me all of a heap when I heard of it."

"The news is about Rangoon, of course, Jim?" said Buck.

"Came at once," replied Dent. "The Professor was known to so many people here."

"Well, between me and you, Jim," said Buck in a low voice, "that's just what I've come to talk about. You know the ropes in this country pretty well, and I want your advice."

"Been in Burmah twenty-eight years, and spent a good deal of the time shiftin' about here and there," remarked Jim Dent. "I know a thing or two, as you may say. But come in; I should like to hear all about it."

He secured the outer door, put out the lamp which lighted the shop, and led the way to an inner room. Here another lamp was burning, and all three sat down. Buck plunged into the story, and Dent listened attentively, now and again putting a question.

"They've got the Professor all right," said Dent at the conclusion of Buck's narrative.

"You, too, think so?" cried Jack.

"Oh, yes, sir," returned Dent, nodding at him, "they're going to make your father show 'em his find, there's no mistake about that. The thing's been done before, but the men have been collared in this country, I admit. I've never known anything so big and daring as this, but still it's on the cards, and Buck has tumbled to the right conclusion."

"But how could they carry off my father with such secrecy?" asked Jack. "It was impossible to book a passage back in any vessel. They would have been found out at once."

"That's right enough, sir," replied Dent. "They must have had a vessel of their own, but that's a puzzling thing. Did you see any sign of this Saya Chone on the voyage, Buck?"

"Not a hair of him," replied Risley.

"He and his pals might have been among the third-class passengers after all," said the gunsmith. "You weren't looking out for them, but it's pretty plain they were looking out for you. They must have been fly to your posting that letter, and got an idea somehow or other of the address. Well, this is a rum go. What's your next move, I wonder?"

"Go straight up to Mogok," suggested Jack, "and strike into the country where my father was exploring. Surely we can lay our hands upon one or other of his native guides, and they will lead us to the place. Then we can discover whether those people you suspect of kidnapping him are anywhere in that neighbourhood."

Dent nodded his head in agreement. "Well, sir," he said, "you'll have to do something after that fashion. But you must go to work very cautiously. The

men you are after are at home there, and have a hundred ways of finding out what you're up to, while you know no more of them and their movements than you know which way a snake's slipping through the jungle."

"Would it be of any use to appeal to the authorities?" asked Jack.

The gunsmith shook his head.

"Not a mite, sir, not a mite. In the first place, you're moving on suspicion, and you can hardly expect the police to go tramping round in wild and only partly explored jungle to find out if your suspicions are correct. Then, again, if inquiries were started you would only warn the parties you suspect, and they'd take good care your plans came to nothing. For holding a man tight and keeping the place of his hiding secret, this country is a marvel. I've known many a native disappear in a very mysterious fashion and be never heard of again; some enemy had disposed of him." The gunsmith fell silent and mused for a few moments.

"I'll tell you," said he, "the best thing to do now, and that is to strike up to Mandalay. There might be a chance there to pick up a bit of river news which would help you. I wonder whether old Moung San is up in Mandalay yet. He started up river with his *hnau* weeks back, and you know how they dawdle along, picking up every scrap of river gossip."

"Moung San!" cried Buck, "old Moung, why, he's the very man whose *hnau* took the Professor up the river Chindwin, the last trip Mr. Haydon made before he went up to Mogok. He'll give us a hand if he can, I know."

"He was in here, buying stuff off me to trade along the river," said Dent, "and he ought to be somewhere about Mandalay by now."

"Then we'll start in the morning by the first train," said Buck; "and that reminds me, Jim, we shall want some guns; we've got nothing at all at present, and we'll look over your stock."

"Come in the shop," said Dent, and all three went back to the little front room where weapons stood in racks about the wall.

"These Mauser pistols are handy things," remarked Dent, as he turned some of his stock on to the counter. "Clap the holster on 'em and they make a very smart little rifle."

"We'll have a couple," said Buck, "they're daisies. I've tried 'em. Have you got a light rifle or two in stock, Jim? We don't want to drag any weight through the jungle, as you know as well as most."

"What's the matter with the Mannlicher?" said Dent, picking up one of those handiest of shooting tools and passing it over to Jack. "No weight, and as good a little rifle as a man wants to put to his shoulder."

"This is all right," said Jack, putting it up. "I've never tried it, but I've heard about it. Makes pretty good shooting, I think."

"Wonderful good, sir," said Dent. "You can't wish for better. And such a handy little cartridge, too. That's a thing to consider on a march. You can carry a much bigger number for the same weight of ordinary cartridges."

For half an hour or more Buck and Jack turned over Dent's stores, and laid in a very complete stock of weapons and cartridges. As the gunsmith talked, speaking of the wild jungle into which they must wander, the wild people they would be likely to meet, and what they would need to meet the chances of their journey, his eye fired and his excitement grew. He poured forth a flood of information, of warning, of directions, which showed how complete was his knowledge of the wilds into which they were about to venture, how deep was his lore of jungle-craft, and how great his passion for the life of the explorer and adventurer. His flood of speech ended on a sigh.

"Five years it is now," he said, "since I made what I call a real trip, getting clean off the track and striking a line which you might fancy no white man had ever struck before."

Buck had been watching his old acquaintance keenly. Now he leaned over and laid his hand on Dent's arm.

"Look here, Jim," he said, "you're achin' in every bone o' your body for a real good trip again. Come with us."

The invitation was like a spark thrown upon gunpowder. The gunsmith struck the counter with his open hand till the weapons danced again.

"By George, I will!" he cried, "I'll come fast enough. It's the sort o' trip I'd choose out of a thousand."

Jack saw what a splendid recruit offered here, and he hastened to second Buck.

"If you could, indeed, spare time to accompany us, Mr. Dent," he said, "we shall be delighted to have your company and assistance."

"Well, sir," said Dent, "I'll give you a month. I can manage, I know, to get the business looked after by a friend as long as that. And within a month, if we go the right way to work, we ought to get a good idea as to whether the Professor's in the hands of that gang or not."

"And if your business suffers at all, Jim, you need never fear you'll be at a loss in the end," said Buck. "There's plenty of money for everything."

"Oh, that's all right," returned Dent. "Didn't you say you're offering a reward of £500 for finding the Professor?"

"That's so," replied Risley.

"Very good," said Dent. "Suppose I hit on him first and pick that up. That'll clear my expenses, and a bit over bar the fun o' the trip."

"Oh, Mr. Dent," said Jack, "we're paying all expenses, of course."

"Better an' better still," chuckled the gunsmith. "I get all the fun and the chance of £500 thrown in, and the lot for nothing. You can count in Jim Dent on this game." And so the matter was settled.

# CHAPTER VII.

## UP THE RIVER.

It was on a Tuesday evening that Risley and Jack entered Dent's shop in Rangoon: late on the Thursday afternoon the three comrades stepped out of the train at Mandalay.

"I know a little place down by the river where we can stay quietly," said Dent, and they took a carriage and drove down to the banks of the broad Irrawaddy. Here, at a native rest-house in a riverside village, they set down their baggage and made a hearty meal in a room whose window overlooked the noble stream with its crowd of craft.

Before they ate, Dent had an interview with the master of the house, a short, stout Burman in silken kilt and headgear of flaming scarlet, and their business was put in hand at once. The Burman sent a native boatman off to see if Moung San had reached Mandalay.

The meal was scarcely ended before the light sampan was back with good news. Moung San had been in Mandalay the last two days, and now lay at his accustomed anchorage.

"That's capital," said Dent. "We'll give old Moung a look up before the evening's much older."

Half an hour later all three embarked upon the sampan whose owner had found out the anchorage of Moung San, and the tiny craft was thrust into the river and pulled across the flowing stream. Jack looked with much interest on the pretty, picturesque little craft with its bow and stern curving upwards, and on its boatman, a strong Shan clad in wide trousers and a great flapping hat, who stood up to his couple of oars and sent the light skiff along at a good speed. A pull of a mile or more brought them to the *hnau*, a big native boat moored near the farther shore of the wide stream. The sampan was directed towards the lofty and splendidly-carved prow of the *hnau* and brought to rest.

Now there looked over the side a dark-faced old Burman, whose face broke into smiles at sight of his old acquaintances.

"Hello, Moung San," cried Dent. "We've come to pay you a visit."

"Very glad, very glad," replied the Burman. "Come up, come up."

They climbed at once to the deck of the *hnau*, where Moung San shook hands with them very heartily. When he heard Jack's name he smiled and showed all his teeth, stained black with betel-chewing.

"Me know your father," he said, and shook Jack's hand again. "Very good man, very good man."

Amidships there was a large cabin, roofed with plaited cane, built up on the *hnau*. Moung San invited them to enter it, and all four went in and sat down.

"Now, Moung San," began Jim Dent "You listen to me. You know the ruby-mines well, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Moung San. "Do much trade with the miners for many years."

"Do you know a man named Saya Chone?"

"Yes," said the trader. "Know him. Don't like him."

"Who is he with now?"

"With U Saw, the man they call the Ruby King."

"U Saw," murmured Dent reflectively. "He's jumped into notice since I was up here last. What sort of character has U Saw, Moung San?"

The Burman lowered his voice and looked uneasily round to see if any of his crew were within earshot.

"Very dangerous man," he said, shaking his head, "if he hears of one of the hill-miners finding good ruby, that man sure to lose it, perhaps lose his head same time. U Saw has many Kachins who follow him, and every Kachin carry strong, sharp *dah* (native sword)."

"Have the police been on to him, Moung San?" asked Buck.

"The police!" Moung San laughed disdainfully. "What do the police know about the hills and the jungle, and what goes on there? But we know. The word goes from Kachin to Shan, and from Shan to Burman, over the country, up and down the river. We know."

"Where does U Saw sell his rubies?" asked Dent.

"In China," replied the Burman. "Takes them along the great road to China from Burmah over the mountains. Sells them there for big, big money. Very rich and very strong is U Saw."

Then, with scarcely a pause, Moung San came out with a piece of news that made his hearers jump.

"When I am at Prome two weeks ago, the 'fire-boat' of U Saw pass me, and go up the river."

"Fire-boat!" cried Jim Dent. "U Saw possesses a steamer. How big, Moung San?"

Moung San went into details. He compared the "fire-boat" with the size of his *hnau*, he compared it with a river-steamer which now went puffing past, he described it with the greatest minuteness, for he had lain beside it at Bhamo for three days on the trip before last.

"Say," murmured Buck, looking round on his deeply-interested companions, "this beats the band. I didn't know U Saw had a steam yacht of about three hundred tons, for that's what Moung San's talk comes to. Say, Jim, my son, this clears things up a bit."

"It does that," said Dent. He turned to Jack.

"You see, sir," he remarked, "that Buck's guess hit the mark pretty straight. I'd stake my shop that the party we want was on that yacht."

Jack nodded, with bright eyes. "It must be so," he said, but Buck was again in conversation with the Burman.

"Do you know where the 'fire-boat' had been?" he asked.

"There was a word that U Saw had been a long cruise in the islands," replied Moung San.

"Been a long cruise in the islands, had he?" said Dent, in a meaning tone. There was silence while the three white men made swift calculations mentally.

"If the yacht is a good sea-boat," said Jack, "they would just about have had the right time to do it, supposing they came up the river two weeks back." He meant the voyage from the Mediterranean, and the others nodded.

The old Burman looked from one to the other gravely. There was something he did not understand behind this, and it was plain that he was about to shape a question.

Buck whispered swiftly to Jack, then spoke:

"Well, Moung San, we must be going. But the son of your old patron wished to see you and to give you a little present because you have served his father."

Jack smiled and passed over twenty rupees. Moung San's mouth was at once filled with thanks instead of questions, and an awkward moment passed safely.

"I could see the old fellow was going to ask questions," remarked Jim Dent, when they were once more in the sampan, and the big Shan was pulling strongly across the stream. "It was a lucky stroke to stop his mouth with the rupees."

"Yes," said Jack, "it's quite clear he knows nothing about my father's disappearance, or he would have said something. So it was just as well to leave him in ignorance, and escape a lot of talk. You never know where the simplest question may lead you to."

"You don't," agreed Dent. "He may wonder why we want to know about the Ruby King, but as long as he's in the dark about things, he'll put it down to mere curiosity."

# CHAPTER VIII.

## THE ATTACK ON THE SAMPAN.

Jack nodded and looked out across the wide, shadowy waste of waters which surrounded them. The night had fallen and there was no moon, but the sky was full of the glorious stars of the East, and the great silent river spread itself abroad in the bright starshine till its low distant banks were lost to sight, and the sampan seemed to be crossing a vast lake. Far away up the stream a myriad twinkling lights showed where the shipping lay thickly, and now a huge cargo boat came down stream, its vast bulk looming high above the smooth flood.

Somewhere on the shore a mandoline tinkled, the faint distant notes coming sweetly to them across the water. Jack dropped his hand into the stream and found it warm to the fingers. Then he felt that the river was full of something floating on its surface, which brushed his fingers, and circled about his wrist.

"What's this in the water?" said Jack.

Buck dropped his hand down.

"Paddy-husks, the husk of rice," he replied. "There are rice-mills on the banks up above, and they pitch the husks into the stream. When the mills are busy, the husks cover the river."

"It is a strong current," said Jack.

"Ay, and a very dangerous one," remarked Dent "There's no mercy in this river. It'll sweep you away like the under-tow of a strong tide, and suck you down to feed the crocodiles, if it gets the chance."

For a few moments there was silence, and Jack, who was seated with his face to his companions, watched the big cargo-boat now passing them, but a good distance away. Suddenly he sharpened the glance of his keen eyes and

looked more intently. A tiny dark patch shot from the shadow of the great vessel and held its way straight towards them.

"There's a boat just come from behind that big ship, and it's making straight for us," said Jack.

"That's queer," said Dent sharply, turning his head to look. "It must have come down stream in shelter of the cargo-boat. I've been keeping a watch on the river round us." He said a few words in the native tongue to the big Shan, and the latter pulled much faster and altered his course a little.

"If they're only making for the shore they'll go straight on," said Jim Dent. "If they're after us, they'll change their course."

"They row fast," said Jack.

Jim spoke to the Shan once more, and a few sentences passed between them.

"It's one of those long creek skiffs, pulled by six men," announced Jim. "He knows by the shape of it on the water and the sound of the oars."

"Think they're after us, Jim?" asked Buck in a low voice.

"I don't know, Buck," replied Dent. "But I wish we were ashore. This isn't a country to take any chances in."

All three watched the dark, long shape behind them, and the Shan pulled with all his might.

"It's after us." Jim Dent's low, fierce tones broke into the tense silence, and Buck gave a growl of anger.

"What's their game?" he muttered.

"Run us down, there's no doubt of it," replied Dent. "That skiff is built of stiff teak planks, with a nose as sharp and hard as an iron spike. If they once hit this light sampan they'll cut it in two and scupper us."

"Ay, ay," said Buck, "and drop an oar on the head of a man who tries to swim."

The long narrow row-boat was now heading for them as straight as an arrow. There could be no doubt of the rowers' intent. They meant to run down the slight sampan and hurl its occupants into the deadly current below. Driven by six powerful oarsmen, the skiff was coming on at tremendous speed, and the shore was still a dim and distant line.

Jim Dent spoke again quickly to the Shan, and the latter made a swift reply and bent to his oars with all his might. He understood their danger better than any one, supposing that his light vessel was run down, and he beat the water with long powerful strokes which drove the tiny craft forward with great power. Jim Dent had begun to rummage in the stern, and soon drew out a broad-bladed steering paddle. He dipped this into the water and added a strong dexterous stroke to the efforts of the boatman; now the sampan began to fly.

"Isn't there anything for us, Jim?" cried Jack. "Must we sit idle?"

"There's not another thing to pull with in the boat," said Dent. "I'll lay in with all the strength I've got with this paddle. We'll take turns at it."

Now commenced a stern, fierce race for life. The two men in the sampan fought with set brows and clenched teeth to gain the far-off shore and save the lives of themselves and their comrades. The six rowers in the long skiff lashed the water furiously with their oars in order to overtake and ram the slight vessel they pursued. One, two, three hundred yards were covered. Jack's heart sank. The skiff had gained terribly. Manned by six powerful oarsmen, she was cutting down the distance between them with frightful rapidity. In the sampan the Shan was still pulling with undiminished energy, but Jim Dent was beginning to pant. Buck seized the paddle from his grip and took a turn. But the skiff continued to come up hand over hand.

"She'll get us long before we reach the shore," murmured Dent as he marked the relative distances, and he spoke in the native tongue with the Shan, who only answered with a grunt or two which had a sound of acquiescence.

"Give me the paddle, Buck," said Dent.

"No, no," said Jack, "it's my turn." Every muscle in his body was tingling to put its strength against the smooth current and the weight of the sampan.

"We're going to try a little trick," said Dent, and Jack perforce had to sit still. He glanced down the river and saw a light low on the water, as if a boat was coming towards them. He wondered whether it meant chance of help, but in any case, it was far off, and the enemy were now terribly near, and his attention was drawn again to their position of immense peril.

Dent and the boatman were now pulling easily, and the long skiff darted up to them faster and faster still. Jack watched their pursuers with a fascinated eye. There was not the faintest sound made, save for the regular plash of the rising and falling oars. They were so near that he could see the naked backs of the oarsmen glisten as they swung their bodies to and fro in the starshine. Nearer, nearer, came the long darting skiff.

Jack held his breath. The sharp nose was within half a dozen feet of the stern of the flying sampan, for Dent and the boatman were once more pulling with all their might. For the first time a sound was heard from the pursuing boat. A single word rang out from the steersman, and the rowers bent to one last tremendous effort to hurl their stout skiff upon the fragile sampan. But at that very instant Jim Dent dipped his paddle deep on the left side, the Shan made a corresponding movement with his oars, and the light vessel spun round on her heel and darted away from the impending stroke.

So close were the two boats when this skilful manœuvre was executed that the dripping bow oar of the pursuers was flourished almost in Jack's face as the sampan flew round. He seized it, but did not attempt to snatch it from the oarsman's clutch. He had no time for that, but he made splendid use of the chance afforded him. He gave it a tremendous push, and released it. The rower, caught by surprise, was flung over the opposite gunwale, and the skiff was nearly upset. As the sampan darted away on her new course, the skiff was left floundering on the water.

"Good for you," chuckled Dent, who had seen the swift action and the confusion it caused; "that's given us twenty yards," and now he allowed Jack to seize the paddle. Kneeling on one knee in the bottom of the sampan, Jack put all his strength into the strokes of the broad paddle. He had paddled a canoe often enough at home on the river which ran near the school, and his powerful young arms backed up the boatman's efforts to such purpose that the sampan travelled as it had never done before. Behind

him he heard the fierce swish of oars, and knew that the skiff was once more in hot pursuit.

Suddenly, without a hint of warning, the end came. Jack was just beginning to thrust the paddle down for a strong, deep stroke when the sampan struck something. The shock was so great that Jack was flung on his face. As he sprang up again he heard Buck cry, "She's hit a floating log." The sampan was uninjured. She had struck the obstacle with her tough keel-piece, and had been turned aside at right angles. The Shan had been flung down too, but was up in an instant and gathering his oars. But this loss of a moment gave the pursuing skiff her chance. Driven by twelve brawny arms, held straight as a dart, her sharp beak of stout, hard teak crashed into the light gunwale of the sampan, hit her broadside, and cut the little vessel down to the water's edge.

Scarcely recovered from the first shock, the second hurled Jack headlong. He felt the sampan turn turtle under him, and in another second he was shot into the dark, fierce current, and felt the waters close over his head.

# CHAPTER IX.

## A CLOSE CALL.

Jack did not rise at once. As he sank, the words of Buck flashed into his mind, and he dived and swam swiftly down stream. When he could stay under no longer, he came very slowly to the surface and put out his face. He drew a deep breath and looked eagerly about for the enemy, dreading to see a heavy oar poised against the sky to beat a swimmer under. But there was nothing close at hand, and he trod water and raised his head very carefully to look round.

Suddenly the splash of an oar falling upon the water came to his ears. He looked behind him and saw the dark mass of the skiff thirty yards away. One of the oarsmen was standing up and striking at some object in the water. A pang went through Jack's heart as he realised that one of his companions must be there, struggling for his life, and being brutally beaten under. Then he saw the frightful danger in which he stood himself. At any moment the skiff might shoot towards him. He turned and was about to strike away when a dark object appeared within a few yards of him down stream.

It looked like a head, and Jack struck out for it. He swam in silence, and within half a dozen strokes had a man by the hair. He turned the face up to the starlight and saw that it was Jim Dent, and that the gunsmith appeared to be unconscious. Taking a firmer grip of Jim's hair, Jack struck out down stream and swam as fast as he could towards the approaching light, which was now much bigger and brighter. He had turned on his side to swim, and looked back now and again as he rose to his stroke. To his horror he saw the long, dark line which marked the skiff begin to move swiftly after him. It was difficult to swim in silence and support Jim. His splashes had marked them out to the murderers, and they were hastening to beat him and his helpless companion under before help could arrive.

Jack marked the approaching light and lashed out more fiercely than ever. Unencumbered by Jim Dent, he would have had ten times as good a chance of escaping from the human tigers who pursued him, but of abandoning Jim, the gallant lad had never thought for a moment. Like a snake darting over the water, the skiff was upon them, and a figure in the bow raised an oar to strike at Jack's head. Lifting himself high out of the water with a tremendous stroke, Jack yelled, "Help! help!" at the top of his voice. The oar fell, but the man had been flurried by that sudden wild cry at his feet, and it missed its mark. Again he raised it and struck. Jack had turned on his back, and as the oar fell, he raised his hand, met the stroke, turned it aside, gripped the blade, and hung on desperately. The figure gave a muttered cry and strove to draw the oar back.

But now a warning murmur arose among his companions. The light was coming on at great speed. Jack's cry had been heard, and the vessel was rushing swiftly up to the place. The men in the skiff knew well now what vessel it was, and their only thought was of instant flight. The oar was abandoned, the skiff was turned round, and away it darted into the gloom which overhung the mid-stream. A moment later, a police launch, with its brightly-burning lamp, and two Sikh policemen aboard, shot up to the spot where Jack clung to the oar and to his comrade.

In an instant the two were drawn into the vessel and Jack was telling his story.

"There are two others of us in the river," he said, and he raised his voice and shouted, "Buck! Buck!"

"Hello!" came a cry from some distance, and Jack's heart thrilled with relief and delight.

The launch was headed in the direction whence the reply came, and soon Buck's head appeared in the ring of light cast upon the water by the bright lamp. He was drawn into the launch, and then the little steamer, circling to and fro, scoured the river to find the Shan boatman. While this was being done, with one policeman keeping a watch for the missing man, the second policeman, Risley, and Jack were hard at work on Jim Dent, trying to bring him back to consciousness.

"Say, this is great," suddenly snapped Buck. "I can feel old Jim's heart beginning to thump. He'll do, he'll do."

"Thank heaven," breathed Jack, who had been terrified at Dent's white face and clenched teeth, and thought hope was gone. "He'll come round then, you think, Buck?"

"He'll come all right," said Buck. "Keep on rubbing him."

"We'll take you ashore," said the first policeman; "there's no sign of your boatman. That was the man they were beating under, there is no doubt. Do you know anything of the men who attacked you?"

"Nothing at all," replied Buck. "We have no idea who they were."

"River-thieves," said the second policeman, "as hard to catch as a monkey in the jungle. They work by night always. If we hadn't come up, your bodies, stripped to the skin, would have been thrown up on the river bank to-morrow."

The police launch put them ashore near the rest-house where they were staying, and Jim was now sufficiently recovered to be able to walk.

"It was a close call that time," he said. "Who held me up? The only thing I remember is hitting my head a terrific crack against the prow of the sampan as I went over. I knew nothing after that till I sat up on the deck of the police-boat."

"Jack had got hold of you, good and all right, so the policeman told me," said Buck. "Where he found you I don't know."

Jack was compelled perforce to tell his story, and Jim Dent expressed his deep gratitude.

"By George, sir," he concluded, "I should have been a supper for an alligator to-night if you hadn't stuck to me. Those murdering rogues would have beaten me under easy enough, even if I hadn't been drowned before giving them the trouble. I've got to thank you for my life."

"Oh, you'd have done the same for me, Jim," said Jack. "We're bound to stick together."

At this moment Buck, who had gone forward, gave a loud cry of pleasure and surprise. Jack and Dent hurried after him, and entered the door of the rest-house. Here they saw Buck slapping the Shan boatman on the shoulder. The man, like themselves, was dripping from the river, and was telling his story to the Burman landlord. The latter acted as interpreter, and they learned how the Shan, as much at home in the river as out of it, had dodged the blows of the oar, and dived and swum so far that their assailants had believed him sunk for ever, and had followed up Jack and Jim. Meanwhile the Shan had swum quietly ashore and walked up to the rest-house. His only trouble now was the loss of his sampan, and his grief was soon turned to joy when he received a sufficient sum of rupees to buy another and leave him something in pocket.

"River-thieves," was the comment of the landlord on the story. "They are very daring sometimes. Without doubt they heard you speak English, and hoped to make a fine booty by drowning and stripping you." He bustled off to get them a supper, and Buck looked at his companions.

"I dunno as I put much faith in this river-thief theory," he remarked. "It's handy and natural, an' all these people jump at it, of course, but I don't think there was much river-thieves about that lot."

"Nor me, Buck," rejoined Dent. "I'd be willing to lay a trifle that some friends of U Saw had a finger in that little pie. It would have been a nice clean sweep of us, and as safe a way of being rid of us as could easily be found."

"After this I'm going to wear a gun," remarked Buck. "I fancy it would have been rather useful if you could have pumped a few bits of lead into that boat as it came swinging into us."

"Very useful, Buck," returned Jack, "but after all, this afternoon we were in a train where it would have seemed as out of place to wear a pistol as if you were going from the Mansion House to Westminster."

"Yes, things change mighty quick in this country," said Buck, "and you've got to be ready to change with 'em."

"By the way," said Jack, "those fellows who attacked us seemed to have nothing to shoot with."

"Best for them not," remarked Dent. "They've got their own way of going to work, and a good one too. Their chief aim is to work in silence. Suppose they'd cracked off gun or pistol at us. A sound like that travels a long way over water, and draws a lot of attention. You see what a sharp watch the river-police keep. Instead of one launch on a regular patrol, there would have been three or four shooting up to see what the row was about."

They stripped off their wet clothes, gave them to the Burman landlord to dry, and put on fresh garments from their baggage. Jim Dent unstrapped the ammunition case, and each took a revolver, carefully loaded it, and put it in a pocket hidden by the tunic.

"We don't want to walk about with holsters strapped round us just yet," said Buck, "and at the same time we might want to do some shooting at any minute. My opinion is that the gang is watching us all the time."

"So I think," said Jack. "How can we drop them, I wonder, so that we can make a start on our expedition without being ambushed as soon as we strike into the jungle?"

"It's going to be mighty dangerous to go into the Mogok country and follow up the Professor's trail straight from the beginning," said Buck. "We shall be spotted at once, and, as Jack says, an ambush will be laid for us as soon as we hit the jungle and leave the last policeman behind."

Jim Dent scratched his jaw thoughtfully.

"They're a trifle too handy at layin' a trap for you," he remarked. "Let's have a squint at the map. We ain't bound to follow just the only track which would give U Saw and his men the chance to scupper us without givin' us a chance to lay one or two of 'em out."

The map was spread on a table, and all three bent over it.

"See, now," said Jim, "everybody knows the road to Mogok. You go up the river by steamer to Thabeit-Kyim, and then you've got sixty miles of road across the hills to the ruby-mines."

"And the road about as quiet as Piccadilly on a fine afternoon in June," remarked Buck. "There are mule-trains and bullock-carts, an' men walkin'

an' men ridin'. You can no more keep yourself hidden on that road than you can if you walked down the main street of Mandalay."

"Can't we take the place in flank?" asked Jack. "Drop somehow on my father's line without giving them such warning as they would receive by seeing us about Mogok?"

"Why, the bother is," said Jim, "we don't know the Professor's trail. We must pick up one of his guides. Buck, here, can lay his hand on one of the people who accompanied your father easily enough, but he's got to be in Mogok to do it."

"Wait a bit," said Buck. "Not so fast, Jim, my son. I see a glimpse o' daylight. What's this place farther up the river, Kyan Nyat. That's where the man came from who was the Professor's head man on his last trip, the chap who engaged the coolies and looked after everything. He was about as useful as they make 'em, the Professor said when he got back. His name's Me Dain, and he told me he was going back to his native village. He was tired of Mogok."

"We'll look him up then, Buck," said Jack. "If we can get hold of him, he could pilot us across country."

"Yes, yes," said Jim. "Straight from the river. Very good, now we know what we're after. The sailing orders are Kyan Nyat."

# CHAPTER X.

## THE DACOITS.

Two days later a swift river steamer dropped three travellers and their belongings at the riverside village, and a couple of coolies carried the baggage to a rest-house on the crest of a slope above the wide stream.

"Me Dain," said the landlord of the rest-house, a huge, fat Chetti, with shaven head and scantily-clothed body. "Oh, yes, sahibs, he lives here. He has returned from the ruby-mines with much pay, and has built himself a fine, new house. I will send a messenger for him at once." Within half an hour Me Dain appeared, a middle-sized, powerfully-built Burman, with a broad, flattish, good-humoured face, marked by high cheekbones. At sight of Buck, a merry face lighted up with the widest of smiles, and he rushed forward to greet him.

"Well, Me Dain," said Buck. "How are you getting on now?"

"Pretty good, yes, pretty good," replied Me Dain, who had picked up a fair amount of English on his travels. "And you, and the Sahib Haydon?"

"This is the sahib's son," said Buck, pointing to Jack, and the Burman bent very politely.

"I am very glad to know you, Me Dain," said Jack. "My father has spoken very well of you."

"The Sahib was always kind to the poorest and worst of his servants," replied the Burman. "I, Me Dain, was always glad to be of use to so kind a master."

"Come aside with me, Me Dain," said Buck, and the whole party moved out of earshot of the inquisitive Chetti, hanging about to hear what passed between the sahibs and his neighbour.

In two minutes Me Dain agreed to go with them. They had no difficulty whatever in enlisting him. Despite his monied leisure and his new house, Me Dain was already bored by the quiet life of his native village, where nothing happened save that a river-steamer selling goods called once a week. He was already longing for the trail and the camp fire, and closed without delay on the good offer Jack made him to act as guide to the region where Mr. Haydon had been surveying Lane & Baumann's concession.

"When we start?" asked Me Dain.

"To-morrow morning," said Jack, and the Burman grinned.

"Then we be very busy at once," he replied, and their preparations for the march were commenced forthwith.

"Can't we manage without coolies?" said Jack, and Buck nodded.

"Best plan," said Jim Dent. "Just the four of us, and a couple of ponies to carry the traps." And so it was decided.

The dawn of the next day saw them afoot and leaving the rest-house. Their baggage was strapped on a couple of Burmese ponies, strong, shapely little beasts, not more than twelve hands high, hardy as wild boars, nimble as cats.

Me Dain marched ahead with the ponies, and the three comrades walked behind. The Burman followed a country road which soon took them through tall palm groves out of sight of the river, and then began to climb upwards. They made a march of four hours, when a halt was called on a lofty ridge, where they sat down in a little clearing to eat and rest.

"That's the country we've got to push through," said Jim Dent, and pointed ahead.

Jack gazed eagerly on the magnificent scene which filled the vast outlook before him. Peak upon peak, spur upon spur, rose a vast array of wild mountains running to the north-west, till a range of great summits closed in the horizon.

"See that big mountain shining red over there, the one with twin peaks?" continued Jim.

"Yes," said Jack, "I see it plainly."

"That's near upon seventy miles from here," returned Jim, "and lies in the ruby country. That's the finest ground in the whole world for the ruby hunter," and he swung his hand in the direction of the vast sweep of wild hill country into which they were about to plunge.

For three days their march was quite uneventful. By day Me Dain led them along secret ways, sometimes mule tracks, sometimes hidden country roads, sometimes through trackless jungle where he steered a course as straight as a ship at sea. Then, towards evening on the third day, he rejoiced them by describing a village where he intended to spend the night, and at the thought of fresh warm milk, eggs, chickens, fruit, and such like provisions to be obtained there, the four travellers made swinging headway.

Presently Me Dain pointed forward and said, "Here we are," and they saw the slender spire of a pagoda dart above the low trees ahead. A few steps again carried them from the forest path they were following to a narrow track deeply printed with the hoof-marks of cattle.

"Here's the village highway," said Buck, and the Burman looked back and grinned and nodded.

The prospect of a night in a village with an exchange of gossip, a thing so dear to the Burman heart, put speed into his heels. He trotted forward, and the baggage ponies broke into a trot also. Jack, eager to see every new sight on the march through this strange and wonderful land, ran after him, and the two others came leisurely behind. Me Dain vanished round a bend in the path, and, almost as he did so, gave a wild cry.

Jack bounded forward and gave a gasp of astonishment at the extraordinary sight before him. Four little men, clothed in blue, had leapt upon Me Dain from the bushes which lined the way. The powerful Burman was fighting desperately, and the ponies had run on ahead. But the four assailants were too much for him. They beset him on every side, clutching him, grappling with him like four wolves pulling down a deer. But even as Jack came into sight, the strangers had mastered Me Dain, and in a second he was dragged to the ground. With incredible speed and quickness they flung loops of rope around ankles and wrists, ran them taut, and made the Burman a prisoner.

Then two of them dropped on Me Dain's legs and arms, and the third seized his hair and dragged his head forward. The fourth leapt a pace back as nimbly as a panther, and swung up a short, broad, heavy sword.

It had all taken place so quickly that Jack had barely jerked his Mauser pistol from his holster when all was ready for the decapitation of their guide. But as the gleaming blade flashed above the head of the little man in blue, Jack laid the muzzle true for his ribs and pulled the trigger. The heavy bullet tore its way through the headsman's body, and with a wild cry he pitched forward on the captive's prostrate form. His three companions vanished into the jungle beside them as Jack ran forward. He did not dare to fire at them, for he might have struck Me Dain. Not one of them rose, but darted away along the ground like four-footed creatures, and just as nimbly. Jack whipped out his knife and slashed the bonds across; the Burman at once leapt to his feet. As he did so, the other two ran up, pistol in hand.

"An attack!" cried Buck. "What's this game? Why, it's a Kachin. You dropped him, Jack?"

"Yes," said Jack, "he was going to lop Me Dain's head off with this sword."

Jim picked the blade up and looked at it carefully.

"A Kachin *dah* (native sword)," he said. "Did you see any more of them about, Jack?"

"Yes, there were four; three of them have cut into the jungle."

"Come on, sahibs," cried Me Dain, who was very little disturbed by his queer experience, "this dangerous place to stop. Perhaps they come back with *jingals* (native guns)."

"What do you make of it, Me Dain?" said Buck.

"Dacoits, sahib, dacoits; let us hurry. That man is dead," pointing to his would-be executioner, "but plenty more in the forest." He seized the *dah* as a weapon for himself, and all four hurried after the ponies, who had come to a stand fifty yards farther along the narrow way.

"Queer business, dacoits so near a village," muttered Jim. "Let's see what the headman has got to say about it."

# CHAPTER XI.

## BELEAGUERED.

But they found no headman to tell them anything. The forest clearing, where the village had stood, was a scene of destruction. Their eyes fell upon ruined houses and burned huts, with here and there a figure lying about. They paused beside the first which lay in their way. It was the body of a big, heavy man, a Chetti, as they saw at once by his build, scored with the most terrible slashes.

"That's the work of a *dah*," said Buck. "This village has been raided by dacoits, and, by thunder, they're not far off."

Everyone looked round uneasily. The forest lay calm and silent in the evening sunshine all about the clearing, and no sign of a blue-clothed figure was to be seen on its edge, yet all felt that the dacoits were near, and that great danger hung over them. Jack had heard many times of the Kachin dacoits, the terrible mountain banditti who descend at times from their hills to plunder and slay, and now he was face to face with them.

"See how it was," said Jim. "This village was raided at daybreak this morning. Not a body has been torn by a wild animal, and the beasts would have been busy enough to-night. Then some of 'em were left lurking about, and they spied Me Dain coming, didn't see us behind, and thought he was coming to the village alone. Of course they slipped out of the bushes and nabbed him, thinking to whiff off his head and turn the ponies' packs out at their own leisure. But Jack upset their little plan, and Me Dain's head stops in the right spot."

"Many thanks, *phaya* (my lord), many thanks," said Me Dain, bending low before Jack. "Your servant thanks you for his life."

Crack! There was a dull roar as of someone firing a very heavy duck-gun from the forest, and a ball whistled by their heads.

"A *jingal*!" cried Buck. "We've got to hustle round and find shelter. The dacoits are on us."

"The pagoda, sahibs," cried Me Dain. "It is the only place of stone in the village. Let us hasten there."

He gathered up the leading-reins of the ponies—which had been easily caught—and hurried towards the spire. The others ran swiftly after him, their steps hastened by the roar of a second shot and the whistle of a second heavy ball.

In a couple of minutes they had reached the pagoda and leaped on the platform between the columns which supported the bulb-like roof crowned by its tapering spire. In the centre of the platform was a shrine. Jack glanced quickly round.

"This won't do," he said, "not enough cover here, supposing the dacoits attack us. What's that place?"

He pointed to a new, strongly-built house of stone a short distance from the pagoda.

Me Dain looked at it in surprise. "It has been built since I was here last," he cried.

"Looks just the thing for us," said Jack. "Come on," and the whole party hurried across to the building, whose door stood half open.

"It is a small monastery," cried Me Dain, as they approached, "some rich man has been winning merit since I was last this way. Stay a moment, sahibs; I will enter and see that all is safe." He flung the leading-reins to Buck and darted forward. In a few moments he reappeared, and cried out, "There is no one here but a wounded villager, sahibs. Come on, we shall be safe from the dacoits' guns in this new, strong house."

The party entered through a door formed of strong teak slabs, and Me Dain closed it behind them. They now found themselves in a large, wide apartment, formed of the whole ground floor of the building, from which wooden stairs led to upper rooms.

At the foot of the stairs was huddled a fine-looking old man, whose rich silken kilt and jacket of delicate muslin showed that he was a person of consequence. He had received a severe cut from a *dah* on the left shoulder, and while Me Dain skilfully bound up the wound, he talked with the old man and learned the story of the affair.

It proved to be the outcome of a blood-feud, one of those savage vendettas so common among the hill-tribes of Burmah. A band of Kachin dacoits had raided near the village some six months before, and three of the dacoits had been cut off and killed by the villagers. Now, in revenge, a strong troop of the savage mountain banditti had fallen upon the village, burning, slaying, plundering without mercy. The old man had fled for refuge to the monastery, his own monastery, for he had built it to house a party of Burmese monks.

"I am Kyaung-Taga Pah, 'Builder of a Monastery Pah,'" he declared proudly, and Me Dain bowed before him in much respect.

It is the great ambition of a wealthy Burman to show his piety by building a pagoda or a monastery, and when he has done so, he is always saluted by his fellows as "Builder of a Monastery," or "Builder of a Pagoda," titles held in very high regard. This was the meaning of Me Dain's phrase about some rich man winning merit, for it is considered that such good works meet with the deep approval of the gods.

When "The Builder of a Monastery," Pah, had finished his story, Buck inquired where the monks were, for, as a rule, such holy men are safe even in blood-feuds. The old Burman replied that they were absent at present. There was a great festival at a large village three days' journey away, and the monks had gone to attend it.

Jim had stayed at the door, keeping watch and ward.

"We're in for a little blood-feud, too," he remarked. "They're dottin' about pretty lively at the edge of the jungle."

Jack ran across to him and saw a large number of little figures in blue flitting through the trees; now and again he caught a flash of steel as some naked *dah* glittered in the rays of the sinking sun. Buck had come too, and was looking over his comrade's shoulders.

"Say, we shall have to flip our guns a bit before we drive those blood-thirsty little ferrets away," he remarked.

"Yes, they'll do their level best to cut our throats," agreed Jim. "They're like a nest of hornets. Touch one and you've touched the lot."

"Hullo, they're bringing something forward," cried Jack. "It looks like a clumsy gun on a stand."

"That's a *jingal*," said Jim. "They're laying it for the door. We'll get out of the way. It's a clumsy weapon and a clumsy ball, but if it hits you, you get all you want an' a little bit over. I remember in '85"—for Jim had once been a British redcoat and had fought in the Burmese war—"we were carrying a stockade with a rush, and a chum o' mine got a *jingal*-ball and went down. He must have been a dead man when he dropped, for we found afterwards that the ball had fairly ripped the inside out of the poor chap."

He closed the door as he finished speaking, and a heavy bar was placed in position across the stout planks. From one of the small, slit-like windows they watched the movements of the dacoits. The *jingal*, a big muzzle-loader on a stand of iron forks, was touched off and a heavy shot crashed into the door.

"Whew!" whistled Jim. "That's a heavier shot than I thought. That bit of iron weighed nearer half a pound than anything."

"It's cut into the door pretty badly," cried Jack, who had run forward to look, and found a long streak of white in the plank which had been struck. "We shall have to stop that or the door will be down."

"Sure thing," said Buck, "an' those little tigers away to the left o' the *jingal* are massing for a rush as soon as the gunners have worked the door loose."

"You're right, Buck," said Jack, who had returned to his window. "Look here," he went on, "there are three windows facing that patch of jungle where the dacoits are clustered. We'll take a window apiece. I'll give the word, and we'll empty our magazines into them as fast as we can pull the trigger."

"Good plan," cried Buck. "It will show 'em we're well armed and an awkward lot to tackle, even if we don't scare 'em off."

"There ain't much scare about them, worse luck," said Jim, "but we'll pepper 'em a bit an' see what happens anyhow."

Each of them had unslung his Mannlicher and held it in hand since the moment of the first alarm, and now they opened the magazine and saw that all was in perfect order. Then they threw the deadly little rifles into the embrasures formed by the window slits, and all was ready for the word.

"Fire!" cried Jack, and the swift trill of rifle-cracks rang out on the soft evening silence. As swiftly as they could press finger on trigger, the three comrades emptied their magazines completely into the fringe of forest three hundred yards away. This storm of tiny, whirling slips of lead struck among the dacoits at point blank range, and, by the screams and yells of the banditti, did much execution. The watchers distinctly saw three or four fall, but these were swiftly dragged among the trees by their comrades, and for a moment not a single dacoit was to be seen. Then, just inside the shelter of the trees, five figures were observed very busy placing a new *jingal* in position. At a glance the besieged saw that the gun was much larger than the first, and would throw a heavier ball.

"We shall have to pick off those fellows at work with the new gun," said Jack. "Perhaps that will terrify them into flight."

"I hope so," said Jim, but there was not much hope in his voice. "The worst of these little chaps is that they never know when they're beaten. They'll give their lives to get yours, as cheerfully as possible."

"And they don't set any high value on their lives, either," chimed in Buck. "Whoever's runnin' the show over there, he'll spend his men's blood like water for the chance o' catchin' us and puttin' us to death as slowly as he can make the time spin out."

"Slowly? Killing us slowly, Buck?" said Jack. "What do you mean?"

"Torture," replied Buck, and the one dreadful word was answer enough.

Crack! It was Jim's Mannlicher which spoke, but the bullet missed its aim. The dacoits at work about the big *jingal* had artfully placed the weapon so that its mouth pointed from between two close-growing teak saplings, and the trees formed a safe cover for the gunners.

"I thought I could pick one of 'em off that time," remarked Jim, "but I believe I only hit a tree after all."

At this instant a figure was seen for a moment behind the long gun. A dacoit stepped into view, crouched down, and carefully trained the piece. There was a second crack, and the freebooter dropped under the *jingal* and never moved. Jack had fired and sent a Mannlicher bullet through the dacoit's brain.

"I say, you can shoot a bit," cried Jim Dent admiringly, and Buck chuckled.

"I guess he can, Jim. He put on a very pretty string o' bull's-eyes at Bisley, shootin' in the competition for public schools. The Professor grinned all over his face when he read how Jack headed the list with a highest possible."

Buck's speech was cut short by a loud roar from the *jingal*. The fallen dacoit had trained it perfectly before he dropped, and a comrade now touched off the piece. At the next moment a terrific crash rang through the building. The heavy missile had lighted full on the point where the door was secured by the stout bar, had smashed its way through door and bar and hurled the door open. As the portal flew back, there was a tremendous yell from the edge of the jungle. Then a cloud of blue figures burst into sight. With gleaming *dahs* flourished on high, or long-barrelled muskets thrown forward ready to fire, the blood-thirsty little men of the mountains rushed upon their prey.

# CHAPTER XII.

## A FIGHT FOR LIFE.

Jack ran forward to the door and tried to thrust it into place again. It swung to, for its hinges were uninjured, and as he closed it, Me Dain was beside him with a short, thick plank he had brought from the other side of the room. The plank was placed diagonally against the door, its head caught under a cross-bar piece of the framework, and, for the moment, the open gap was filled up. The rifles in the hands of Jim and Buck had been going steadily from the moment the Kachins flew out of their cover, and Jack now poked the muzzle of his weapon through a broken plank, and fired swiftly and steadily into the mass of assailants racing directly towards him. The whole thing happened so quickly that the dacoits had not crossed more than one half of the space intervening between monastery and jungle when Jack opened fire.

The withering storm of bullets poured from the three magazines had no more effect in checking the dacoit rush than if the bullets had been drops of rain. The men actually struck dropped, of course, but their comrades were not in the least terrified by their fall. The short, broad, powerful figures rushed on as undauntedly as ever, their dark, wild faces full of the savage light of battle, their rough, deep voices uniting in a terrible yell of rage and of fierce lust for vengeance. A shower of bullets from their muzzle loaders pattered on the door or whistled in through the windows.

Buck gave a grunt of pain as a bullet cut him across a shoulder; Jim and Jack were untouched. The Kachins did not stay to reload, and in another moment their dark faces and blue forms were massed in the doorway, and the door rang under the tremendous blows delivered upon it by their *dahs*, weapons so broad and heavy as to be sword and axe in one. The windows, luckily, were too narrow for them to swarm through, and when Jim and Buck could no longer rake the flying crowd, they ran to the door to help their young leader. This was the moment when the Mauser pistol proved itself an invaluable weapon. Quicker and handier in the narrow space than a

rifle, it poured its stream of heavy bullets into the assailants in an almost unbroken stream, as the defenders slipped clip after clip, each containing ten cartridges, into the magazine.

Fanatically brave as were the desperate Kachins, this was a punishment too severe for mortal flesh and blood to endure. Of a sudden they broke and fled, leaving a heap of dead and wounded about the door, and a trail of fallen men to mark the track they had followed.

"Are you hurt, Buck?" cried Jack, drawing a long breath. Fiercely as they had been pressed, he had not forgotten Risley's grunt of pain.

"Snicked my shoulder, that's all," replied Buck.

Jim looked at the wound and nodded.

"A snick it is, Buck," he agreed, "and a lucky thing for you. A bit lower, and it would have smashed the bone."

"We'll wash the wound and tie it up," said Jack.

"Later on, later on," murmured Buck. "We've got no time to spare at present. What's the little move next with these boys in blue."

"Do you think they will attack us again?" cried Jack.

"Sure thing," said Buck, "they're a tough crew, I can tell you. We've got a lot more to do before we chill 'em cold."

"That's true," said Dent. "After they smell blood there's no more holdin' them than you can hold a tiger."

"We've punished them terribly already," said Jack.

It was his first battle, and in true English fashion he had fought his hardest for his own life and the lives of his comrades. Now he looked with a troubled eye on the fallen, and sighed.

Jim Dent nodded at him with a friendly smile. "I know just how you feel, Jack," he said. "But the thing is pure necessity. If you hadn't shot that chap back in the path there, he'd have had Me Dain's head off as sure as sin, and after you shot him, the rest followed as straight as a string."

"True, Jim," said Jack, "the whole thing lies at their door."

"Say, Jack," murmured Buck, "you'd better get your Bisley bull's-eye trick on that *jingal* again. They're goin' to try another shot or two."

Jack ran to the window, and as he did so, the *jingal* roared, and crash came the heavy shot into the door. It struck a weak place, burst through, and rolled across the floor. In another moment Buck had picked it up and brought it forward.

"Say, boys," murmured Risley, "no wonder this *jingal* makes the poor old door crack. Look here!" He displayed a ball of iron, nearly the size of a cricket ball.

"By George! What a smasher!" said Dent. "The door's bound to go if they can get two or three of those straight on it."

Jack glanced at the heavy shot, then turned to the window to watch for the gunners in order to check them in working their destructive piece.

"I can't see them," he said. "There's no sign of them at all."

Jim and Buck joined him at once.

"There's the bunch of trees they were at work among," said Dent. "They must have drawn the *jingal* farther back into the jungle."

"Yes, but if they can shoot at us we ought to be able to see them," said Jack.

"Sure thing," murmured Buck. "Where's the little old cannon gone to?"

In another moment all three gave a cry of surprise. The mystery was made clear before their eyes. A sudden puff of smoke burst from a tangle of vines and creepers twenty yards to the left of the *jingals* former position, and a second ball crashed into the door, shook every plank in it, and ripped a great piece out where it struck. The dacoits had swiftly cut down and lashed a number of saplings across a couple of trees to form a cover for their gun. Over the slight barricade they had thrown a great tangle of creeping plants, and the whole concealed and protected them in a wonderful fashion.

"They know how to play their own game," said Jack, as he searched the spot with a few bullets. "They're hidden all right."

"Sure thing," said Buck. "They're up to all the tricks of the jungle. I don't see how we're going to stop 'em gettin' the door down now. It's pure luck firin' into that tangle."

Within the next half hour Buck's fears were verified. Shot after shot was launched from the heavy *jingal*, and at the short range the gunners found the door an easy mark, and pounded it again and again until it was utterly shattered, and the opening into their stronghold was left defenceless. Nor could the besieged make the gap good with any other barrier. Between the firing of the heavy balls a steady fusillade of musketry was poured into the doorway, and no one dared to show himself there.

The three comrades stood each at a narrow window, each with his weapons charged, and his mind sternly resolved to make the banditti pay a heavy price for his life.

"They'll come again soon," muttered Jim Dent. "We must pump lead into 'em like mad as they cross the open, then hold the doorway as long as we can."

"Yes," agreed Jack. "We must not let them get in if there's any way of keeping them out. Once they surround us, their *dahs* will finish the struggle in a few strokes."

"Say, I fancy I see a bunch of 'em just beyond the *jingal*," said Buck. He fired, but there was no sign that his bullet had taken effect. "They're gone again," he continued in a tone of disappointment.

There was now silence while each watched the fringe of the jungle with the utmost vigilance. Minute after minute passed, and not a sign appeared of the terrible little dacoits. The *jingal* was fired no more, the musketry had dropped, and the stillness remained perfectly unbroken. Anyone less experienced in jungle warfare than Jim Dent would have concluded that the fierce Kachins for once had had their fill of fighting, and had retired towards their fastnesses among the hills. But he bade his comrades stand close and be ready.

"There is some trick in the wind," he said. "What it is we shall see before long if we keep our eyes open."

Suddenly into this silence came the sound of heavy blows on the planks over their heads. These planks formed the ceiling of the lower room and the floor of the upper. The noise in this unexpected direction made them jump, and then Buck roared, "Who's aloft?"

The head of Me Dain was now shown at the head of the flight of steps leading to the next story.

"Me up here," said the Burman. "Me got a job." He held in his hand the heavy *dah* which had so nearly been driven through his own neck, and he now returned to his task without making any further explanation. Buck moved as if to investigate into the Burman's doings, but at this moment Jack gave a cry of surprise, and he turned hastily back to his window.

"What do you see, Jack?" said Dent quickly. "Are they coming?"

"Something's coming," cried Jack, and pointed. "Look straight opposite to us," he went on. "It seems as if a piece of the jungle were moving upon us."

# CHAPTER XIII.

## A CUNNING TRICK.

Jim and Buck followed the direction of his outstretched finger, and then gasped in surprise. As Jack said, it seemed as if a patch of jungle had begun to move. A mass of tangled greenery was edging steadily forward from the sharp line where the forest ended, and was making its way very slowly across the open towards them. For a moment the whole thing looked horribly uncanny, then at the next instant the explanation flashed upon them.

"Say, that's a deep game," cried Buck. "We're in for a hard streak o' weather, boys. They're coming on in shelter of a movin' barricade."

So they were. The cunning little men in blue had set their savage hearts on the blood of the white men, and were sparing no effort to compass the destruction of their enemies. But the terrible hail of bullets from those steady rifles was a thing they must avoid, or the attacking party would be wiped out before the shattered door was reached. So they were coming on under cover. The thing was simply enough contrived. They had cut down young palms and saplings and lashed them together with tough creepers. Thus they had formed a little palisade six feet high and fifteen feet along. Into the joints everywhere they had thrust great feathery bushes of the wild plum, completely concealing every sign of themselves. Six of the sturdy little highland caterans were strung along behind the palisade. To their muscles of iron it was the simplest thing in the world to swing the barricade forward a step at a time, and behind them crept a score of their comrades with *dah* and musket ready for action.

"They'll march right up to us if we can't stop them in some fashion," cried Jack, and he fired his Mannlicher into the palisade. The others followed his example, and for a few moments they searched the oncoming mass of greenery with a close fire.

"There's something behind those bushes of wild plum," said Jim Dent. "Can't you hear the bullets striking into wood? They've formed a big shield of logs, and are pushing it forward."

Now that their advance was known, the Kachins gave up their silence. The bearers began to shout to give each other the time and to make their movements regular and swift. "Ai-ai-Ai!" they shouted. On the last cry they all lifted and swung the barricade a step forward, "Ai-ai-Ai!" On they came again, "Ai-ai-Ai!" Another swing of their burden, and so they cut down the distance foot by foot, and the blood-thirsty little men who crawled after them felt the edges of their *dahs* and promised to dull the shine of the great blades in the blood of the English sahibs who had shot so many of their friends.

In the building, Jack and his comrades were at their wits' end to know what to do in order to check this deadly advance.

"They're standing us off easily enough," cried Jack. "At the rate they're coming, they'll be up to the door in a quarter of an hour, and then they'll swarm straight in on us. These bullets are too light to check them." Suddenly he turned on Dent, his bright eyes flashing. "Jim, Jim!" he cried, "what are we thinking of? Didn't you pack a heavy big-game rifle among the baggage?"

Jim Dent leapt as if he had been shot.

"Of course I did," he roared. "I put it in on chance of being useful if we had trouble with tigers or a rogue elephant." He darted across to the baggage ponies, who had been tethered in a far corner of the large room, and swiftly cut a case loose. He unstrapped it and drew out an eight-bore rifle, a big powerful weapon. In a corner of the case was a package of the cartridges which fitted the rifle. Jim caught up the packet and ran back to his window.

"The very thing," he breathed in the utmost excitement, "and I stood here like a dummy and never remembered it was with us till you thought of it, Jack. Unless they've got some very stiff stuff in yonder palisade, I'll send a bullet through it as if it was only paper. I've tried this gun with nickel-covered bullets such as these, and sent the bullet through eight one-inch teak planks and five inches of wet sawdust."

"That ought to be good enough," cried Buck. "Pipe the lead into 'em, Jim, and me and Jack will watch for any you drive out of cover if your bullet goes through."

"If," snorted Jim, as he threw open the breech and slipped in the big cartridge, "I'll show you."

He threw the elephant gun forward and fired at the centre of the palisade. There was an instant scream. The immensely powerful weapon had driven the bullet straight through the centre of a palm log, through the body of the dacoit behind, and wounded one of the party following up.

Jim whipped open the breech, and the empty shell flew out, for the rifle was an ejector. His practised hands had another cartridge in and the breech closed in an instant. He fired again and then again, aiming each time at a different spot in the palisade. There was a roar of anger from the hidden Kachins, a roar answered by an exultant shout from the besieged.

"Pipe it into 'em, Jim," roared Buck. "You're gettin' home every shot. Hark at 'em squealin'."

The barricade had now come to a standstill, and it trembled all over every time that it was struck by the heavy bullet travelling at terrific speed at so short a range.

"Fire low, Jim," cried Jack, "they have stopped and are crouching at the foot of the palisade, I know."

Jim fired low, and his shot was answered by a fresh outburst of yells of pain and rage. Suddenly the palisade began to waver, then it slowly fell over, as a stream of blue-clothed figures darted from its insufficient shelter. The dacoits did not make either for the door of the hut nor for the jungle they had left. The pagoda was the nearest cover to them, and they raced for it with all their speed, the quick-firing Mannlichers scourging them with a whistling shower of lead as they flew. When the last Kachin who could run had disappeared behind the building, the comrades checked their fire and looked at each other with joyful eyes. Jim slapped the breech of the eight-bore exultantly.

"It sent every bullet through their shield like a cannon!" he cried. "Lucky I put it in; they'd have got up to the door all right if it hadn't stopped 'em."

"They would, indeed, Jim," replied Jack, "and it would have been all over with us then."

"Sure thing," agreed Buck. "We should ha' hit the long trail in short order."

"What's the next move?" cried Jack.

"Hard to say," replied Jim. "We can do nothing but watch 'em."

Watch them they did. The three comrades kept a steady look-out, but the sun went down, and the swift dark of the tropics fell over jungle and clearing, and the dacoits had given no further sign of their presence. The approach of night filled the besieged with the greatest uneasiness. There was no moon to light the early hours of the darkness, and in the deep gloom the dacoits could creep upon them unseen and swarm over them by sheer force of numbers. But just as dusk fell, Me Dain began to drag down a number of planks and posts from aloft. This was the fruit of his hacking away with the heavy *dah*. He had cut loose enough timber to make a very useful barrier at the open doorway, and he and Jim made the strongest barricade they could while the others kept watch.

When night fell they kept their places, every ear strained to catch the faintest sound. They had only to watch one side of the ground floor where they stood. Three of the walls were solid and very strongly built; the fourth was pierced by the windows and the door, and here they had taken their stand from the first.

About two hours after dark, Me Dain came to the head of the stairs leading to the next floor. He had been stationed there to move from one to the other of the upper windows and keep strict watch all round.

"Come here now," said Me Dain.

"I'll go," murmured Jack, and he groped his way across the floor to the foot of the wooden steps. Up he went, and found the Burman waiting for him at the top.

"Me think some men this way," muttered Me Dain, and took Jack's shoulder to lead him through the darkness of the unlighted passage above.

"Which way?" whispered Jack eagerly, clutching his rifle. "Are they creeping on us from the back, Me Dain?"

"Me think so," replied the Burman, and led Jack to a long, narrow room at the back of the monastery, a room lighted by a large window. Coming from the blackness of the passages, Jack saw the window clearly, a grey patch in the gloom of the walls. He ran across to it and looked out. The window was high above the ground, twenty feet at least, and looked upon a tangle of low bushes which ran almost to the wall of the building.

"Men in the bushes. Me hear them," said Me Dain.

Jack nodded, and watched intently. The window was a mere hole in the wall, closed, when necessary, by a shutter. At present the shutter was fastened back, and Jack could hear every sound that was made below.

Presently his ears caught a rustling among the bushes, and he threw his rifle forward. Then he returned it to the hollow of his arm. He would wait and see what were the plans of the freebooters now ambushed below. At this moment he found Me Dain's lips at his ear.

"They make ladder and come up here," breathed the Burman.

Jack nodded. That was the idea that had already struck him. Well, it would be easy enough from above to sweep the ladder with a swift rifle fire and drive the dacoits back into their hiding-place.

Then another idea struck him, and he turned it over and over. To drive them back. Yes, that was all right. But it would still leave him and his comrades prisoners with the Kachins in hiding about the monastery and thirsting for their blood. Would it be possible to win a chance of escape out of this? It seemed to him there was a chance, just a bare chance, and he resolved to seize it. He drew Me Dain back into the shadows, and whispered softly, "How many doors lead into this room?"

"One," answered the Burman, who had thoroughly explored the monastery before the dusk fell.

"Can you fasten it?"

"Yes, very easy. Big lock, strong lock, and key in it."

"All right," said Jack. "Now you keep watch on, the men below. I'll be back soon."

# CHAPTER XIV.

## JACK'S PLAN.

He hurried to the ground floor, and in a dozen swift words laid his plan before his friends.

"Frightful risky!" said Jim, "Frightful risky! I don't say there's nothing in it, but a big risk."

"We stand in fearful danger now, Jim," said Jack. "I know it's only a chance, but we've got to do something, or these fellows will wipe us out for a certainty."

"Sure thing," said Buck, "and there is a chance in Jack's idea. I'll carry it out."

"No, Buck," said Jack firmly, "I can't agree to that. Both of you came into this thing to oblige and to help me, and it would be a cowardly trick on my part to put the risky work on your shoulders. I'll try it."

"Let's toss up," suggested Jim, "or draw straws. I'm willing to take my chance."

"I know you are, Jim," said Jack, "but I insist on having a shot at it myself. If they catch me, it may leave a chance for you two to get clear away. I know it's a mere toss-up whether the plan comes off or not, but we must try something."

Jack left his Mannlicher with Buck and slipped away up the stairs once more. He regained the window where Me Dain was watching, and found that the Burman had nothing to relate save that much rustling had been heard. Within five minutes again Jack saw the very thing he had been awaiting. A dark, thin shape rose from the bushes and began slowly to creep up the wall. It was a ladder which the dacoits were raising to the window below which they stood, a ladder formed of a couple of bamboo stems with rungs of creepers.

Now came the time for action, and Jack drew the Burman back into the passage and locked the door himself; luckily the big key turned quietly and easily. Down to the lower floor hurried Jack and crossed to his friends.

"They have raised the ladder just as I expected," he said. "Now I'm off."

"Good luck, Jack, good luck," breathed Jim and Buck earnestly, as Jack dropped on hands and knees at the door and glided out at a hole which they had prepared for him by moving a portion of the barricade. When he found himself in the open, Jack paused for a moment and listened with all his ears. But he could not catch the slightest sound of either voice or movement on this side, and he glided on like a snake, keeping his body very low and pressing closely against the dark wall.

He gained the corner of the building just beyond the door, and cautiously put his head round. Again he listened and looked. All was quiet, and once more he slipped on. Near the next angle was a patch of low-growing bushes. He worked his way into these with the utmost care, and raised his head slowly until he could peer through the upper shoots. He now commanded the rear of the building, and his heart gave a great thump of excitement and satisfaction as he saw the sight which he had been hoping for. He saw the swaying line of the ladder clear against the sky, and mounting it, rung by rung, a line of climbing figures. The dacoits were swarming nimbly up to the quiet room, from which they expected to fall like thunderbolts upon their unsuspecting enemies below.

Jack now began to work his way towards the foot of the ladder. He went very slowly and with the utmost care. At last he paused. The bushes which had helped the banditti to approach the back of the monastery unobserved had helped him too, and he was now within ten yards of the foot of the ladder. He raised himself to one knee and looked intently over the ground. The last of the climbing dacoits was vanishing through the window, high above his head, and one stood motionless below. He, clearly, had been left on guard to keep the foot of the ladder. Now Jack heard plainly a shuffling and creaking and straining above. The Kachins were trying to force the door which he had locked against them.

"Lucky it's a strong door," thought Jack. "It'll keep them busy for a few minutes. How shall I dispose of this fellow?"

Suddenly the crash and uproar of heavy blows rang out from the room above. The dacoits had given up trying to force the door quietly, and were beating it down. This noise gave Jack a chance of a thousand to carry out his plan. He had slung his rifle over his shoulder. He now unslung it quickly, clubbed it, and bounded forward. The dacoit at the foot of the ladder was staring upwards, intent on the doings of his comrades, when Jack landed without a sound scarce a yard behind him.

**THE ATTACK ON THE MONASTERY.**

Down came the butt of the rifle with a terrific swing, fair and square across the skull of the dacoit, who crumpled under the blow and dropped without a groan. Jack jumped at the ladder, seized it, dragged it from the window, and flung it among the bushes. The dacoits were trapped. Then he turned and darted away. He gave a glance at the window as he ran. As far as he could see, his plan had met with wonderful success. Not a figure showed at the dark square above; every man seemed to be taking part in the furious assault on the door.

Now Jack ran for his life. Would the dacoits beat the door down and be upon them before he could give the word? He flew back to the front and called in a low, quick tone, "Come on! Come on! I've cleared the ladder away, and they're trapped above."

"Then we'll be off before they've got the door down," said Jim softly. "Forward, boys!"

A little procession now streamed swiftly through the doorway and hurried across the open space which led to the friendly jungle, where they hoped to find shelter and hiding.

Me Dain went first leading a pony, Buck followed with a second pony, Jim and Jack brought up the rear, their rifles ready for any pursuers who might hit on their trail.

They were on the edge of the forest when a confused uproar of voices told them that the dacoits had swarmed down the stairs and were in the stronghold they had so luckily deserted. But even as the shouts of the Kachins rang in their ears, the sounds were dulled, for Me Dain plunged into a narrow path running through a thicket of bamboos, and they left the clearing behind them.

"Will they follow us?" whispered Jack to his companion.

"It would be sheer luck if they hit on our track now," replied Dent in the same soft tones. "Me Dain is leading us by a path that it isn't likely these fellows know. Coming from a distance, they would only know the chief road through the village, and they are almost certain to divide and strike along that in both directions, thinking we have fled towards the next village."

"Where is the old Burman whom we found in the monastery?" asked Jack.

"Dead, poor old chap," replied Jim. "He'd lost too much blood before Me Dain tried to patch him up."

"What savage fellows these dacoits are!" murmured Jack.

"A merciless crew," returned Dent. "Any of our poor fellows who dropped into their hands in the Burmese war were cut up in most frightful fashion,

and in cold blood, too. But we made them pay for it now and again, when we got in amongst them with the bayonets."

No more was said, and they tramped on in silence, with their ears laid back to catch the faintest sounds of pursuit. But no sign of danger was to be caught. Now and again they halted, and listened intently. The jungle was perfectly silent save for its own noises, chief among which was the sullen, deep roar of a tiger calling to its mate.

"That's a tiger calling," said Dent to Jack.

"I thought so," replied Jack; "it sounds like the Zoo, but how queer to think that fellow is not behind bars, but roaming free through the forest."

"Say," remarked Buck over his shoulder, "I hope that 'Tiger, tiger, burning bright' isn't a man-eater. If he is, he'll have a soft snap with us, marching along this narrow path through thick cover."

"By George, he's coming!" cried Jim, in a tone of sudden alarm. "Let's bunch together, boys. If he doesn't get one of us, he may get a pony, and that wouldn't suit our game at all." The tiger had again raised his voice, but not in a roar so much as a fierce, grumbling snarl, and the sound was much nearer.

"Quick, quick!" cried Me Dain, from the head of the procession, and the whole party hurried forward. Suddenly the trees above their heads parted, and they saw the stars. The little band had reached an open space in the jungle, and they gathered in the midst of this space and closely surrounded the ponies.

"Put your hand on this little beast's shoulder," said Dent to Jack.

Jack laid his hand on the shoulder of the pony next to him, and found that it was trembling violently and running with sweat.

"I rather fancy it knows all about that noise, and what's making it," went on Dent. "They understand when trouble's in the wind as well as anybody."

"It must be in a terrible fright," said Jack. "Do you think the tiger will attack us, Jim?"

"It isn't at all unlikely," replied Dent. "What do you say, Buck?"

"If he doesn't want one of us, he wants a pony," replied Buck, "so it comes to just the same. We'll have to pipe him full o' lead, I shouldn't wonder."

"This is a bad place for tigers," broke in Me Dain. "Very bad place. Three Chinamen killed here four months ago."

"How was that, Me Dain?" asked Jack.

"Nobody know," returned the Burman. "Three diggers going up to the hills to look for rubies. Make camp on little creek not a mile from here. Somebody pass the camp next day and see one man dead. Then they look, and see pieces of the other men in the jungle. Me forgot that, running from Kachins."

"Never mind, Me Dain," said Jim Dent. "Don't worry about that. A 'bad' tiger is a very awkward brute to run up against, but a bunch of Kachins is a more desperate case still. Hallo, he's pretty close. Hold the ponies tight, Me Dain. They're ready to bolt."

The little creatures were now frantic with fear, and the Burman had all his work cut out to keep them in hand.

"Look there! Look there!" cried Jack. "What's that straight in front of us?" He had been staring hard into the blackness of the jungle, and now, all of a sudden, two bright green flames seemed to start up in the gloom.

"That's a tiger just stepped from behind a tree," murmured Jim. "Stand steady, boys, and don't let anybody loose off in any too much hurry."

"There's another, and another," said Jack.

In swift succession two fresh pairs of gleaming eyes were seen. Me Dain gave a groan of terror.

"Old tiger and two little ones," he said in a low voice. He was much more terrified of tigers than of dacoits.

"Say, he's got it quite straight," said Buck. "It's a tigress and a pair of cubs. The eyes of the last couple are nearer the ground."

It was so dark in the jungle which surrounded them that no sign of the bodies of the savage creatures could be seen, only the eyes, which burned upon them with a fierce, steady gaze.

"It's a family party," said Jim. "Where's the old man tiger? It was his call we heard, certainly."

At this moment the tigress gave tongue. She let out a horrible whining snarl, full of ferocity and threat. In an instant her call was answered. Somewhere near at hand in the jungle arose a terrible sound which seemed to fill the air and shake the earth, a sound which made the blood run cold. It was the horrible coughing roar of a charging tiger.

"Here he comes," said Jim in a low voice, and Jack clutched his rifle tightly.

# CHAPTER XV.

## IN THE JUNGLE.

A moment later, and a fresh pair of burning eyes was added to the group in the jungle.

"Shout, shout, or he spring," cried Me Dain.

The whole party shouted at the top of their voices. This sudden uproar checked the tiger; the most ferocious brute hesitates to leap upon people who are making a great noise. Then a sudden flame spurted up, and they saw the whole scene plainly. This was the doing of Buck. He had been hastily gathering great handfuls of dried grass and piling them together. He struck a match and tossed it into the heap. The withered grass caught at once, and a great red flare leapt out and lighted the scene. For the first time they saw the tigers clearly, an immense male tiger, his smaller mate, and two large cubs. The tigress and the cubs were retreating a little, and the male was crouching as if for a spring, his tail lashing his flanks, but the sudden flaring up of the fire checked him, and for the moment he did not leap.

That moment's hesitation saved them, so quickly and well was it used by Jack. He had his rifle already at his shoulder. As the flame sprang up, his quick eye brought the sights to bear on the huge, round head of the crouching tiger. He touched the trigger, and the rifle spoke. The great tiger gave one convulsive shudder, but did not move. There was a general thrill of terror among the party. Had Jack missed, or only grazed him? If it was so, he would spring at once, and his mate would follow.

The flame leapt and fell. The grass had burned out. With frenzied haste Jim and Buck tore fresh handfuls to feed the fire. Every second they expected the tigers to rush on them through the darkness. But no charge came, and once more the red flame ran through the dried grass and leaped into the air. As it did so, they gave a cry of astonishment. There crouched the tiger, just as before, save that his tail no longer swept to and fro. His head was laid

low, his paws were drawn under him just as if he were about to rise in the air and descend upon them like a living thunderbolt, but he made no movement, uttered no sound. Suddenly Jim Dent broke the wondering silence.

"By George," said he in a low voice, "what a shot! What a shot! Jack, that's a dead tiger."

"Do you think so, Jim?" said Jack, joyfully. "Have I killed him?"

"Sure thing," said Buck, "that's a brain shot. He never moved after the bullet hit him. Now for the others. Where's the lone, lorn widdy and the poor orphans. Jack, they'll rip holes into you for robbing them of a kind father."

Buck was still speaking when the tigress returned and rushed up to her mate. She seemed to suspect something, and she bent over the huge, prostrate figure and snuffed at it eagerly. Then she gave a blood-curdling growl and retreated slowly towards the cubs, which came bounding to her side, whining impatiently.

"Those cubs are very hungry," said Buck.

"Yes," said Jim quietly. "What's her next move? Will she scent danger and clear off with the young ones, or is she in so great a need of food for herself and them that she will attack us?"

Suddenly Me Dain began to shout, "Shoot, sahibs, shoot! She is coming! She is coming!" His experienced eye had told him that the tigress was about to charge, and another instant showed that he had given no false alarm. Maddened by the scent of the pack animals, and by the whining of her famished cubs, the tigress turned short and came at them with two tremendous leaps! The second carried her full into the light of the fire, and as she touched the ground, all three rifles cracked, and three bullets were driven home into her shining, striped body.

Again she rose to her leap, her eyes blazing madly, her mouth opened to its fullest extent, showing her huge fangs, and the repeaters crackled as a rapid fire was poured into her in hopes of checking her rush, for a wounded tigress is the most savage and dangerous beast in the jungle. The last volley carried the day. Each fired into the open mouth, and each hit his mark. The

bullets, travelling at terrific speed, cut their way through flesh, sinew, brain, and bone, and almost tore the head of the tigress to pieces. She dropped across the fire and lay there without moving, her coat singeing in the embers.

"Whew!" Jim blew out a long breath. "I thought she was in among us that time. And if she had been, we should have known about it. There's a fore-arm for you." As he spoke, he touched the short, thick leg where the muscle bulged in huge rolls under the loose skin.

"And look at her claws," said Jack, bending with much interest to examine the dreadful creature now lying so still. "A stroke of those would mean mischief."

"I saw a tiger once rush out of cover and give a beater a stroke in passing," said Jim. "I remember I thought the brute had only patted the man. I wasn't fifty yards away, and I'm perfectly sure the beast didn't put any particular force into the blow. But the man dropped, and when we ran up to him, we found five of his ribs torn clean out of his body. He died from loss of blood almost at once."

Buck twisted a bunch of dried reeds into a rude torch and lighted it. "Let's have a look at the boss," he said, and they crossed to the great tiger, still crouching as if about to spring. There was no mark of injury on him save a small patch of blood between his eyes.

"That's where you hit him, Jack," said Buck. He bent down and felt among the fur. "I can feel the hole in the skull," he said, "but those Mannlicher bullets are so small, there's scarcely anything to be seen."

"That bullet took him through the brain and then went down the spine," said Jim. "Must have done, to have settled him so completely. You see he never moved after he was hit."

Jack took the torch from Buck's hand and looked proudly over the magnificent proportions of his first tiger. The gleaming, satiny skin, the bright bars of black and yellow, showed that the animal was in splendid condition, and at the height of his powers.

"Isn't he a splendid fellow?" murmured Jack. "I should just about like to have his skin."

"Sahibs," came a voice behind them, "let us go. Perhaps the Kachins hear the guns."

"The dacoits!" cried Jack. "Upon my word, I'd forgotten all about them! By Jove, it's a matter of saving our own skins without worrying about the tiger's. We'd better be on the move."

"I'd clean forgotten 'em myself," said Jim, and Buck chimed in with, "So had I."

"They're pretty awkward parties to forget," went on Jack.

"That's so," agreed Buck. "If they hit our trail, we'll see trouble yet."

No more time was spent over the dangerous brutes which had threatened to bar their way. They were left lying where they had fallen, and the little party of fugitives turned once more to their flight, and pushed rapidly through the jungle.

An hour later the moon came up, and soon after that they reached a wide, naked stretch of rocky hill-side. This was very hard travelling, but they welcomed it, as it was country where they would leave very few traces to guide pursuers. On and on they pushed, until dim grey streaks in the east told them that the dawn was near at hand. They climbed a steep slope, and were just on its crown when the morning broke, and the sun shot up into a sky without a cloud.

"Good place here to make camp," remarked Me Dain, and all agreed heartily with the remark.

"I reckon this is your first night march," said Jim to Jack, smilingly.

"Yes," said Jack. "It isn't bad fun either." His tall, powerful, young figure was as upright as a dart, his eye bright, his cheek fresh; he could have gone on all day again.

"Well," said Jim Dent, "I don't mind saying I'm ready for a rest," and he dropped on the grass beside the fire which Me Dain had already begun to

build.

Buck got out the provisions, and they ate from their store of native bread and dried beef, and washed it down with plenty of tea.

"The country looks empty," said Jack, glancing over the wide stretch they had traversed, "but for all that we had better keep our eyes open, perhaps."

"We had," said Jim. "Those Kachins will follow us hot-foot when once the light comes and they get our track for certain. I should say we'd better stop here a few hours and then push on again till we've got clean out of this country-side."

"Very well," returned Jack. "We'll set a guard. Best to run no risks. I'll take first watch."

The last watch fell to Me Dain, and Jack awoke just as Buck roused the Burman and lay down himself for another nap before continuing the march. Jack, who was lying in a patch of thick grass, and wrapped in a blanket, watched the sturdy figure of the Burman as Me Dain paced lightly to and fro, looking out keenly on every hand. Then Jack dozed off himself for half an hour, and woke again. He glanced round and saw that Me Dain was sitting on a rock with his back towards the sleepers. The first glance aroused Jack's suspicions. The Burman's head was sunk between his shoulders. Next moment suspicion became certainty. A gentle snore reached Jack's ears, and he knew that Me Dain was sleeping at his post.

Up sprang Jack at once, and crossed to the sleeping man. He was about to shake the drowsy watchman by the shoulder, when he paused and looked intently at the slope below. What were those creeping figures among the rocks down there? A second later he knew them, and aroused his sleeping companions by a low, fierce cry.

"Up, up! Buck! Jim! Get your rifles at once. The dacoits are on us!"

# CHAPTER XVI.

## THE BRIDGE AND THE FORD.

The two men were on their feet at once.

"Dacoits! Dacoits!" growled Jim, dashing the sleep from his eyes and gripping his weapon. "How in thunder do they come on us so soon? Have we overslept?"

"No," said Buck, glancing at his watch. "We're inside our time. They must have picked up our trail quicker than we thought, and followed a lot faster than we travelled with the ponies."

By this time Jack had taken cover behind a boulder, and was drawing a bead on the first of the oncoming figures. Up the hill-side was streaming a broken line of crouching little men in blue, following, with the skill of born trackers, the signs of the fugitives' march. Jack's finger pressed on the trigger, and the leader dropped. At once the men in blue seemed to disappear as if the earth had swallowed them. They vanished behind rock, or bush, or tuft of grass, and the hill-side was empty save for the fallen figure. At this instant Buck and Jim crept to Jack's shoulder.

"How do they come to be so near to us as that?" cried Buck in surprise. "In two minutes again they'd have been in the camp slicing us up as we lay."

"Me Dain was asleep," said Jack briefly. "I happened to wake up and hear him snore. So I nipped up and took a look round and dropped my eye on the dacoits making straight for us."

"Good for you, Jack," replied Buck. "That's saved all our lives, for a certainty."

A groan of misery behind them drew their attention. They glanced over their shoulders and saw Me Dain seated on his rock, a picture of shame. He had been awakened by Jack's call and the crack of his rifle, but sat still,

unable to face the men whose lives he had risked by giving way to his desire for more slumber.

"Me Dain, you fat, brown-faced villain of the world," cried Buck. "What d'ye mean by letting the dacoits nearly get us?"

"Me sorry, me very sorry, sahibs," cried the Burman. "The sleep just catch me. Me very sorry."

"You'd better be sorry," returned Buck. "I've a good mind to boot you till your nose turns grey. If it hadn't been for Jack, the king-pin o' this outfit, we should all have hit the long trail this morning."

"We'd better give those chaps down there a volley," said Jack. "See how the tufts of grass shake as they creep on us."

"You're right," said Jim. "They're trying to get within range. At present they can't reach us with their muzzle-loaders, but we can pepper them easy enough."

Firing steadily but swiftly, the three comrades raked every patch of cover with a stream of Mannlicher bullets. This checked the advance; no more signs of movement were seen.

The voice of the Burman was now heard behind them.

"Sahibs," he said, "let us go on. Two miles more we reach a deep river, and break the bridge. No Kachins follow then."

"Sounds like a chance for us," remarked Jim. "Get the ponies, Me Dain, and cut along ahead. We'll follow in a minute."

The Burman at once slipped the hobbles from the ponies, whose packs had not been removed, and led them quickly away. From the head of the slope the path crossed a kind of tableland, and they could easily keep their guide in sight for a long distance.

"Now to search the places where these fellows below are in hiding," cried Jack. "That will hold them back from following us till we get a good start."

"That's it," returned Jim. "Just what I was thinking of."

Each man spent a couple of magazine loads in firing into every spot where a Kachin had been seen to move or to go to cover. Then they drew back out of sight, leapt to their feet, and ran at full speed after Me Dain, who was hurrying the ponies along in the distance.

"After that bit o' shootin' they'll wait a while before they push on to the top of the slope and find we're gone," said Jim as they ran. "And that will give us a good start to cross the river."

Within a mile they caught up the Burman. Jack looked back as they ran up to the ponies, but the top of the slope was now out of sight, and he could not discover whether the Kachins had swarmed up to it or not.

The fugitives were now following a well-worn path, clearly that used by the people of the country-side to gain the bridge over the stream in front.

Jack was now leading the way, while Buck and Jim formed a rearguard behind the ponies. Looking ahead, Jack saw that the path began to descend very rapidly and fell out of sight. He ran forward and found himself on the lip of a ravine with steep sides. At the foot of the ravine flowed the river, and Jack gave a shout of joy when he saw how near they were to the stream which promised safety.

Then the sound of swift, heavy blows came to his ears, and he looked in the direction whence they proceeded. His call of joy was checked in an instant. What were those three figures in blue doing down there? In a second he saw what it meant, and he dropped on one knee and clapped his Mannlicher to his shoulder with a cry of anger. The dacoits had been more cunning than they suspected. The pursuers knew also of the bridge, and at this very instant three powerful Kachins were hacking away with their keen, heavy *dahs*, cutting the bridge down.

The three men in blue were so intent on their work that they never once glanced upwards. They were slashing fiercely at the nearer end of the bridge, and were about two hundred and fifty yards away. A rifle-bullet would reach them more quickly than anything, and Jack drew a careful bead on the nearest worker and fired. His bullet went through the arm which had just swung up the heavy blade for a fresh stroke at the frail bridge, and the

*dah* dropped into the water, while the dacoit's yell of pain came clearly to the ears of the party now gathered on the edge of the ravine.

"Gosh!" cried Buck. "They're ahead of us."

"So they are," snapped Jim. "They're cutting down the bridge and penning us in. Drop 'em, boys, drop 'em quick, or it's all over with us."

At the next instant a swift shower of the tiny slips of lead was pelting on to the bridge head where the two dacoits still hacked away, striking harder and faster now that the rifles cracked on the lip of the ravine. One dropped into the river with a splash, the other leapt into cover of the big tree to which the bridge was swung, and was safe from the darting bullets. But his gleaming *dah* still flashed into sight now and again as he hewed fiercely at the bridge.

Jack at once bounded out, and, followed by his companions, raced madly for the place. The bridge was but a slight affair, a native structure formed of a couple of long bamboo poles with cross pieces lashed into place by native cordage.

The lower slope of the ravine was covered with tall bushes of wild plum, and, as Jack ran through these, he lost sight, for a few moments, of the bridge and the busy dacoit. He burst through them with a straight, open run before him of seventy yards to the bridge head. His heart beat thick and fast as he flew across the open. The blows of the *dah* had ceased. Had the bridge gone or not? A little clump of water-grasses on the bank hid the bridge from him, but the silence was terribly ominous. He thought he saw a blue kilt disappearing among the trees, but he did not stay to intercept it. He shot up to the edge of the stream, and saw a horrible space of blank water between bank and bank. The bridge was swinging slowly towards the other side. Held fast there, the current was thrusting the slight structure across the stream. The dacoits had succeeded in their plan.

Jack stood still and looked round for their enemies. There was no sign of a Kachin to be seen. One had dropped into the river, and the current had certainly carried him away; the others had escaped into the jungle which grew thickly within a short distance of the bridge head.

"By Jingo!" cried Jim Dent blankly, as he ran up. "The bridge has gone. We're in a pretty fix."

"Gone," echoed Buck. "They've cut us off after all. Boys, we're in a tight place."

"Bridge gone!" cried Me Dain. "Bridge gone! What shall we do? Sahibs, oh, what shall we do?"

Jack looked from one to the other in some surprise at hearing this outburst of deep anxiety.

"It isn't very wide," he cried. "Why on earth can't we swim over? That would be simple enough."

"Ay, ay," said Jim Dent. "Easy enough if we were sure of getting to the other side, but we're not. All these rivers swarm with alligators, big, savage brutes that would pull a man under as easy as if he were a dog."

Jack's looks were now as blank as the others. This put a very different face on crossing the river, and he gazed on the dark, swift stream with horror. In those gloomy depths lurked huge, dreadful reptiles whose vast jaws would drag a swimmer down to a frightful death.

"It's not a short journey across this creek, d'ye see," said Buck. "The stream's so fast that a swimmer would be swept down full a hundred yards in crossing from bank to bank, and in that time it would give an alligator plenty of chance to lay hold of him."

"We can't cross here, sahibs," put in Me Dain. "Stream too swift, too strong. The bridge is here because the river at this place is very narrow, but about a mile down there is a ford."

"We'd better light out for it without losing any more time then," cried Buck. "We might see an ugly row of Kachins any minute now along the brink of the gully behind us."

"True for you, Buck," said Jack. "Lead us at once to the ford, Me Dain."

The Burman turned and hurried down the banks of the stream, and the others followed. In a moment they were lost to sight among the tall bushes which were dotted about the bank. When the sound of their footsteps had completely died away, two figures slipped from the edge of the jungle and approached the spot where the fugitives had stood. The newcomers were a

couple of dacoits, one the man who had been wounded by Jack's first shot. The short, broad, powerful figures stood for a moment in close conversation, then the wounded man started to climb the bank of the ravine. The second dacoit plunged into the bushes, and followed easily the track left by four men and two ponies. It was his task to track the intruders down: his comrade was despatched to find the rest of the band and lead them to enjoy the revenge for which the blood-thirsty dacoits lusted.

# CHAPTER XVII.

## A FRIGHTFUL PERIL.

Meanwhile the fugitives, unconscious that a sleuth-hound was on their track, hurried forward and came to a point where the river spread out broadly over sandy flats.

"This is the ford," cried Me Dain.

"Why was it given up?" asked Jack.

"Because it was too dangerous, sahib," replied the Burman. "Many men, many women have been seized by alligators at this ford. So the villagers made a bridge at the narrow place higher up."

"Well, we shall have to face it," said Jack. "How deep is it in the middle?"

"To the waist when the water is low," replied Me Dain.

"H'm, that's awkward," remarked Jim Dent, "for the water certainly isn't low to-day. There's been rain among the hills. You can tell by the colour. It may mean swimming in the middle."

"I'll try it first," cried Jack, "and I'll sing out to you how I find it. Here goes!" He was about to spring into the river, when Jim Dent called to him to stop.

"No, no," said Jim. "That won't do, Jack. We might lose you that way, and we should prefer a good deal to lose a pony."

"Sure thing," said Buck, as Jim looked at him.

"Now," went on Dent, "here's our best plan. We'll go in in a bunch with a pony each side of the party. Then, if some of these ugly brutes come up to see who's crossing their river, they're more likely to grab a pony, and if we lose them, why we must."

"It will be a frightful loss," said Jack.

"It lies between that and being scuppered ourselves," said Dent.

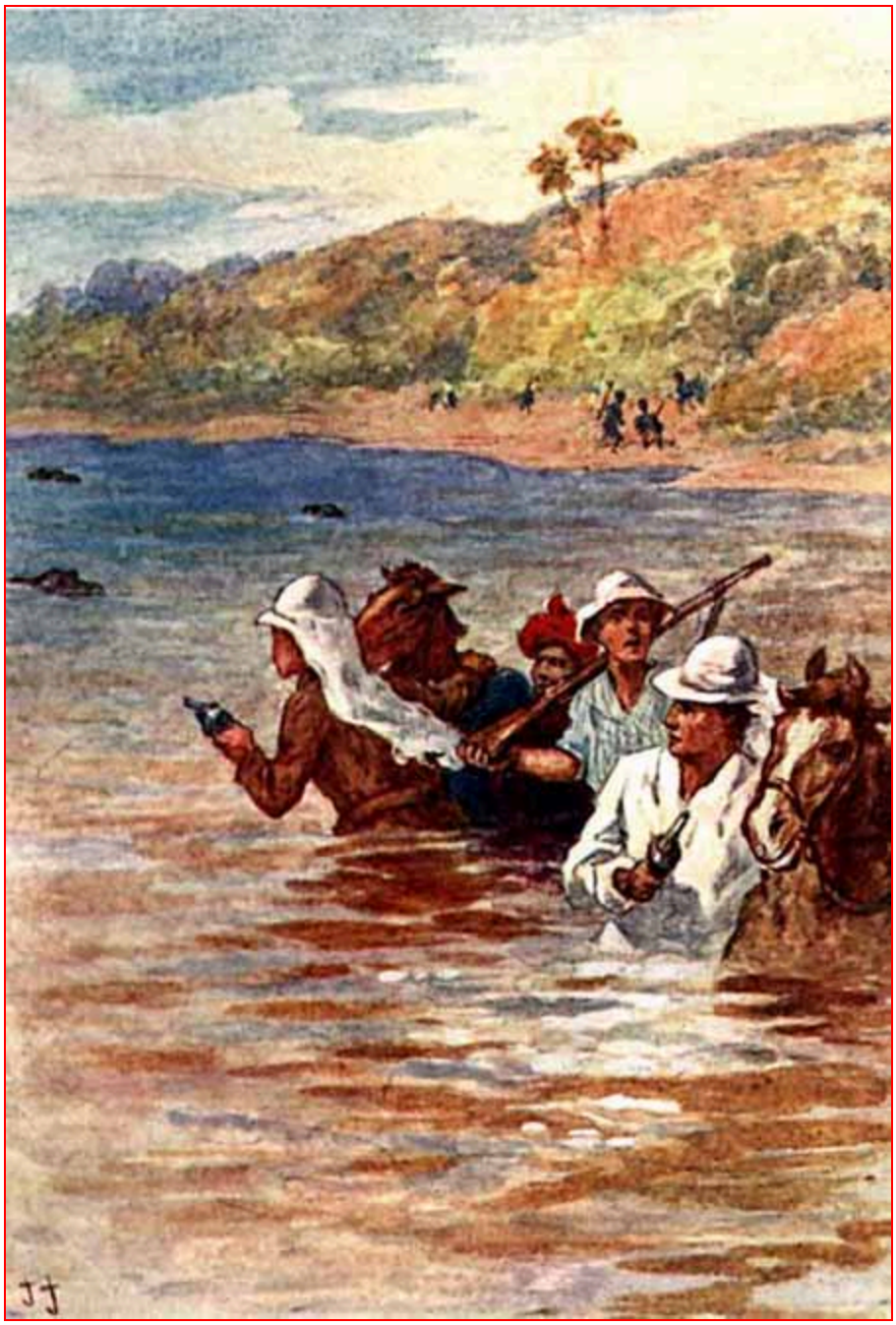
"Yes, yes, Jim, of course," cried Jack. "Your plan is the best."

It was carried out at once. The four men went into the ford in a bunch, with a pony up stream and a pony down stream. Jack was leading the up-stream pony, Buck the down-stream animal, while Jim and the Burman were between them. The crossing was a broad one, near upon a hundred yards, for the river had spread out on a sandy flat, and they were thirty or forty yards into the stream before they were more than thigh-deep. Then the water suddenly deepened a full twelve inches, and they were up to their waists. The stream, even on the flat here, was fairly swift, and they could only wade forward slowly.

"Slow job this," remarked Buck. "Water's tougher stuff than you think to get through. I feel as if I was wading through treacle."

"Yes, doesn't it clog your movements," agreed Jack, "but I should think we're a good half-way over."

"Deep part got to come yet, sahib," said Me Dain. "We have come through easy part of ford."



**THE DANGER AT THE FORD.**

Just at this moment Jim's voice broke in; his tones were low and fiercely earnest.

"Push ahead, boys," he said. "Do your best. Strike it faster, everybody."

"What is it, Jim?" The question broke from Jack's lips, but a glance up stream answered it before Jim could speak in reply. A hundred yards above

the ford a small sand-bank rose above the water. On this bank lay, to all appearance, three logs washed thither by the current. But now, oh horror, Jack saw these logs move and raise themselves. They were huge alligators sunning themselves and waiting for prey. It was clear that the vast saurians had noted the movement on the surface of the river. One by one they slid down the sand and vanished into the stream.

"They are coming, sahibs, they are coming!" cried Me Dain, and his brown face was hideously ashen with terror.

"Strike it faster, everybody," growled Jim, and the party pushed forward at their utmost speed through the stream.

"Gosh!" panted Buck. "It's getting deeper and deeper. That's dead against us."

"Let us go back, sahibs," cried Me Dain, beside himself in terror of the awful reptiles now coming down stream upon them with frightful rapidity. "Let us go back. Better to face dacoits than alligators."

"Easy does it, Me Dain," said Jack. "Peg along and do your best. It's facing death either way. Let's have a go at the other bank."

"That's the way to talk, Jack," said Jim, through the teeth set in his white, grim face. "We've got to go through with it now. And hark, listen to that!"

There was the crack of a musket on the shore behind them, and a ball whistled over their heads and splashed into the water before them. Jack glanced back and saw a blue-clothed figure on the river bank.

"They're coming," he said. "One of them's trying to pot us now. Impossible to turn back."

"Gosh! it's deepening again," growled Buck.

So it was. The stream ran nearly shoulder deep, and the other bank was still a good forty yards away. Jack pushed on as fast as he could, urging the pony forward. His breath came fast, and his heart thumped like a trip-hammer. The situation was inconceivably desperate. Somewhere through the hidden depths of the rushing stream, three monstrous and frightful reptiles, fearfully dangerous and terrible creatures in their own element,

were darting swiftly towards them, and behind them the dacoits now lined the shore and prevented return into shallower waters which might promise safety from the huge saurians.

Suddenly the pony which Jack led gave a great leap, and pawed the water madly with its fore-feet, and uttered a loud snort of agonised terror. Jack held him tight and looked over his withers. Nor could the brave lad keep back a cry of alarm at the frightful thing he saw there.

# CHAPTER XVIII.

## THE COMBAT IN THE RIVER.

The river, though swift, was not muddy, and through the clear brown water he saw plainly the vast open jaws of a huge alligator rising in the stream, and about to seize the pony by the neck. In another second the great saurian would have seized its prey, but the pony swerved aside, and the huge snout shot out of the water, and the jaws, missing their prey, clashed together with a sharp snap. At the next moment they were opened, as the alligator drew back a little for a fresh assault.

Jack had been marching with his Mannlicher held on top of the pony's pack, and his Mauser pistol held up in the other hand, hoping to keep the weapons dry. Now he seized the opportunity of pouring a stream of heavy Mauser bullets into the open jaws.

So swiftly did he press the trigger that he drove five shots in before the alligator once more snapped its jaws close. The great saurian was badly wounded, and in its rage and agony began to lash the water furiously with its huge tail, while blood and foam poured out at its jaws and nostrils. The deadly, ripping, soft-nosed bullets, which would have glanced off its hide of mail, had torn their way down its throat and through the soft parts of the body with fearful destructive power, inflicting mortal wounds. At sound of the pistol shots so close to its ear, the pony leapt forward more frantically still, and the huge dying brute was left floundering in the water.

"One done for," roared Jim in delight. "Peg away, boys. We may come safe yet."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Buck let out a yell of alarm.

"Say," cried Buck, "there's one here. He's got hold of the pony."

Buck's words were drowned by the loud shrill squeal of affright from the pony, whose off-hind leg had been seized by the second of the vast brutes to attack the party.

"Here's another," shouted Jack, and he and Jim, who had been also holding his pistol above the stream, fired rapidly. The third alligator was sailing straight upon them down stream, floating on the surface, his evil, unwinking eyes fixed full on the pony which he was about to attack. Jim planted a lucky shot in one of the wicked-looking eyes and knocked it clean out of its socket. Jack plainly saw the bleeding hole before the alligator threw up his huge tail, slapped the water with a crack like thunder, and dived.

In the meantime Buck was engaged in a terrible struggle with the alligator which had seized the pony. He held the bridle of the unlucky beast, and assisted it as much as possible in the strong fight it made for its life. So desperately did the powerful little animal struggle with its terrible foe that it actually gained a dozen yards or more, dragging the huge reptile along the river-bed. But the immensely powerful jaws, fanged with strong, sharp teeth, never loosed their grip.

Jim now turned to Buck's assistance. At that instant the alligator rolled in the water, showing its softer underside. It rose towards the surface, yet never easing its grip, and lashed the river into foam with its powerful tail as it tugged backwards with tremendous force, aiming to pull the pony into the deeper water. For a moment Jim saw its underside near the surface, the four horrible legs armed with huge claws striking out savagely in the water.

He thrust his rifle into the stream, pressing the muzzle against the saurian's body. Luckily the magazine still remained above water, and he fired several shots in swift succession into the vast brute, the water boiling and swirling as the gases of the discharge came to the surface in huge bubbles. One of these shots must have reached a vital part; the alligator gave a final convulsive shudder, its jaws ground savagely together, then they gaped wide, and the pony was free.

Jack was pushing on swiftly with the pony under his charge. That was his business, and he hurried forward, feeling joyfully that the water was growing shallower with every step. His shoulders were out, and now the

pony's withers began to rise. Suddenly a horrid dark snout was thrust up in front of him. It was the wounded alligator, which had returned to the assault.

Before Jack could fire the saurian dived, and Jack saw the huge dark form dart at him under water. He felt his legs swept from under him at the next instant, and down he went. He had not been seized, he had simply been knocked from his foothold by the rush of the great brute, and he landed full on the alligator's back. He felt plainly with his hand its rough scaly covering like knobs of horn. He had kept his eyes open, and saw clearly the horrid brute below him, and the dark forms of his companions at hand.

He dropped his pistol, whipped out a great hunting-knife from his belt, and drove it time and again into the underside of the big reptile. Then he struck out for the surface and came up gasping for breath. He swam a dozen swift strokes before he dared to drop his feet again and find the easy depth which the whole party had now reached. He saw that the Burman was leading ashore the pony he had been torn away from, and that Buck and Jim were doing their utmost to keep the second pony on its legs. Suddenly the bottom began to rise swiftly, and the whole party, fearfully exhausted, but very luckily unhurt, staggered ashore and threw themselves down on the warm sand.

"You all right, Jack?" snapped Buck. "I thought I saw you go under."

"Yes," said Jack, "the brute that Jim knocked an eye out of attacked me and fetched me off my legs. But I dug a knife into him and got away. How are you two?"

"Oh, we've come through with a sound skin," replied Jim. "But that was a near shave. And look what we've missed." He pointed to the water, where, thirty yards out, half-a-dozen huge ridged backs were now to be seen cruising to and fro.

"By Jove!" said Jack, "it's a fresh lot turned up just as we got out."

Everyone shuddered as they thought what their fate would have been if the alligators, attracted to the scene by the scent of prey, had arrived a few moments earlier.

"Where are the dacoits?" said Jack, looking across to the other bank. "They've all cleared out, except a couple who seem posted to watch us."

"So they have," rejoined Buck. "What's their little game?"

"I wonder if there's another bridge handy," remarked Jack. "Where's the next bridge, Me Dain?"

"A long way down the river, sahib, but there is a village about four miles off."

"Then they've gone there to borrow a boat, I'll wager a trifle on that," cried Jack.

"Right for you, Jack," said Dent. "We'd better be on the move. But what can we do with this pony?"

The poor beast, which the alligator had mauled, had managed to get ashore and that was all. Its leg was frightfully torn.

"This pony 'll never hit the trail again," remarked Buck, after he had examined it carefully. "We shall have to carry its pack partly between us and partly on the other pony."

"Poor little brute," said Jack. "It's suffering fearfully. Look at its eyes!"

"We can do nothing for it, I'm afraid," remarked Jim.

"No," said Buck, "but if we don't hump round a bit, somebody'll do something for us."

This hint of the danger in which they still stood from the blood-thirsty and revengeful dacoits quickened their movements, and the wounded pony was stripped in a few moments. The other pony was quite unhurt, and a good share of the baggage was added to its load for the present; the remainder was swung up on the shoulders of the four members of the party.

Jack, Jim, and the Burman now marched swiftly up the river bank towards the road which ran from the broken bridge. Buck stayed behind for a moment. Soon his companions heard the crack of the pistol which put an

end to the sufferings of the wounded pony, then heard Buck's footsteps as he hastened to rejoin them.

"What a lucky thing you packed the ammunition in water-tight tins, Jim," remarked Jack, as they pushed at full speed along the bank.

"Yes," said Jim, "I've been in this country a time or two afore. It wasn't wetter in that river than it is in the jungle at times when a storm catches you."

"I've lost my Mauser pistol," said Jack. "It had to go when that brute knocked my legs from under me. I had to drop it to whip my knife out. Luckily I've got my rifle all right. That was on the sling."

"We've got another Mauser in the outfit," said Jim. "I slipped a couple of spare ones in. We'll turn it out at the next stopping-place."

No more was said, and they pushed on swiftly along the river bank. The day was fearfully hot and the road rough. Jim Dent began to puff and blow under his burden.

"Say," grunted Buck, "this is a tough job running away under loads from dacoits who'll scour after us like coyotes as soon as they hit our bank of the river."

"It is," panted Jim. "Me Dain, how far is it to the next village which is strong enough to make us safe against the Kachins?"

The Burman shook his head.

"Soon the road leaves the river," he said. "Then it goes through jungle. But it passes only little villages, very little."

"A jungle road, and no chance of a haven," said Jack. "This sounds precious awkward. It strikes me our only chance will be to pick a strong position, or as strong a one as we can find, and wait for them. They'll certainly run us down pretty soon at the pace we're travelling now."

"And we can't go any faster," said Buck, "without we leave our traps, and then we should be up a tree for want of them, even if we escaped from the dacoits in the end."

"I'm getting beat, and that's a fact," murmured Jim Dent. "I had a sharp touch of fever about three months ago, and it's not gone so clean out of my bones as I thought."

"I'll carry your pack, Jim," cried Jack.

"In addition to your own?" said Dent. "Not likely. I'll peg along a bit farther before I agree to that."

At that moment the path ran into a grove of tall bamboos clustered along the bank. The grove was of no great width, and they emerged from it to see a little camp pitched on a sand-bank beside the stream. A fire was burning, and a pot of rice simmering over the flame. Watching the rice, sat, or rather squatted, a couple of Shan boatmen, and their boat was moored to a tree at the water's edge.

"Hallo!" cried Jack, "these chaps have got a big boat here. Can't we get them to run us and our stuff up the river?"

"By George!" said Jim Dent, "there's something in that."

"Ask them, Me Dain," called Jack. "Tell them we'll pay them well if they'll carry us up the river."

The Burman ran forward at once and began to talk quickly to the big-hatted boatmen. In two moments everything was settled. The men were poling their boat back up the stream after selling a load of tobacco in a down-river village, and were glad to serve travellers who would pay them well. The baggage was stripped from the pony, and hastily swung into the empty boat.

"What shall we do with the pony?" said Jack.

"Turn him loose into the jungle," said Buck. "He's got heaps of sense, they all have. Before night he'll hit on some village, and then he'll soon find a master. A stray pony comes in very useful to anybody."

This was done. Me Dain led the pony a short distance from the river bank and loosed it, and gave it a cut with a switch. The little creature threw up its heels joyfully to find itself free, then cantered off among the trees, and they saw it no more.

By this time the Shans had swallowed their rice, and were ready to seize their poles. All sprang aboard, the Shans and Me Dain grasped the boating-poles, and the craft was soon being driven steadily up stream. For some time Jack watched the boatmen with deep interest. They drove their craft along just as a punt is propelled in England. Each man handled a long stout pole, and, where the water was shallow enough, he set the bottom of his pole in the gravelly bed and urged the boat forward. Where the water was too deep the craft was turned inshore, and the polers thrust the ends of their staves against the bank or against tree trunks lining the water's edge. Jack saw that quite deep holes had been made in many of the trunks where boatman after boatman had gained the purchase which sent his craft spinning up stream.

"Well, Jim," said Jack, "this is a bit easier anyhow."

"It is," sighed Dent, wiping the streaming sweat from his brow. "I was pretty near caving in, and that's a fact."

"We'll drop the dacoits for a sure thing," said Buck. "They'll stop to hunt all about the place where they lose our trail, and then they'll follow up the pony for a dead cert."

"True for you, Buck," replied Jim Dent. "We left no marks at all to show them where we got into the boat."

They had embarked secretly by pushing the boat up to a big stone, and moving carefully in order to leave no trace.

"Where does the road turn off from the river bank, Me Dain?" asked Jack.

"We have passed it already, sahib," replied the Burman. "It is solid jungle on both banks now, with no path at all The dacoits cannot follow except along the river itself."

"Then we've dropped 'em," said Jim Dent decisively. "We shall never see 'em again."

And Jim's words proved to be right. They had at last eluded the pursuit of the blood-thirsty little Kachins.

# CHAPTER XIX.

## THE VILLAGE FESTIVAL.

For three days the strong arms of Me Dain and the two Shan boatmen drove the river boat up the stream, and every day's journey brought them nearer to the mountains where the rubies were found, and among whose recesses they believed that Jack's father was a close prisoner in the hands of men who coveted rubies above all things.

Jack said very little to his companions about the object of their journey, but his own thoughts were full of it at every waking moment. Since he had discovered that U Saw, the Ruby King, had a steam yacht, and that it had returned and gone up river shortly before their own arrival, he had felt no doubt whatever in his own mind as to his father's fate. He knew that the great ruby expert was on that yacht a close captive, and that he had been carried by secret ways, through the jungle and over the hills, to the place where U Saw was all-powerful, and would do his utmost to wrest from Thomas Haydon the knowledge which the latter certainly possessed of a great ruby-mine.

Very good. They, too, would push into the Ruby King's country, and do their utmost to foil his plans and snatch his prisoner from his clutch. Hour after hour Jack thought over the situation, while his eye rested almost carelessly on the lovely scenes of hill-side and jungle, past which their boat was driven.

At the end of the first day they left the main current of the river, and poled eastwards by a network of creeks leading to the village from which their boatmen came. For the most part the water-way was very solitary. Here and there they passed a village, but, as a rule, no life, save that of wild animals, was to be seen. Monkeys chattered in the trees over their heads, panthers and deer came down to the stream to drink, tigers roared in sullen fashion in the jungle, and once, a troop of wild elephants crossed a ford before them in stately line.

With the evening of the third day the boatmen reached their native village, and the travellers stepped ashore. A new hut, built of reeds and cane, was set apart at once for their use, and, after supper, they talked over their future movements before turning in.

"How do we stand now as regards striking the course my father followed from Mogok?" asked Jack.

Jim Dent, who knew the country well, cross-examined Me Dain for a few moments.

"We ought to hit it to-morrow afternoon," he said. "We've come a long way on the right road by dropping on these boatmen. We're just handy to the foot-hills, and the Professor skirted 'em, according to what Me Dain says."

"Very well," said Jack. "Then we'll roll into our blankets, and be off by daybreak."

Jack was so eager to start on the real trail, and so excited by its nearness, that he slept but little. He was up an hour before the dawn, and had got the fire burning when his companions awoke. Buck sat up, and rubbed his eyes, and sniffed the smoke.

"Keen on a start, Jack?" he murmured.

"I am, Buck," replied the tall lad. "Haven't you told me a score of times how the news of travellers in a country runs with marvellous swiftness through the jungle, from village to village? Well, I want to be ahead of the news. It might make Saya Chone and U Saw suspicious. They knew very well we were in Mandalay. I don't want them to learn too soon that we're at their very doors."

Jim Dent nodded. He, too, had wakened, and had been listening to Jack.

"Me Dain," said Jack, "go to the headman, and tell him we want a couple of good ponies to carry the packs once more. Bring them here for us to see, and then we'll pay the owners."

Within half an hour they had the pick of a score of capital little beasts. They looked them over carefully, chose the couple which seemed best suited to

their needs, paid for them, and set to work to pack the traps on them. Within an hour after sunrise they were on the march.

For several miles they followed a well-worn road running due north from the village. This was to conceal their true line of march from the knowledge of the curious villagers. But when they were well away from the place, and safe from all prying eyes, they swung to the east and marched straight through open country for the foot-hills, plainly in view a score of miles away.

The sun was low and they had made a good day's journey, when Me Dain halted on a little ridge, overlooking a sloping green valley with a brook tinkling down its centre. Jack was beside him.

"There, sahib, there," said the Burman. "We have reached now the path which the sahib, your father, followed. We made our camp, one night, under those trees."

He pointed to a group of noble teak trees growing beside the little brook, and Jack strode forward, and was soon standing on the spot where his father had camped a month or two before. He had scarcely reached the place when he received proof positive that Me Dain was right. Something glittered in the rays of the sinking sun. It was an empty tin tossed carelessly into a clump of wild-fig bushes. Jack picked it up with a cry of recognition.

"Look here," he said; "the Burman's hit the trail all right. Here's one of the governor's empty tobacco tins. He's never smoked anything else in my knowledge of him."

Jack held in his hand an empty tin which bore the name of a brand of Carolina tobacco. Though little known out of America, the tobacco was an immense favourite with Mr.. Haydon, who carried an ample supply of it with him wherever he went.

"Sure thing," chuckled Buck. "That's one o' the Professor's tins. Well, we'll follow him up."

They camped that night under the teak trees, and with the first light of the next morning, began to follow up the track which Mr.. Haydon had taken

some time before, the track which led into the wild hill-country, where U Saw, the Ruby King, was all-powerful.

They now moved with the utmost caution. When they saw a caravan of cattle, laden with salt, marching along a hill road they were about to cross, they hid from it in the jungle. When they saw afar off the spire of a pagoda peeping over the trees, and knew they were near a village, they sent Me Dain ahead to make inquiries, and find whether the villagers were familiar with the name of U Saw. And so for three days they worked cautiously along the track running up into the hills where Thomas Haydon had found the immense ruby of priceless value.

On the fourth morning they were just breaking camp, when, to their surprise, a troop of gaily dressed villagers passed them, and called out a cheerful greeting to Me Dain. The Burman went forward to talk to them, while Jack, Jim, and Buck went on with their packing, and tried to look unconcerned.

They were in reality vexed that they had been seen. But the bunch of walking figures had descended the ravine in which they were camped so suddenly and unexpectedly, that there was no time to get out of the way.

"Where under the sun have these people turned up from, in so lonely a part of the hills?" said Jack to Buck. "Why, we haven't seen a village since yesterday morning."

"I dunno," replied Buck. "This beats the band. They seem to have dropped from the sky."

When Me Dain came back to them, the explanation was simple enough. Four hours' march ahead was a large village, where every three years a great religious festival was held. To this festival the whole country-side gathered, and the band of villagers, now pushing ahead and almost out of sight at the foot of the ravine, had already come three days' journey to attend the feast.

The Burman reported that the villagers had been filled with curiosity at the sight of three white travellers in this out-of-the-way region, and had overwhelmed him with questions about them.

"What did you tell them, Me Dain?" asked Jack.

"Said you were crossing the hills to strike up to the great road from Bhamo," replied the Burman. "Sahibs, we must go to that village now, and pass through it openly."

"But won't that make our presence known throughout the whole district?" cried Jack.

"Not half so much as if we don't show up," said Jim Dent "D'ye see, Jack, it's uncommon, but not impossible, for travellers to strike across the hills this way. Now, if we pass through this village in an open sort of fashion, it won't make a tenth of the talk as if we were to slip off and never be seen again. Then there'd be such a chatter in the country-side as we don't want to start."

"I see what you mean, Jim," returned Jack. "We must hope that we can get through the place quietly."

But Jack's hopes proved utterly vain. Half a mile outside the village they were met by a dozen of the leading inhabitants, each wearing a fine new silk *putsoe*, and with a *gaung baung* of gorgeous colour on his head. The strangers were politely bidden to take up their residence in the house of the headman, and to be present at the great feast which was that night to open the week of religious festival. It was impossible to refuse these attentions, and the little group of travellers, whose keenest wish was to pass unnoticed, entered the place under the stare of many hundreds of eyes.

A large room was set at their disposal in the house of the headman, and here they talked together.

"It's vexing, but it can't be helped," said Jack. "We must slip off again in the morning. After all, this fandango, you say, will last a week. At that rate, we shall get a big start of the people assembled here, and shall outrun the country gossip far enough."

# CHAPTER XX.

## THE DANCING GIRL.

After the dusk had fallen, the travellers were conducted by the headman himself, a white-headed old fellow, who showed them the utmost respect, to the spot where the festival was to be opened with a play and a performance of dancing girls.

Jack was fascinated with the wonderful sight now presented to his view. He, alone, among the party, had never seen such a spectacle before, and he looked on with the deepest interest. He was seated on a heap of cushions, before a wide open space surrounded by thickets of low trees and tall bushes. On the branches of these were hung innumerable coloured lamps, which lighted the scene with a soft, bright radiance.

In the centre of the space were ranged sixty dancing girls, in ten rows of six in a row, and each dancer stood at an equal distance from her next neighbour on either hand. Each girl was dressed in beautiful silks of the most glowing, or the most delicate shades. Her short embroidered jacket, her tightly folded skirt, were of the brightest and newest, and her hair was decked with beautiful flowers.

The dance began, and the graceful swaying movements, to which the clink of the bangles worn in rows on every arm kept time, were full of fascination and charm. All round the open space the villagers from far and near were gathered, and this mass of spectators in strange garbs, but everything of the freshest and gayest, formed a striking setting for the scene.

When the dance was over, the headman, through Me Dain, begged them to inspect the pagoda and the offerings which had been brought to it by the faithful. They went and saw a very quaint and beautiful structure, its columns inlaid with mosaics and coloured glass which glittered with a thousand glancing rays in the lights of the myriads of lamps. Chief among the offerings at the shrine were huge packets of gold-leaf, for the religious

Burman loves to decorate his favourite pagoda with sheets of gold-leaf, till it glistens in the sun like a palace of gold.

Among the offerings ranged on the steps of the pagoda was a native painting, a quaint piece of work which drew Jack's attention at once. He bent down to look at it, while his companions rambled on with Me Dain and the headman.

As Jack straightened himself again, he felt a light touch on his arm, and looked round. Beside him stood a dancing girl, wrapped in a close-fitting robe of yellow silk, and a scarf of muslin so wound about her head that he could not see her face.

Jack stared for a moment in surprise, wondering what the girl could want with him, then he gave a great start as she began to speak. She used the softest, gentlest whisper, but her voice came easily to his ears, and, marvellous to relate, she spoke in perfect English.

"I know what you seek," she said, "and I can help you."

Jack's surprise was so great that, for a moment, he could not answer, and the veiled figure went on:

"Would you not like to know where the object of your search is?"

"How do you know that I seek someone?" said Jack in wonder.

"Oh, I know," murmured the dancing girl with a soft, light laugh. "I will go a little further. Would you not like to know where your father, Thomas Haydon, is imprisoned, and what is happening to him?"

For a moment the whole glittering scene of lamps and gaiety went round before Jack's eyes. Then he pulled himself up steady once more. This savoured of the utterly marvellous, that a dancing girl in this village which he had never seen before, should glide up to him and tell him the innermost secret of his heart, the purpose of his quest.

"Who are you, and how did you come to know such things?" said Jack.

"Oh," said the girl lightly, "in this strange land we can do many strange things. But I cannot talk to you long. Do you wish, I ask you once more, to

gain tidings of your father?"

"There is nothing I wish for more upon earth," returned Jack earnestly, for it was idle to pretend that the girl was wrong, and try to hide his secret. It was known only too clearly to this strange creature in the yellow robe, with a score of silver bangles tinkling on her arm. Jack turned his head towards his companions who had strolled on, and were now a dozen yards away, and half hidden by a group of villagers standing before the shrine.

"No," said the girl, laying her hand on Jack's arm, "no, you must not call to them. I do not wish to talk to your Burman guide. It would place me in great danger if it became known that I had warned you. If you do not listen to me, and alone, I shall vanish into the crowd, and you will never see me again, or learn that which you long to know."

The girl's hint that she stood in danger by warning him, at once checked the call on Jack's lips. He looked at her keenly, but could only see a pair of lustrous eyes flashing through the folds of delicate muslin, her features he could not make out at all. His brain was in a whirl. Here seemed a most extraordinary, a most wonderful chance to gain news of his father, but at the same time his reason bade him be careful.

Suppose he were to seize the girl and declare that she must tell him at once what she knew? But Jack's feelings revolted at such conduct. Suppose she should come into danger by his doing so, by his making public the fact that she was warning him? No, he could not do that. Besides, they were but a few strangers amid a great concourse of natives. Such an action might give great offence, and place, not only himself, but his friends in a position of the utmost peril.

These thoughts went through Jack's head in a flash. The girl at his side gave another light laugh.

"You can find out all you want in so simple a fashion," she murmured. "Turn your head to the right, and near a patch of acacia bushes you will see a monk with his begging-bowl. Cross over to him, and drop a piece of money into the bowl. At the same moment you can take out of it the letter which your father has sent to you by his hands. I would fetch it for you, but he will not give it up to anyone but you."

This became more and more bewildering, but at the same time, Jack saw that this matter was very simply settled. He looked away to the right, and saw the monk plainly enough, a Buddhist monk in yellow robe, his begging dish of bronze held out before him. The man stood upright and motionless, not thirty yards away.

Jack turned on his heel and strode straight across towards the monk, resolved to see at any rate what was in the dish. The dancing girl followed him with graceful, swaying step.

At the instant that Jack moved towards the monk a fresh band of revellers came out of a path leading from the acacia bushes and crossed towards the steps of the pagoda. From among them a tall, thin man dressed in white robes stepped out and moved with long, soft strides after the young Englishman. His companions lingered and stared idly about them.

As Jack approached the monk, he saw the latter raise his head and glance at him meaningly. Then, with a slight movement of the hand, the monk pointed to the bottom of his bowl. Jack had taken a rupee from his pocket and stretched out his hand to drop it into the bowl. As he did so he glanced eagerly into the bronze vessel. A folded piece of white paper lay in the bottom of it. Jack dropped his coin and stretched out his hand to seize the paper. But he never touched it.

**THE DANCING GIRL**

With horrible swiftness and suddenness, someone clutched him from behind. Once more he felt his throat in the frightful strangling grip which had seized him on Rushmere Heath, in far-away England. He tried to shout, but his half-choked voice was drowned in the sudden burst of song which rose from the band of gaily dressed figures which now swarmed around him. He tried to struggle, to throw off the fearful grip which held him, but now the dancing girl sprang to him and pressed against his face a cloth she

had drawn from beneath her yellow robe. Almost at once the powerful drug with which the cloth was saturated took effect. Jack's head dropped forward, and the dancing girl nodded to the strangler to loose his frightful clutch.

At that moment Buck looked round and missed his young companion.

"Where's Jack got to?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Jim. "He was looking at a picture just along there, the last time I saw him."

"I don't see him anywhere about," said Buck, in an uneasy voice, and he walked rapidly back. He came to the picture, stopped in front of it, and looked eagerly round for Jack. He saw the band of singers a short distance away, but took no notice of them. He had seen scores of such bands during the evening. Little did he dream that, under cover of those harmless looking revellers, the body of his young comrade was being dragged among the acacia bushes by the monk and the dancing girl.

# CHAPTER XXI.

## JACK FINDS HIMSELF IN BAD HANDS.

When Jack came to himself again, he felt faint and sick, and his head ached dully. This was the effect of the powerful drug which had been used to overcome him, but for the rest he was unhurt and quite himself. He found at once that he was securely bound hand and foot. His ankles were fastened together by a short cord, his hands were tied behind him, and a rope ran round the middle of his body and tethered him securely to a strong post. But he was not gagged, and his eyes were free.

He looked eagerly around the place in which he found himself. It was a native hut, built of canes and reeds, woven upon a framework formed of saplings and stronger trees. The floor was of earth, and he could see the whole of the bare, empty room, for in one corner a lamp stood on the floor, and gave sufficient light to show him every nook in the place. Somewhere, not far away, there was a hoarse roar of water, as if a river leapt over falls near at hand.

Jack raised his voice and shouted. He could not move, but his throat was free. Twice or thrice he shouted the names of his companions. The only answer to his call was a light mocking laugh outside the door, which swung half open straight before him. Then a figure appeared in the doorway, a figure in a tight yellow robe and short embroidered jacket, the dancing girl who had ensnared him. But even as he opened his mouth eagerly to speak to her, he was silenced. The figure was drawing aside the muslin veil from its head. As the soft shimmering folds of the delicate wrapper slipped away, Jack's heart leaped within him. He knew that face. This was no dancing girl. It was the half-caste in disguise. It was Saya Chone, the man who had stopped him on Rushmere Heath, the man who had slipped out of his clutch at Brindisi.

"Ah," said the half-caste, squatting down in front of Jack, "I have no need to ask if you know me. I see recognition in your astonished face. Well, does it

now surprise you that a dancing girl should know so much of your business up in these hills?"

"So it was you, you rascal, was it?" said Jack, drawing a deep breath. "You, all the time."

"I, all the time," chuckled the half-caste, clicking consonants between his teeth.

"If you'd have spoken out, I should have known you," said Jack.

"Ah, possibly," said Saya Chone; "but then for my purpose the soft voice, the gentle whisper, was the only thing."

"What do you mean by this, and what do you want with me?" demanded Jack.

"Orders, orders, I am acting under orders," murmured the half-caste, waving his brown hand in the air. "And I do not want you at all. It is merely my business to hand you over to my patron U Saw. It is he who wants you, not I."

"And what does he want me for?" said Jack.

"Ah," murmured Saya Chone, "that I shall not tell you now. It is not good for the servants of U Saw to interfere too much in their master's business. Well, I must prepare for the march."

He clapped his hands, and a tall, thin man in white robes came in. Saya Chone said a few words to the newcomer, and the latter sat down and fixed his dark, menacing eyes on Jack.

"This is a Malay, who is entirely devoted to U Saw's service," said the half-caste, with an evil grin. "He is a very useful man, for he is absolutely the cleverest hand with the strangling noose that I have ever known. I believe he could strangle a child in its mother's arms and she would know nothing about it. You have already had a slight taste of his skill on two occasions. Once on that heath in your queer, cold England, and again to-night. But as he was under strict orders on both occasions not to take your life, he spared you the last touch of his art, that sharp, neat twist which breaks his victim's spinal column as if he was snapping a bit of dry stick."

Saya Chone turned to go, but paused at the door and looked over his shoulder.

"I heard you shouting as I came in," he said. "If you have a fancy for that amusement, pray shout as much as you like. But I ought to warn you that it is a pure waste of breath. We have carried you nearly a couple of miles into the jungle, and fifty times the uproar you could make would be quite useless to attract attention."

He left the hut, and Jack sat back against the post to think over his desperate situation. He had fallen into the hands of the very people that he and his comrades were trying to circumvent. How they had discovered their line of march, and been enabled to lay this clever trap for him, he could not imagine. But one thing he saw clearly, that U Saw's arm was very long in this country, and that his net for information was spread abroad very widely and very successfully.

He looked across at the Strangler, and found the dark bright eyes of the Malay fixed intently upon him. Jack had been thinking to test the strength of the knots and the cords which bound him, but in the presence of this keen watchman it was useless, and he bent down his eyes in thought once more.

"I am to be carried to U Saw," he thought. "Then my father must be there already. At any rate I shall see him, I hope, and find out what has happened to him, and how he has been treated."

Several hours now passed in complete silence. Jack's bonds chafed him miserably, but he could do nothing to relieve himself, and the Malay watched him with fierce alertness at every moment. Then the ricketty door was jerked open again, and Saya Chone came in.

"It is the dark hour before the dawn," he laughed jeeringly. "A capital time to slip away while all the revellers are sleeping, and the forest paths are empty. Your conveyance awaits you, my lord."

He said two words to the Strangler, and drew a revolver from beneath his jacket. He had thrown aside his disguise as a dancing girl, and now appeared in the rich tartan silk kilt, the jacket, and turban-like head-dress of a prosperous Burman.

"Get up," he said curtly to Jack, while the Strangler unfastened the rope which bound the captive's feet and also that which bound his body to the post.

Jack got up, and Saya Chone motioned to him to go outside, and Jack went, with the Malay and the half-caste in close attendance. Resistance was impossible. His hands were still bound behind his back, and the half-caste held a big, blue "Smith and Wesson" within two inches of his ear.

In front of the hut loomed up a huge beast looking monstrous in the light of a couple of lanterns held by attendants. It was an elephant, and a ladder was placed against the open howdah fixed on its back; the great beast was swinging trunk and tail impatiently, and its driver was already seated behind the huge head.

"Up with you," said Saya Chone. Jack glanced round, and saw nothing but dark, fierce, inimical faces all about him.

"No chance in the world at present," he thought, and began slowly to climb the ladder. It was very awkward work with no hand free, but the Strangler stretched out a long arm, supported him to the top rung, then thrust him violently forward, so that Jack rolled into the howdah. It was the simplest form of this kind of carriage, and was exactly like a huge open basket of strong wicker-work fastened on the elephant's back. Before Jack could recover himself from his fall, the Malay and two other men bounded into the howdah, and flung themselves on the prisoner. In a trice they had strapped his ankles together again. Then they swung him into a sitting posture, and lashed his arms firmly to the back of the howdah.

Next they descended, another figure leapt up, and the ladder was taken away. The newcomer gave an order, and the elephant driver spoke to his huge beast in a low voice. The elephant at once swung forward, and in a moment the hut and its lanterns were left behind, and they were moving through the darkness of the jungle.

Jack had known by the voice that it was the half-caste who was his companion in the howdah, but he said nothing, and Saya Chone, too, was silent. Soon the half-caste lighted a huge Burmese cheroot, and in the light, almost the flare, of this immense cigar, nine or ten inches long and an inch

thick, Jack saw now and again his beardless brown face, his big, shining, evil eyes.

When the dawn came and Jack could look about him, they were traversing a narrow path through jungle so thick that the sky could scarcely be seen overhead.

"Ah," said Saya Chone, breaking the silence at last, "you may look round, my lord, but you will never be able to keep in mind the details of the route. I shall take you into the hills by paths so hidden in the jungle or along ravines so deep that to track you will be impossible."

Jack was silent for a moment. Then he spoke. "Shall I see my father?" he asked.

Saya Chone laughed. "You will see what U Saw wills that you shall see," he said mockingly. "I am U Saw's humble servant, and can say no more."

Jack made no reply. He was sorry he had spoken, but the question had slipped out on the impulse of the moment.

All that day they travelled on, and at night they camped in a hollow among the rocks at the foot of a tall cliff. Jack was not ill-treated, and plenty of food was given to him, but the keenest watch was kept upon his every movement, and escape was a thing altogether beyond his reach. His captors were six in number, including the man who drove the elephant. The driver and Saya Chone were Jack's companions on the great beast, and when they were on the move the captive was always lashed tightly to the framework of the howdah. The other four, the Malay and three companions, rode the strong, nimble ponies of the country. The baggage of the party was conveyed on a pack-pony, and they travelled at a good speed.

On the second morning, Saya Chone sat on the edge of the howdah, purring at his huge cheroot, while the Strangler and a companion lashed Jack into position. The half-caste had been superintending the operation with his revolver at Jack's ear, until the knots were tight, and our hero could not move.

"This is a very good idea, indeed," he murmured, "this carrying of a prisoner in a howdah on a pad-elephant. I had an idea it would be a success,

but it is better than I thought. It is a neat, little, portable prison. It is far better than tying the feet of an active young man under a pony's barrel. The young man may dig his heels in and gallop off after all. But tied up in a howdah he is quite safe."

Jack paid no attention whatever to the half-caste's sneers and jeers: he had resolved to take his gruel without whining, and he bore everything in stoical silence.

Two hours' march brought them to a clearing in the jungle, and the road ran between small paddy-fields. This meant that a native village was near at hand, and Jack looked out for the slight huts of reed and cane in which the villagers lived. To his surprise he saw nothing. And not to his surprise alone. He could not understand the words used by his companions, but he saw plainly that they were puzzled about something. Then the cries of wonder broke out loudly as they passed a grove of bamboos and came upon a scene of extraordinary destruction. The native village had been built in shelter of the bamboos, only a little place, a cluster of fifteen or twenty huts. But every house lay in ruins as if the place had been knocked about the villagers' ears with a huge flail. Near at hand a man lay dead, his body horribly crushed and battered. No sign of life was to be observed about the place.

But while the travellers stared in wonder on the havoc which had been made, they were suddenly attacked by the author of it, and knew that their own lives were in deadly peril. There was a terrific crashing among the bamboos, and then a huge, dark object was seen to be bursting a way through the tall stems. All but Jack knew at once what it meant; he was enlightened in an instant.

"A 'rogue' elephant! A 'rogue' elephant!" cried Saya Chone, and the driver urged the pad-elephant forward with voice and spear.

Then Jack understood. His father had told him many times how that a big, savage male will often leave a herd of wild elephants, take up a solitary life in the jungle, and become a "rogue." There is no more terrible beast to be met with. His enormous size and strength, his terrible ferocity, make him the king of the jungle. He attacks all he meets, and tramples every foe under his huge feet.

This "rogue" had evidently been attracted to the clearing by the paddy-fields, where the elephant loves to feed. Then, irritated probably by some attempt of the natives to drive him away, he had attacked their village and swept it out of existence. Now he was charging savagely upon the newcomers.

He came at them across the open with terrific speed. Jack had not the faintest idea that so ponderous a beast could move at such a pace, and he stared with fascinated eyes at the extraordinary sight. The "rogue" was an immense tusker, a big, wild, savage-looking brute, who charged with up-lifted trunk, and now trumpeted with so tremendous a note that the jungle and the hill-sides rang with the hoarse thunder. His course was laid straight for the men in front, two of the attendants on ponies. The Malay, the remaining attendant, and the pack-pony were behind the pad-elephant.

The ponies, obedient to their riders, had at first bounded forward, but when that frightful trumpeting broke out, and they saw the huge tusker thundering upon them, they were seized with such fear that they stopped and stood still, trembling in every limb. Before their riders could urge them on, the immense brute was upon them. One of the riders, a bold fellow, stood up in the stirrups, and struck at the "rogue" with his *dah*. But he might as well have struck with a straw. The monster literally swept the two ponies down in his stride, trampling them under foot in his frightful charge. The man who had used his heavy sword to so little effect, went down with his pony. The second man had leapt from his saddle, and he ran at full speed for a teak tree, intending to swarm up its trunk.

His flying figure caught the eye of the "rogue" just as he was about to turn and trample on those he had hurled to the ground. Now the savage brute strode on, and it was seen how swift was his great lumbering stride. He caught the man up, long before the fugitive was anywhere near the tree, and hurled him to the ground with a stroke of his tusk. Then he pulled up and deliberately knelt down on the unlucky wretch, who screamed horribly as his life was crushed out of him by the tremendous weight of the gigantic beast.

# CHAPTER XXII.

## THE TWO ELEPHANTS.

All this passed directly below Jack's horrified eyes. The pad-elephant was so frightened at the advent of this savage specimen of his own species, that he had turned stupid and made no attempt to obey his driver's orders. Instead, he turned and backed slowly from the place, keeping his head towards the "rogue." Thus Jack saw the ferocious brute swiftly crush the life out of the man upon whom he knelt, then leap up and rush back to the spot where the two ponies and the rider who had used the *dah* were still lying on the ground.

The ponies had both been trodden on in that terrific charge, and the man, untouched by the elephant, had been flung three or four yards, and lay half-stunned by his fall. As he scrambled to his feet the "rogue" was upon him. With a scream of rage the maddened brute bent down his huge head and delivered a sweeping stroke with his tusk. The great sharp spear of ivory struck the man in the back and was driven clean through the body. The elephant raised his head and swung the man high above the ground. Jack shuddered as he saw the writhing figure impaled on that huge tusk.

For a moment the elephant held his victim aloft as if in triumph, then with a swing of his head he hurled the man far away, and looked round for fresh victims. At the next moment the earth shook under his tread as he thundered down upon the pad-elephant and the burden it bore.

"Cut me loose!" roared Jack to the half-caste. "What chance have I got, tied to this howdah?"

But Saya Chone, ashen with fear, clung to the edge of the car, and had eyes and ears for nothing save for the great beast charging full upon them. Jack hurled himself to and fro, trying to slacken a little the bonds which held him a prisoner under such fearful circumstances. If the pad-elephant would only make a fight of it, there would be a chance for its riders to slip down and escape, but how could Jack help himself?

As the "rogue" made his last few sweeping strides upon them, the pad-elephant seemed to pluck up the courage of desperation. He was a fine, big, powerful fellow, though not equal in size to his wild enemy, and now he took a step or two forward, threw out his huge forehead, and met his enemy in full career.

The crash as the two huge beasts charged into each other was tremendous. The pad-elephant was driven back half a dozen yards, but he kept his feet. Then the two immense creatures, head braced to head and tusks locked in tusks, began a steady trial of strength, each striving to force the other back.

Now Saya Chone plucked out his heavy revolver, and, leaning over the edge of the howdah, began to fire swiftly into the head and body of the savage "rogue." But though the bullets cut deeply into the flesh, and the blood spouted freely, the big brute troubled nothing about that. As far as reaching any vital part went, the revolver might have been a pop-gun, and the wild elephant gave himself up entirely to the struggle with his tame brother.

In a few minutes it was seen that he was carrying the day. The pad-elephant, with deep grunts of anger and fear, began to give way before the fierce strength and impetuosity of his terrible opponent. Jack looked round and saw that they were alone; the Malay and the fourth attendant had fled from the place.

Then, at the next moment, the elephant under them gave up the fight. He suddenly backed off, turned, and lumbered across the clearing in full flight. The "rogue" threw up his trunk, and trumpeted a roar of victory, then dashed after the pad-elephant in savage pursuit. He was much swifter, and soon came up on the flank where Jack, by turning his head, had him in full view. Jack saw the small, fierce eyes burning with fury, and then the head was bent and the great forehead was driven against the flying enemy. The shock was such that the pad-elephant was driven to its knees, the driver was hurled over its head, and Saya Chone flung headlong out of the car. Jack alone remained in the howdah, held fast by his bonds.

Again the "rogue" elephant charged his enemy, and now the latter was flung over on to its side, and the rim of the howdah brushed the ground. Jack looked up in despair. The vast bulk of the infuriated elephant hung right

over him as the "rogue" prepared to trample upon the foe whom he had hurled to the ground. In vain did Jack dash himself to and fro in his bonds; he was fastened only too securely, and he knew that the least stroke of the foot now raised above his head would crush him as surely as a steam-hammer would crush a nut. At the next second Jack saw a gleaming white tusk dart down towards him as the "rogue" bent his head and struck.

The tusk went through the howdah within six inches of Jack's leg, and was buried deep in the back of the pad-elephant Then the "rogue," as he withdrew the dripping spear of ivory, caught sight of something and turned his wicked little eyes on it. He saw the driver and Saya Chone at some little distance running for their lives, and his fickle fancy turned to the thoughts of making short work of them before he finished with his tame brother.

Away he went in pursuit of this new object, and the pad-elephant scrambled to its feet, and stood for a few moments as if bewildered and uncertain what to do. During these few moments Jack saw the driver caught and felled to earth by the huge beast before whose savage might all stood helpless. Saya Chone had far outrun his companion, and the half-caste disappeared among the trees as the "rogue" began to trample upon the driver, whose frightful screams were silenced as both breath and life itself were swiftly crushed out of the body, so soon made pulp under those huge round feet.

Suddenly the pad-elephant wheeled about with big clumsy movements, and was off at a good round lumbering trot in the opposite direction. He had seen quite enough of this savage brother of the jungle, and had no wish for further punishment. But the "rogue" had no intention of letting him go so easily. Leaving the driver, the wild elephant dashed after the tame one at full speed.

And now began a most extraordinary race. The pad-elephant darted straight into the jungle and took the country as it came, straight before him, thinking of nothing but escape. He dashed through groves of bamboos and saplings, cutting his way clean through; he raced grunting and puffing up hill-side and down ravines; he dodged through the big trees with an agility and swiftness most wonderful in so heavy and clumsy a beast, and all the time his enemy hung upon his rear, sometimes near enough to gore his flank, sometimes out-distanced for a little as the tame beast, frenzied with fear and

pain, put out an extraordinary burst of speed. And in the howdah, fast bound still to the tough wicker-work, was Jack, the only spectator of this marvellous chase through the jungle, and one with an immense stake in it.

When the "rogue" came up, Jack's heart beat thick with anxiety. If the creature that bore him was once more knocked down, then he knew that it would be all over with him. He would certainly be crushed like a fly in the terrific struggle which would follow. When the pad-elephant got away, Jack breathed a little more freely, until he heard his enemy's ponderous steps once again thundering up.

Mile after mile, through jungle or over open plain, this marvellous chase went on, and still the pad-elephant raced snorting for his life, still the furious "rogue" pounded at his heels in hot pursuit.

Jack was nearly shaken to pieces. He braced his feet against the side of the howdah, and propped himself firmly against a corner of the huge basket in which he rode. More than once the curling trunk of the pursuer was raised above his head, but, as is well known, the wild elephant hesitated to attack a rider on the tame one's back. For three full hours the furious monarch of the jungle drove the pad-elephant before him, a ride Jack never forgot to the end of his days. Then they came out on a wide grassy plain by a river, where a large herd of wild elephants was standing knee-deep in the stream, solemnly spouting water over their backs.

On rushed the pad-elephant, now panting and almost ready to fall from exhaustion, towards his fellows. But the "rogue," a hater of his kind, pulled up, trumpeted a few shrill notes of defiance, turned, and trotted back into the jungle.

The pad-elephant now stood still, trembling from head to foot with his tremendous exertions. The herd of wild elephants, more than twenty in number, left the river and came towards the beast which bore the howdah and Jack. They marched up in slow and stately fashion, without any sign of anger, but apparently full of curiosity as to this newcomer and his strange equipment.

At the next moment Jack found himself in a most extraordinary position, his elephant being surrounded by the wild herd, whose trunks ran here and

there over their tame brother like so many hands being stretched out to examine him. One big bull put his trunk into the howdah and ran it over Jack, who remained perfectly still, knowing that an incautious movement might arouse the animal's anger. But these creatures seemed as mild and gentle as the "rogue" had been ferocious. Before long their curiosity was satisfied, and they strolled away to crop the young bamboo shoots.

At last Jack breathed a little more freely. His wild ride had been a terrible business for him. A hundred and a hundred times had his heart come into his mouth when the great beast that bore him had plunged through groves where it seemed that over-hanging boughs must sweep howdah and rider from the elephant's back. But he had come through all these dangers safely, and now the "rogue" had gone back to the jungle and the pad-elephant was at peace.

Presently Jack underwent an odd experience. His elephant walked down to the river and took a long drink. Jack envied the lucky brute; he, too, was parched with thirst. But in another moment he had water enough and to spare, for the elephant, filling his trunk with water, began to cool himself by spouting it over his body, and in a very short time Jack was drenched to the skin.

"It's refreshing, at any rate," thought Jack, as he shut his eyes against a fresh deluge of yellow water. "I wish to goodness I could only work myself free. I've got clear away from Saya Chone and the Strangler, and that's something to the good."

He began again to work himself about in his bonds, but he was soon obliged to desist. He was already stiff, and he soon became very sore as he struggled with his fastenings, which seemed to be eating into his very flesh.

"It's no go," he said half-aloud. "I cannot shake myself loose," and he fell back into his corner.

His elephant now came out of the river, and looked around eagerly for food. The herd of wild ones was already deep in a large bamboo thicket, and the tame one went at once after them and began to crop and munch the bamboo shoots. The wild elephants, feeding as they went, plunged farther and farther into a region of wild jungle, far from any habitations of men, and the

tame one steadily followed them, bearing on his back the young Englishman, a prisoner, and forced to accompany the elephant wherever he might go.

"I've heard," thought Jack, "that these tame ones will often break away and join wild herds. I'm in a pretty desperate fix if I've got to remain lashed in this howdah while this brute rambles far and wide with this troop of companions he has hit upon."

He looked around on every side, but saw nothing that could give him the slightest cause for hope. With every step he was being carried deeper and deeper into the recesses of the jungle where no hunter dare venture, where the elephant, the tiger, and the leopard rule as undisputed masters. His plight was terrible. Who would free him, who could free him of the bonds which held him in subjection to so cruel a fate?

# CHAPTER XXIII.

## THE PANTHAY WOOD-CUTTERS.

It was within an hour or two of dark, and Jack, faint with hunger and the strange and exhausting experience through which he had gone that day, was hanging listlessly in his bonds. The elephants had gathered in an open stretch at the foot of a deep ravine, and all was very quiet. The pad-elephant stood with his trunk gently swinging, his huge ears slowly flapping; he had eaten and drunk, and now he was taking a rest.

Suddenly into the silence of the narrow valley there fell the sound of blows. Thud—thud—thud. A pause. Thud—thud—thud, again and again. Jack started and listened eagerly. There was a ring about the sound which told him what it was.

"It's the sound of an axe on a tree," cried Jack to himself, and he knew that other human beings were in the neighbourhood. He collected all his breath and gave a loud shout. Again and again he shouted. The noise on the hill-side far above was now stilled, and once more Jack roared at the top of his voice.

At the next moment his outcries were drowned in the wild trumpeting of the elephants. The human notes had disturbed them, and they trumpeted shrilly and moved uneasily away from the neighbourhood of the pad-elephant. Then the wild herd set off at a trot, went a mile or more up the ravine, and came to a halt near another feeding-place, a clump of young bamboos. The tame elephant with its burden had followed steadily, and now Jack shouted no more. He feared lest his cries should disturb the herd so much that the wild creatures should take flight, and run a great distance. If they did so, the pad-elephant would be sure to follow them, and thus very possibly carry Jack completely out of reach of the human beings, whoever they were, that he had heard at work among the trees high up on the bank of the ravine.

So now Jack was silent, but he looked about eagerly on every hand for some sign of human life. If the people had heard his cries, surely they

would come to see who called for help in such a place. His elephant was now quietly feeding with the rest, and the last rays of the sun were shining through a gap in the hills straight into the hollow where the elephants were gathered.

Looking eagerly back on the track the herd had followed, Jack saw something moving in the wild plum-bushes about three hundred yards away. He looked closer and saw that it was a man, a native. His heart leaped for joy. Whether friends or enemies, perhaps he was about to be loosed from his dreadful position. Now he saw a second man, and the two dark figures, both naked save for a waist-cloth, crept slowly towards him under cover of the bushes.

They were a couple of Panthay wood-cutters, felling teak trees on the edge of the ravine. At present the ravine was dry, but in the rainy season an ample flood of water roared along the hollow, a flood which would carry the teak logs down to the big river below. They had heard Jack's cries, and, wondering at the strange sound, had followed up in rear of the flying elephants.

Their surprise was immense when they saw a white sahib in the howdah on the elephant's back. But in this part of the country, where white men very rarely came, a white face was regarded with the deepest reverence, and the simple, harmless Panthays at once set about the task of relieving the sahib who seemed unable to rise in his carriage. One of them disappeared at once into the jungle, one remained in the bushes.

Jack saw that they were engaged upon some plan, and hoping that it meant his deliverance, he remained silent, and watched eagerly for what was about to happen.

Within ten minutes he saw one of the woodmen swarming up a tree some distance ahead, a tree growing beside the well-trodden path which wild beasts had made along the foot of the ravine. Then his companion showed himself among the bushes below and uttered a peculiar cry. The wild elephants stopped feeding at once. Always sensitive to the presence of man, which means danger, they gathered uneasily in a group. Then, following the lead of an immense bull, the patriarch of the herd, they lumbered along the path up the ravine and away from the wood-cutter who had shown himself.

Jack saw, to his immense relief and delight, that his elephant would pass directly below the branch where the second Panthay was now perched. As the pad-elephant jogged up, closing the file of the retreating herd, the native, swinging himself from the bough, dropped with the greatest ease and certainty into the howdah.

For a moment the Panthay, a short, strong, powerful man, looked upon Jack and his bonds with great surprise. Then he thrust forward the head of his axe, which he had carried with him all the time, and laid the keen edge against the cords which bound Jack to the howdah. In a trice Jack was free. He flung his arms up thankfully, but dropped them again with a groan. They were so stiff that all movement was painful.

He thanked the Panthay again and again, and patted his bare, smooth shoulder, and the native grinned and bowed before him. Then the wood-cutter pointed to the ground, and Jack nodded. He saw that the man wished him to drop from the howdah and leave the elephant. Jack was perfectly willing. It was plain that the pad-elephant meant to stick to his new friends and follow them wherever they roved.

The Panthay slipped down the right flank of the elephant and dropped to his feet like a cat. Jack was wretchedly stiff, but he also climbed over the side of the carriage which had been his prison, and let himself slide over the elephant's tail.

"I shall stand the least chance of being trodden on that way," thought Jack. He dropped to the ground all right, for the pad-elephant took not the least notice of their movements. But as for keeping his feet, that was impossible. He rolled to the earth, for his ankles were even more numbed than his wrists.

At this instant the second Panthay ran up. The natives seemed to understand at once what was wrong, for both began to rub Jack's ankles and wrists briskly. Jack had to set his teeth to keep back a cry of pain. After the long numbing confinement, it was pure agony when the blood began to move freely once more, but he grinned and bore it, and soon began to feel better for the treatment.

When he could stand up and walk a little, the Panthays beckoned to him to accompany them, and they went down the ravine, following the track used by the wild inhabitants of the place. The dusk was falling over the jungle when they reached the camp of the Panthays, a deep cave in the side of the ravine, where a few simple cooking-pots and a small store of rice furnished all the woodmen needed.

By signs Jack was invited to sit down on a big heap of dried grass at the side of the cave, and one of the men swiftly built a fire and put on a pot of rice to cook. Soon the simple meal was ready. The cooking-pot was swung from the fire, and the rice was flavoured with salt and other condiments; each of the latter articles was contained in a small neat cylinder of bamboo, and packed away again when done with in the basket which was the only baggage of the teak-cutters.

Jack was as hungry as a wolf, and he ate heartily of the food which his new friends offered to him. They were extremely respectful, called him *phaya*, my lord, the only word of their speech which he could make out, and did not touch a single grain of rice until he had finished.

While they ate, Jack rested on the soft, dried grass, and went through his pockets to see where he stood. Somewhat to his surprise, Jack found that his captors had relieved him of nothing save his weapons. His money-belt round his waist, the contents of his pockets, his watch, everything had been left untouched.

"No," thought Jack, "I don't know what their game was, but it was a lot bigger thing than just collaring what I had about me. However, it's lucky my money's left. It's bound to be useful even in the jungle. If I can only get these fellows to lead me to a village, I can find a guide to put me on the road towards joining Buck and Jim again."

The thought of Buck and Jim turned Jack's thoughts towards them, and their surprise and consternation when they found that he was missing.

"What will they do, I wonder," thought Jack. "They'll never in the world be able to discover what's become of me. I must try and hit a line back towards them as soon as possible."

His eyes now turned on the Panthays, busily devouring the last of their rice.

"How can I talk to these chaps?" thought Jack. "I'll give them a tip. They've done me a first-rate good turn. Perhaps they'll be willing to do more if they see there's something to be got by it."

He drew a handful of rupees from his belt, and gave them five each. The woodmen stared in astonishment at so much wealth, fingering the big silver coins with childlike wonder and delight. Then they bent before Jack, and made him at least a score of deep obeisances, and poured forth floods of thanks. Jack did not understand their words, but their movements told all they wished to convey.

Each tucked his new-gained riches in his waist-cloth, and then they busied themselves in making Jack comfortable for the night. He was soon satisfied. He was far too tired to be very critical of his sleeping quarters. As a matter of fact, they were excellent. The cave was dry and warm, and the Panthays made up for him a big heap of soft dried grass.

The thought of sleep made Jack's eyes drop to of themselves. In a couple of minutes after he stretched himself on the couch of grass, he was deep in slumber.

# CHAPTER XXIV.

## AN UNWELCOME MEETING.

When he awoke the next morning the pot of rice was once more bubbling over the fire, and one of the natives was squatted near by, feeding the fire with dry chips; the second man was not to be seen. The Panthay feeding the fire looked up with a cheerful grin when he heard Jack move, and pointed to the cooking-pot, as if to assure him that breakfast would soon be ready.

Jack stretched himself and yawned. After his long sleep he felt like a giant refreshed. He wondered what time it was, and glanced at his watch. But his watch had stopped, he had forgotten to wind it up. The sun, however, showed him, by its height, that the morning was well advanced.

"I've slept off my weariness with a vengeance," murmured Jack to himself. "It must be nine or ten o'clock by the look of the sun."

At this moment the native by the fire uttered a cry which was answered from without. The second Panthay ran up at that moment, panting as if he had travelled fast and far. He bore upon his shoulders a basket from which he took a couple of chickens, half a dozen plantains, and a fresh supply of rice.

"Then there's a village somewhere in the neighbourhood," thought Jack. "But it may be ten or a dozen miles off. This fellow looks as if he had had a long run for the stuff. I suppose it is in my honour."

The two men prepared one of the chickens in a trice. They stripped off the feathers, cut up the fowl, and broiled the pieces over the fire on little skewers of hard wood. In a short time an excellent breakfast of broiled chicken, rice, and plantain was set before him, and Jack devoured it with the utmost relish. Then he set himself to work by means of signs to make them understand that he wished them to lead him to the village from which the Panthay had fetched the supplies.

In the end they understood him, and put their axes in a corner of the cave. By motions of their heads and hands they gave him to understand that they would lay by work for the day, and become his guides. Jack patted them on the back, and gave them another couple of rupees apiece to strengthen them in this excellent resolution.

When he had finished his meal, Jack sat down again on the heap of grass to await the pleasure of his companions. The second man had not eaten, but he soon despatched his portion of rice, and then they were ready for the road.

They left the cave, and the two Panthays led the way down the ravine, retracing the line the elephants had taken in coming into this part of the country.

"That's good," thought Jack. "We're striking on the road back at once. I wish I knew the name of the village where the festival was held, but I'm pretty certain to find someone in the place these chaps come from who can tell me. People were marching to the feast from a much greater distance away than this can be."

Their progress was slow, for the day was one of scorching heat. The naked Panthays slipped through the jungle as easily as the monkeys skipped through the trees, but Jack could not move at any speed. As the sun approached high noon a halt was called in shade of a thicket on a little ridge, where the air was fresher than in the dark, steaming hollows. Here they stayed for three hours, and Jack, after he had eaten the meal the Panthays prepared, dozed in the shade.

When he saw his guides gathering their baggage and packing it into the big basket which one carried slung over his shoulders, Jack sprang to his feet, stretched himself, and strolled forward half a dozen yards. They had halted beside a narrow path which crossed the ridge, and he wished to see toward what kind of country below the path led.

The bushes thinned, and he saw that a vast plain was opening out before him. But he did not leave the cover of the edge of the thicket. Something moving below caught his eye, and he parted the tall shoots of a bush before him, and peeped through the huge trails of pink and crimson convolvuli which festooned the branches of the low trees. Straight before him the path

ran down a steep slope and then wound over a broad plain, showing itself here and there in the gaps between patches of bamboo and acacias and palms. It was among a clump of palms at some distance that Jack had caught sight of a moving object, and he now looked eagerly to see it come into view again.

It was not that he feared any particular evil at the moment, but in his present desperate circumstances, utterly stranded in these wilds among savage hill-tribes, he knew not at any moment when a savage enemy might appear. He knew well that he had been lucky in falling in with these quiet wood-cutters, and he hoped that such luck would stay with him for a little till he could rejoin his friends.

The thought had scarcely crossed his mind when he saw that it was vain, and that at this very moment he stood in the utmost danger from his worst and deadliest foes. The moving objects he had seen came in sight once more, a couple of naked fellows in turban and waist-cloth. Jack knew them for Panthays, like the men who were now behind him making ready for the march. Then, at the next second, he saw two brilliant spots of colour, and knew that the Panthays were not alone. A little cavalcade of six riders, mounted on ponies, followed the two naked men on foot. The whole of the tiny procession passed over a little clearing, and was lost again in a clump of bamboos.

Jack's heart beat fast and he drew a deep breath. Who were these men the Panthays were leading towards him? He remembered two of his enemies yesterday, and the two leading riders brought them to mind again. Saya Chone had worn a head-dress of brilliant flaming scarlet, the Strangler a turban of bright yellow.

**A SUDDEN ALARM.**

Again the little procession filed into sight, out of the bamboos. Scarlet and yellow the head-dresses of the first couple of mounted men flashed vivid into the burning radiance of the sunlight. The riders were too far off for Jack to make out their faces, but he did not need that; he felt in his bones that his terrible enemies were upon him once more, and he turned to fly. It was plain enough, too, how they had hit upon his whereabouts. They had followed up the tracks of the flying elephants, and inquired in every village

round-about. Then the Panthay, returning to his home for food, had spoken of the sahib they had found among the hills, and had put the pursuers on Jack's trail.

As Jack turned he heard a grunt of surprise. One of the Panthays had stepped forward and caught sight of the approaching cavalcade. Jack sprang upon him, seized his naked shoulder, and drew him back into shelter of the thicket. The two men looked at him in wonder. Our hero had nothing but signs with which to communicate to these men the danger in which he stood. He chose three effective movements. He pointed to the oncoming strangers, he pointed to himself; finally he seized the *dah* which one carried swinging in a thong over his shoulders, and made a motion as of passing the keen weapon across his throat.

By their looks of intelligence he saw that the Panthays had fully grasped his meaning. They spoke swiftly to each other for a few moments.

Jack awaited the upshot in keenest anxiety. If these men did not stand by him he was indeed lost. Then, to his immense relief, the elder man, he who had dropped into the howdah and had taken the lead from the first, stepped forward, raised Jack's hand, and kissed it. Then he pointed to the depth of the jungle. Jack nodded and patted him on the shoulder. The younger Panthay swung the basket on his back, and away glided the three, leaving the path, and striking off directly among the trees.

In two minutes they were out of sight of their camping-place, and as the advancing party was not yet at the foot of the slope, Jack never doubted but that the half-caste would be thrown off the scent, and would pass on towards the ravine where the wood-cutters were known to be at work. But he had made one mistake, the error of supposing that the two Panthays in front of the horsemen were the first of the party. They were not. A single tracker had led the way some distance ahead, and him Jack had missed among the thickets and groves which hid the path here and there. So that, as the three fugitives disappeared among the thicker growth of jungle, a dark figure gained the crown of the slope, and with swift and noiseless tread approached their camping-place.

The quick eye of the Panthay at once caught sight of the retreating men, above all of the sahib, so easily to be known by his dress, and the tracker

drew back instantly into the bushes.

# CHAPTER XXV.

## THE CAVE IN THE RAVINE.

In the meanwhile Jack and his companions hurried forward, quite unconscious that they had been spied upon. The elder Panthay led the way through the jungle, and within a mile they came to the edge of a steep descent. Down this they climbed with much difficulty, swinging themselves by creepers and holding on to the boles of saplings until they gained the foot of a deep ravine.

The Panthay paused and pointed with a laugh. Jack nodded cheerfully.

"By George!" he murmured to himself, "we shan't be hard up for a hiding-place here."

The wall of the farther side of the ravine was honey-combed with black holes, looking for all the world as if a colony of gigantic sand-martins had built their nests in the place. Jack knew that these were the mouths of caves, and he ran swiftly after the Panthays as they hurried for a hole which was within easy reach of the ground.

A small fig tree grew below the mouth of the cave. Jack slipped his foot into the crutch where a bough struck away from the parent stem, swung himself up, and tumbled into the hollow, which was an irregular circle about nine feet across. The Panthays at once followed him, and all three pushed over the broken floor within, towards the shelter of the cave.

Inside, the place hollowed and widened out. Thirty feet back from the entrance it was dusky, and here Jack seated himself on a huge fragment of rock which had fallen from the roof. He was very glad of a rest and of a chance to wipe the sweat out of his eyes, as it was terribly punishing for a European to have to hurry on foot through the frightful heat of so scorching a day.

The elder Panthay had followed Jack to the back of the cave, and was now squatting on his haunches in front of the English lad. The younger native had remained nearer the entrance, and, placing himself behind another big fallen boulder, was keeping watch through the mouth of the cave.

The Panthay who had accompanied Jack now entered upon a series of gestures so clear and striking that Jack understood them as if he spoke. The signs were to the effect that they should stay in the cave till darkness had fallen, and then they would resume the journey.

Half an hour later, when Jack was lying at full length on the rock, lazily staring into the gloomy heights above him, a sudden, low, sharp cry broke into the stillness. The cry had been uttered by the watcher at the mouth of the cave, and now he said a few quick words. The elder Panthay leapt to his feet and shot down the cave with the glide of a panther. Jack sprang from his rock and followed.

The English lad had known at once that the cry meant danger, so deep an anxiety had lain in the low troubled note. As he crept up to the boulder behind which the two Panthays crouched, he saw that the peril which threatened him a short time ago still hung over his head. Looking through the hole, they commanded a full view of the upper edge of the opposite side of the ravine. Gathered aloft there, in full sight, was a bunch of figures, and, in the front of the group, the scarlet and yellow turbans still blazed.

Jack knew at once that danger was closer than ever. By some means Saya Chone and the Strangler knew that he and his guides had turned aside from the ordinary track, and had followed on their new trail.

Now their pursuers began to climb down the steep side of the ravine, led by a Panthay tracker. In a moment Jack saw that the man was following the path they had followed. His quick eye was marking the displaced stones and torn creepers, and he was leading Saya Chone and the Strangler straight upon their prey.

Jack looked swiftly round the cave in which they stood. Did it offer any securer hiding-place than the part in which they were? To leave it was impossible! They could only step out in full sight of the advancing band of enemies. He looked at the Panthays and saw that they could render him no

help. They were trembling like leaves with terror. He caught a name on the elder Panthay's lips, and knew it.

"Saya Chone," the man was murmuring. "Saya Chone."

"Oh," thought Jack, "this fellow recognises the half-caste and fears the vengeance of a powerful enemy. Then we can't be far now from the country where the Ruby King rules the roost. But the point for the moment is, how to dodge Mr. Saya Chone."

He beckoned to the Panthays to follow him, and all three retreated to the depths of the cave. The elder Panthay ran ahead, waving his hand to Jack to follow.

"Hullo!" thought Jack, "looks as if this chap knew of a spot to hide in," and he hurried forward. At the lower end of the cave the roof dipped sharply down, and the sides closed in, forming a tunnel about six feet high and five feet wide. This tunnel was three or four yards long, and then it opened out again into a second cave of fair size. The second cave was dimly lighted from a rift in the rock, forty feet above their heads. In two minutes Jack had made the circuit of it, and knew that, except for the fact that it was an inner cave, it offered them no refuge. The walls were smooth and unclimbable, and there was no break in them except at the point where the tunnel ran in.

Jack returned from his swift search and peered down the tunnel. From the cool darkness he looked out and saw a ring of brilliant light, the mouth of the outer cave. Suddenly a head shot into the patch of blinding sunlight without. The head was covered with a yellow turban, and Jack saw the Strangler slowly draw himself up and stand in the mouth of the cave. The big Malay did not rush forward. Instead, he stood gazing curiously about, and then Jack understood. He and his companions had left no track on the smooth hard rocks which paved the bottom of the ravine, and their enemies were not certain in which cave they lay; each cave was being searched in turn.

"Oh," thought Jack, "what would I not give for my handy little Mannlicher, and a good pocketful of cartridges. I could hold an army at bay in this narrow tunnel. But they stripped me of every weapon, even to my knife."

At this instant there flashed across his mind the thought of the *dah* carried by the younger Panthay. He turned and found the man at his shoulder. Jack seized the thong by which the man bore the weapon, and lifted it over the Panthay's head. The native made no resistance, but gave up the sword at once.

Jack drew the weapon from its sheath and looked at it carefully in the dim light. He saw at once by the bright gleam that it was in excellent order, and well polished. He tried the edge with his thumb; it was as keen as a razor. He stepped back two or three paces to give himself room to swing the blade, and flourished it about his head in order to find out its swing and play. These, too, were perfect. So well balanced were the huge, broad blade and heavy handle, that the great sword swung easily about Jack's head in his powerful young hands.

"By George!" thought he, "I'll make it warm for these rogues before I've done with them. If I can't give it 'em hot in this narrow tunnel with this good bit of steel, I'm a Dutchman."

He stepped forward and peered once more down the tunnel. He started. Saya Chone was climbing up, and after him came three or four figures in blue kilts. Jack had seen such before, and knew them for tough, wiry, hard-bitten little Kachins, small men, but immensely muscular and powerful. Behind him he heard a sound as of a withered leaf blowing along the floor. He turned his head and saw the two Panthays fleeing to the uttermost part of the cave. They trembled before these terrible enemies.

At this moment the Panthay tracker climbed into the cave. He spoke for a few moments to Saya Chone, pointing to the tunnel where Jack stood, but where in the darkness no one could see him. Saya Chone nodded, and the whole party moved forward until they were within a couple of yards of the mouth of the tunnel. Now Saya Chone began to speak.

"Haydon," he called in a loud voice. "Come out at once. The game is up. We know you are within there. You have left a score of signs in the outer cave to show whither you have retreated. Come out, I tell you."

He ceased, and stood as if awaiting a reply, but Jack made no answer. He meant to give his enemies no idea of the point where he had stationed

himself. Again the half-caste's voice rang out.

"I will give you one minute again to come out," he called, "and then, if you do not appear, I shall send in those who will fetch you out more roughly than you will like."

Jack made no answer, but went down on one knee to give himself plenty of room to strike overhead in the combat which was now near at hand.

The minute passed, and Saya Chone called out some orders to the savage little men in blue, who were now hovering about the mouth of the tunnel as if burning to rush in to the assault. Upon the orders being given, three Kachins started forward.

Jack saw them clearly against the bright light outside, and his heart swelled with rage and fierce anger. Not because each man held in his hand his broad and glittering *dah*. Oh, no. That was all in the game, and Jack was willing to give and take in the struggle between man and man, out-numbered as he was. But each man had now drawn out a coil of fine rope and slung it about his left arm. Jack saw that shameful bonds were being prepared once more for his free limbs, and his heart burned with fury.

"I'll die fighting before they shall tie me up again," breathed Jack to himself, and he clutched still more tightly the heavy *dah*. Then he drew a short, sharp breath, and held himself ready, every nerve strung up to its highest tension, every muscle braced and ready for action.

The Kachins were coming. Already their figures darkened the mouth of the tunnel.

# CHAPTER XXVI.

## THE RESOLVE OF BUCK AND JIM.

We must now return to Buck and Jim, whom we left in great perplexity at the village festival, wondering what had become of their young leader.

At the moment that Jack was dragged into the bushes by the Buddhist monk, who was not really a monk at all, but one of Saya Chone's followers in disguise, and the dancing girl, who was Saya Chone himself, Buck was within a dozen yards of them, looking all about for Jack. But he saw nothing of his young master, because a group of people, also in Saya Chone's pay, covered the movements by which Jack was drugged and carried off by his enemies.

"Thunder and mud," growled Buck. "Where's Jack got to? I left him here not five minutes ago, laughing over this picture."

At this moment Dent came up.

"Where's Jack?" said he quickly.

"I don't know, and that's the square-toed truth," replied Buck. "P'raps he's rambled off in a different direction."

The two comrades began to move swiftly about in search of their young leader. They kept together, for, with their knowledge of the country, they felt uneasy at once, and were not willing to separate, lest each might not find the other again. They found Me Dain, and set him to hunt in every direction. They found the headman, and he seemed bewildered at the idea that Jack had disappeared. He gave, or seemed to give, them every assistance possible in their search, but within an hour the two comrades were looking at each other very blankly. Jack had gone. There was no sign of him from end to end of the village, but how or where he had gone was a completely impenetrable mystery.

Buck and Jim and the Burman gathered in the hut which had been assigned to them, and held a council of war.

"Say," muttered Buck uneasily, "this beats the band. What's come to Jack?"

Jim Dent shook his head, and made no reply for a moment.

"Well, Buck," he said at last, "there's one thing quite certain; he hasn't gone on his own account."

"Sure thing," replied Buck.

"And if he's been nabbed in some mysterious fashion or another, we're pretty certain who's got hold of him," pursued Jim, and Buck nodded with a blank face.

At the next instant Jim's suspicions were confirmed by the Burman.

"Well," grunted Me Dain, "U Saw got both now, for sure, both young master and old master."

"What makes you think that, Me Dain?" cried Buck. "Have you seen or heard anything?"

"Nothing, nothing," replied the Burman, waving his hand. "But what else can be? They catch him and take him off. Oh yes, sure to be."

"After all, it would only be in line with plenty of things we've heard of, Buck," remarked Jim Dent, and again Buck had to give a sorrowful nod.

"Well," said Buck, in a decided voice, "s'pose we put it at that. In some fashion or other he's been kidnapped by the people who kidnapped his father. Let it go at that. Then, next thing is, what are we going to do?"

"I'll bet I know what you're going to do, Buck, my son," said Jim Dent, with a dry chuckle. "You'll follow on a bit and see what's happened to father and son, or I'm making a big mistake."

"You're quite right, Jim," said Buck Risley. "I don't hold with backin' down on a pardner, and I'm goin' along to see what's happened to the Professor and Jack just as far as I can crawl."

"And I'm with you, old man," said Jim quietly. "I owe Jack my life, too. One good turn deserves another."

"And me, sahibs, and me," said Me Dain quickly. "The young sahib save my life also when the dacoit thought to chop off my head. I go with you everywhere to help the two sahibs."

"Bully for you, Me Dain, you're a good sort," cried Buck, and he thrust his hand out to the Burman. Me Dain, highly delighted to receive the white man's sign of friendship, shook hands very solemnly with both Buck and Jim, and they formed at once a confraternity of three to hunt up U Saw's quarters, and see where he held the prisoners, whom they now firmly believed to be in his grasp.

# CHAPTER XXVII.

## THE FIGHT IN THE TUNNEL.

We must now return to Jack, whom we left crouching at the end of the tunnel which led to the outer cave, and awaiting the onslaught of three powerful Kachins.

As the natives drew step by step along the tunnel towards Jack, he balanced the great broadsword he held by both hands, and poised it ready to strike at the foremost. Though he was greatly out-numbered, yet he held one advantage. The forms of his enemies were clear against the sunlight which poured into the mouth of the outer cave. He could see every movement they made, but they could not see him. The inner cave was very dimly lighted, and, coming from the bright light without, his enemies could not mark that Jack was waiting for them.

A second advantage he enjoyed was that they did not know that he was armed. They knew that they had stripped him of every weapon when he was first seized, and now they did not dream that he had secured a *dah* for himself, and was thoroughly resolved to make the deadliest use of it before he would submit to capture.

On crept the Kachins in the boldest fashion, urged forward not merely by their native bravery, but convinced that they had before them the simplest of tasks, the seizing of an unarmed lad who would surrender at sight of their weapons.

At the next moment they were terribly undeceived. Fetching a sweeping blow, Jack cut down the leading Kachin with a terrific stroke. The edge of the keen, heavy blade fell at the point where neck and shoulder meet, and the doomed man was nearly cut in two. He dropped with a single groan, and the two men behind caught him by the feet and dragged him swiftly back.

Jack drew a deep breath, regained his heavy weapon, and poised it anew. But for the moment he was left in peace. The group in the outer cave had

gathered about the fallen man. They uttered loud cries of surprise when they saw the deep and dreadful wound he had received with such terrible force from the dah. "*Dah! dah!*" Jack heard the name of the native sword pass from lip to lip, and knew that they had recognised by what weapon that frightful slicing blow was delivered.

But in another moment he recognised how grim and fell were these people who were his foes. As coolly as though it were but a dog that Jack had slain with that tremendous blow, the Strangler lifted the dead Kachin and tossed him carelessly aside. Saya Chone said a sharp word, and a fresh man stepped forward, drawing his *dah* with a grin as he was ordered to join his companions in a fresh assault. Jack knew these little men in blue kilts to be brave to desperation, utterly careless of life, either their own or another's, and he braced himself once more for the struggle.

But this time the Kachins came on in different order, and in a different fashion. A sudden flare of yellow light filled the tunnel, and Jack saw that two men marched ahead, each with his *dah* ready to strike, and that behind them the third man held a flaming torch. He saw at once how cunning was the trick. The glare would flash over the assailant's shoulders straight into his eyes, confusing him, while they would be lighted perfectly to the attack.

In a second Jack had devised a plan of meeting this danger. He dropped his *dah* over his left arm, bent and seized a huge pebble from the floor. He poised the stone for an instant, then flung it with great power. At this short range he struck the mark to a hair, and his mark was the grinning face of the Kachin who carried the torch, and rejoiced that his friends would now make short work of the fierce young Feringhee who had hidden in the cave.

The dark face of the native was wrinkled with a savage smile, and all his gums were on view when the heavy stone struck into his open mouth with a crash of splintering teeth. The first pebble was followed by a second, which took him between the eyes. Stunned and blinded, he reeled back and dropped the torch. His comrades, bereft of their guiding light, upon which they had counted so much, hesitated for a moment and hung upon the next step. There was no hesitation with Jack. Things stood at too desperate a pass with him that he should let things hang in the wind. No sooner did he see the Kachin with the torch reel back and drop the firebrand, than he

swung his weapon on high and darted at the two men who had halted in the tunnel. As he did so he let out a mighty shout. Shout and blow fell together on the hesitating Kachins. Both thrust their *dahs* forward to parry the unseen assault.

Jack's weapon fell with a ringing clash of steel across the *dah* of the leading man, beat it down, went on, and bit deeply into the Kachin's skull. The latter reeled against his companion and clutched him. For a second they swayed, then both men fell heavily together to the ground.

Lying helpless as they were at his feet, it was a mere matter of a couple of blows for him to utterly destroy both, and so lessen the number of his enemies. But Jack could not strike fallen men. He returned to his own end of the tunnel, and allowed them to creep back to the outer cave, the wounded man crawling slowly after his friends.

This second repulse seemed to put Saya Chone and the Strangler beside themselves with fury. They screamed invective and insult against Jack, and threatened him with the most frightful penalties when he should fall into their hands. Both had a perfect command of some of the worst language in English that Jack had ever heard, but he took it all for what it was worth, clutched his faithful broadsword tighter still, and waited to see what their next attempt would be. He still cherished a hope of escape. He had crippled pretty well half of the attacking force, and if he could but hold them off till darkness came, there might be an opportunity of escape in the moonless night.

"There were only four Kachins with them," thought Jack, "and the natives they have picked up from the neighbouring village may be dismissed as fighting men, if they are anything like the chaps who are somewhere behind me here. The half-caste and the Malay seem to keep out of the scrimmages. If I only have a bit more luck, I can chew them up enough perhaps to make them sheer off and leave me alone."

As far as appearances went, they were leaving him alone now. But Jack knew that appearances are too often deceitful. The outer cave looked perfectly empty. Neither sign nor sound of human presence was given. Saya Chone and the Strangler had gone away, leaping down from the mouth of the outer cave to the ravine. But Jack was certain that the unwounded

Kachins were still lurking in the cave out of his sight, and he had no intention whatever of creeping out and engaging in a hand-to-hand struggle with the iron-limbed little mountaineers. Fully half an hour passed in this profound silence. Jack kept the sharpest look-out, but could catch no sign to show that his lair was still watched.

"If they can wait," thought Jack, "so can I. I'll not stir an inch from my cover, however silent they may be."

At that instant he caught a sharp, low cry of surprise behind him. He whirled round swiftly, for in his intentness he had actually forgotten the two Panthays, his fellow-prisoners. With a gasp of relief, Jack found that it was the elder Panthay who had called out. The two men had been crouching in a corner of the inner cave, and had given no sign of their presence while Jack struggled with his foes. Now one was calling out, and both were pointing upwards.

Jack took a step back from the mouth of the tunnel and looked aloft. The rift in the rock forty feet above, which lighted the cave, was obscured and darkened. In a moment he saw that the gap was filled with a human body, and that a Panthay was peering down upon them.

"What's this game?" thought Jack. "They've climbed up to that hole, but unless I obligingly stand under it, and let them drop a stone on my head, I don't see what they get by it."

Little did the heroic lad dream of the fearful use to which his enemies meant to put the rift in the rock high above him.

# CHAPTER XXVIII.

## THE RUSE OF SAYA CHONE.

In a moment the native drew back, and Jack jumped to cover as he saw a dark object come whirling through the rift and fall straight into the cave. But the thing flung in was harmless enough in appearance, a mere bundle of dried grass bound loosely with a shred of creeper. Then, thick and fast, bundle after bundle was hurled into the cave, dried reeds, more grass, big loose splinters of pine, fat with resin, withered brushwood, and the like.

Down they came, thicker and faster, until a great pile of this rubbish was heaped on the floor of the cave. Jack was staring wonderingly at this novel method of attack by flinging rubbish apparently at large, when once more the Panthay above thrust his head through the rift and spoke a few words, his voice ringing down hollow into the depths where the three prisoners stood. Jack did not understand what was said, but he saw that the effect on his companions was most extraordinary.

They sprang to their feet, and, braving all the terrors of Saya Chone, whose name had appeared so dreadful to them, they darted for the tunnel, brushed swiftly by Jack, and were gone. The English lad watched them eagerly. He saw them fly down the outer cave, leap wildly into the ravine, and disappear. A minute later he saw them cross his field of view as they climbed the opposite bank. They were going like the wind, and there seemed not the slightest attempt made to stop them, nor was the faintest sound of pursuit to be heard.

"All the same," murmured Jack to himself, "I don't think I shall follow you, my nimble friends. It's pretty certain you've been allowed to go in peace in the hopes of drawing me out as well. I hardly fancy I should be permitted to pass so quietly. Well, I'm thankful the poor beggars have got away in safety. But what scared them so frightfully? They went like rabbits bolting from a hole when the ferrets have been put in. There seems nothing very terrifying about this heap of rubbish."

But was there not? was there not? Ten seconds later Jack was ready to take his words back, and acknowledge that heap of rubbish to be a very terrible and awful weapon in the hands of his enemies. Something flashed above him, and he glanced up to see a flaming torch hurled through the rift. It did not, however, fall into the heap of light inflammable materials awaiting it. It struck against a projecting point of rock, was turned aside, and fell almost at Jack's feet. He stamped the flame out swiftly with his boot.

But his breath came fast and short, and his brave face paled as he saw the frightful cunning of this master-trick. He had luckily quenched one torch, but he could not be sure of quenching the next and the next. One of them had but to fall into the mass of reeds, canes, dry grass, and withered brushwood, to cause a swift, fierce flame to run through the whole mass.

This, then, it was which the Panthays had learned from their fellow who looked down from the rift. The Englishman was to be roasted out, and they were warned of the fearful fate about to befall him. Before this vision of horrors they had fled, the greater fear conquering the less.

Jack stood looking up at the rift with blanched face, and teeth set like a steel-trap. His heart gave another jerk within him. A second torch flashed through the rift. But this time the torch whirled flaming through the air, and fell at the mouth of the tunnel, within a yard of Jack's foot. He stamped it out. A second torch followed, almost in the same place. He stamped this out too. He looked eagerly to see where the next would fall.

It seemed extraordinary fortune that not one of them should fall in the midst of the waiting heap. Then he heard a low, evil, chuckling laugh from someone beside the rift, and he understood. Saya Chone was there, playing with him, as a cat plays with a mouse. The half-caste was tossing torches within Jack's reach, simply to torture him with the idea of what would happen when one of the flaming splinters of pine fell into the heap of tinder awaiting it.

Five minutes of perfect silence passed, and not another torch fell. To Jack the time seemed like five years rather. He cast swift alternate glances at the rift above and through the tunnel, where he felt that enemies waited and watched for the opportunity the fire might give them.

And now a great flare appeared in the rift. A huge bundle of reeds, blazing fiercely, was thrust in, and dropped. His enemies meant now to fire the pile and bring the play to an end. The flaming mass rolled slowly down the steep face of the cliff within, and Jack was torn in a fierce dilemma as to what was the best course for him to follow. Should he leave the mouth of the tunnel and try to beat out the flames with the broad blade of his *dah*, or should he not?

But if he left the tunnel, then he would give up the key of the situation, and be swiftly surrounded. If he did not, the roasting flame and the masses of billowing smoke would render the inner cave untenable. Yet, before the bundle of reeds had rolled down to the mass below, the question had been settled for him.

A second and a third faggot, each blazing fiercely, and each directed towards a fresh part of the heap, were flung through the rift.

"I can't stop all three," thought Jack. "The pile must burn."

Within a few seconds it was burning in very truth; the fire ran through the heap of light combustibles with magical power and swiftness. Scarce had the first bunch of burning reeds fallen, than a vast scorching flame was leaping up and roaring towards the rift, while a powerful current of air was drawn through the tunnel and fanned Jack's face.

"What's this?" thought Jack; "they reckoned without the draught, I fancy. It looks as if I shall be no worse off than before. It's very hot, certainly, but with this rush of air through the tunnel I can manage all right."

But he soon found that his enemies had not made any miscalculation. For five minutes the air rushed fiercely past Jack, fanning the tremendous flame which leapt from the blazing pile and carrying it upwards to the rift, then it began to slacken, and the flame, instead of roaring upwards to a point, began to sink, and spread its wide red wings abroad in the cave, fluttering from one side to the other.

Jack looked upwards with a sinking heart: *the rift was closed*. It had been left open till a terrific fire had burned up, and now it was blocked, and the whole of the heat and the smoke was pent up in the cave; and Jack was pent up, too, in this roasting inferno.

# CHAPTER XXIX.

## THE TORTURE BY FIRE.

For some time Jack was but little troubled with the smoke. It billowed up and up, and rolled in huge clouds about the lofty roof. But gradually the cave filled, and Jack saw that with every moment the smoke came lower and lower, threatening to fill the cave from the floor to roof and choke the life out of him. A cloud whirled about him and was gone again. But it left Jack coughing and half-choked, so pungent and keen was the whiff which he had drawn into his lungs.

Thicker and thicker rose the clouds of smoke as the fire burned, for, cunningly intermingled with the dried tinder of the canes and reeds, his enemies had flung great bunches of fresh-cut boughs. The green wood of the latter, roasting and spluttering with sap in the midst of the roaring fire, threw out vast rolling clouds of choking smoke.

The freshest air was still at the mouth of the tunnel, and here Jack crouched, his head as low as possible, for he knew that the last fresh air would be found nearest to the floor. He was resolved not to go out. His stubborn British blood was aflame at the thought of being placed afresh in bonds, and he was ready to face the fiery torture within rather than creep out and give his enemies the joy of knowing that he was beaten, and of seeing him surrender.

Hope, too, was not yet dead in his heart. The heap of blazing brushwood was at some distance from him, for the rift was at the other side of the cave. If he could but set his teeth and endure this agony of fire until the heap had burned out, he would not be forced from his post.

But at that instant the fire reached several great faggots of green palm branches, and fresh clouds of aromatic smoke rolled out still thicker and faster than before. A swirl of the air currents within the cave sent a thick billowing mass full on the spot where Jack crouched. The brave lad felt that

he was choking, that his senses were deserting him, as he drew, involuntarily, the pungent, biting smoke into his lungs.

He flung himself on his face, coughed out the smoke he had swallowed, and caught one refreshing gasp of sweet air blowing up the tunnel. Then the fresh air was driven back by the huge billow of smoke, and the heavy clouds settled about Jack. He could not have moved now had he wished. He was the prey of the thick suffocating smoke, and a swift merciful unconsciousness fell upon him and put an end to the agonies he had so nobly endured.

When Jack came to himself again, the first thing he knew was that he had failed to keep himself out of the clutch of his enemies. When he opened his bleared and smarting eyes and looked round, he saw the dark face of Saya Chone straight before him. The half-caste said nothing, only grinned in evil joy, and Jack closed his eyes again with a groan of despair. He felt that he was once more in bonds, though they were not so close and galling as before. He was dripping wet, and his eyes pained him cruelly.

He lay still for a few instants, then pulled himself together, jerked himself into a sitting position, and looked round boldly, determined to put the best face possible on the situation, and not give the half-caste the joy of gloating over an enemy who acknowledged himself beaten.

He found he was in the outer cave, and through the tunnel he could see plainly the glow of the fire still blazing in the inner recess. But no smoke came this way. Clearly the rift had been opened, and the fire was pulling up towards the natural vent. Jack looked round and saw that he was in the midst of a pool of water; he supposed that it had been flung upon him to bring him to.

"Well," said Saya Chone at last, "are you not going to thank me for saving the life you seemed obstinately bent upon throwing away? If I had not been able to order a couple of fellows, as careless of their lives as you of yours, to go into the smoke and drag you out, it would have been all over with you by now."

Jack made no answer. He did not so much as trouble to look at Saya Chone. He ignored him entirely, and glanced down at the fetters which confined his

limbs. He found that his ankles were bound together with light and slender links of steel, a steel ring encircling each ankle, and similar fetters bound his wrists. At first glance it seemed as if these light bonds might easily be broken, but Jack gave up that idea very soon. He saw that they were the work of a very cunning and skilful craftsman, highly wrought and beautifully tempered, slight in appearance, but immensely strong.

A head now came in sight outside. It was the Strangler, and he called out a few words to Saya Chone. The half-caste had been sitting with his hand in the breast of his jacket. He now drew it out and showed that the butt of a heavy revolver had been in his clasp. He pointed the weapon at Jack's heart.

"I must beg of you to get up, my lord," he said, in tones of sneering deference. "Your conveyance awaits you outside the cave."

When he saw that Jack hesitated to obey, he gave a shrill whistle. A couple of Kachins at once sprang up at the mouth of the cave. Sooner than be handled by these evil little ruffians, Jack now got up and shuffled slowly down the cave, his fetters allowing him to move about ten inches at a stride. But this, however, did not save him from their hands. At the mouth of the cave the two Kachins and the Malay seized upon him and swung him down to the bed of the ravine. Here a strong pony was waiting, and when Jack's ankles had been freed, he was tossed astride and the reins put in his hands.

The half-caste followed him at every step with the revolver, nor did he put the weapon away until the Strangler had once more locked the fetters which bound Jack's ankles together. This he did with a small key, and, as the links of steel were brought under the pony's barrel from one foot of the prisoner to the other, Jack was securely tethered to the animal.

# CHAPTER XXX.

## THE STRONGHOLD OF THE RUBY KING.

As soon as Jack was mounted, Saya Chone and the Malay also got to their saddles, and the party moved off down the ravine. Save for his fetters, Jack rode as usual, but the two Kachins, one on either side, held his pony by stout thongs of raw hide, fastened in the bridle. At his heels trotted the two leaders, and Jack knew that both were well armed.

On the journey that followed it is not necessary to dwell, for it was quite uneventful. They travelled steadily till dusk, when they halted in a small village where Jack was assigned a hut, and a strict watch was kept over him at every moment. The next morning the journey was resumed at earliest dawn, and now they held their way for mile after mile through wild, gloomy passes between lofty mountains, where no sign of human life or cultivated fields was to be seen. Hour after hour they pushed on through this deserted hill country, until, late in the afternoon, they topped a stony ridge, and Jack gave a sharp exclamation of surprise.

Below him the ground fell away steeply to a small and fertile valley with a river running down its midst, and fields of paddy and plantain lining the course of the stream. Groves of palmyra, and teak, and palms were dotted about the scene, and in the midst of the valley rose a tall house of stone. Instinctively Jack felt that they had reached their journey's end, and that before him was the goal he had set himself to win, the stronghold of U Saw, the Ruby King. But how different was his approach from that he had hoped to make! Instead of advancing upon it in company of his trusty friends, he was marching in as a prisoner, fettered hand and foot.

Jack fixed his eyes eagerly on the great house below as another idea sprang to his mind. Was his father there? Had his quest been in vain, and was Thomas Haydon far away from this lonely valley set among the wild hills? But Jack believed that his father was there; everything seemed to point to it. Well, he would soon know, one way or the other.

The path now ran through a native village, whose slender huts of reed and cane bordered both sides of the narrow way. The people ran to their doors to gaze upon the passers-by, and Jack knew them for Kachins. He recognised the short, dark, sturdy forms of the men. Beside the latter, women in embroidered kilts, with big, queer head-dresses, and brown, naked, nimble children, came to look upon the sahib who rode into their valley, the captive of their lord and master, U Saw.

The village was passed and a grove of palms was entered. Beyond the palms the land ran smooth and open to the front of the great strong house of stone which U Saw had built to keep himself and his treasures safe.

The cavalcade halted before a strong gate formed of huge bars and beams of teak, and in another moment half of the gate was flung open by a pair of blue-kilted Kachins. Jack's pony was led inside, and the English lad now found himself in a large courtyard beside the house. The walls of the courtyard were formed of great logs of teak, and round them ran rows of thatched huts built against the palisade. These, as Jack learned afterwards, were used as the lodgings of the strong body of retainers whom U Saw kept about his person, his bodyguard.

Only one small door opened upon the courtyard from the house, and towards this Jack's pony was led. The Malay unlocked the fetters which bound Jack's feet, and he was hauled roughly to the ground.

"March in," said Saya Chone, and pointed to the small, narrow, dark doorway. Jack went in, staring hard into the dark before him, and wondering what fate would befall him in this great, lonely house to which he had been led in so strange a fashion, and through such wild adventures. He found himself in a small, dusky hall, lighted only by one tiny window, and that heavily barred with iron. The door was now closed and bolted behind him, and he was taken up a narrow flight of tortuous stairs. Then he was conducted along a maze of narrow passages, being led now and again through doors which Saya Chone unlocked and carefully locked again after them. The stone walls, the iron bars which covered every opening, the narrow passages, the locked doors, all told of the caution of U Saw, he who trusted no one, and suspected all.

At last they arrived before a narrow door, heavily banded with iron, and fastened by a huge bar of teak. Before it squatted a little man in blue, with a big naked *dah* across his knees. Saya Chone spoke to him and it sounded like a password, for the man sprang to his feet and stepped aside. The great bar of teak was drawn from its staples, and the door was opened. The Malay thrust Jack into the room, and the door was at once closed and barred behind him.

Jack now found himself in a bare stone cell, lighted only by one small window eight feet or more from the ground. There was nothing in the place save a small bench in one corner, and he sat down on this and awaited the next movement of his captors. For full three hours he sat there, and had begun to wonder whether they had forgotten him, when the door was suddenly opened and the Strangler appeared, attended by a couple of the bodyguard. The Malay beckoned to Jack to come forward, and the latter went.

He was now led into a large room, where a tall, stout man sat on a heap of rich cushions, and Jack knew by the deference paid to him that the latter was U Saw, the Ruby King. The room was lighted by a couple of large lamps, for the dusk had fallen, and the English lad was led into the bright light and placed before the Ruby King.

The latter looked steadily at Jack, and Jack returned the stare with interest. The Ruby King had a huge, gross face, thick-lipped and evil-eyed. He was dressed splendidly in a rich embroidered jacket of pink silk, a silken kilt striped in red and white, and a huge pink *gaung-baung* on his head; in the front of his head-dress blazed a magnificent ruby.

He looked long and keenly at Jack, and the latter thought that U Saw was going to speak to him, but the Ruby King said nothing, and at last waved his hand. Upon this Jack was led aside by the Malay and made to sit down upon a large, heavy chair near the right-hand wall. All this was done in perfect silence, and for some minutes Jack sat there waiting, while U Saw seemed to forget his presence, and rested upon the pile of cushions with head bent as if in deep thought.

Suddenly the Strangler, who had been moving to and fro, disappeared behind Jack's chair. Jack was about to turn his head to keep an eye on his

enemy's movements, when he felt a soft silken band slipped swiftly over his head and tightened about his shoulders. At the same instant a couple of attendants flung themselves upon him and held him down tightly in the chair.

Jack tried to throw them off and wrench himself free, but his hands had never been unfettered, and he was easily mastered. In a trice he found himself securely lashed to the heavy chair, and then felt another broad band of silk drawn over his mouth. Coolly and methodically the Strangler gagged him in so skilful a fashion that he could not utter a sound, though he was able to breathe quite easily. When both bonds and gag were secure he was released from the grip of the men who had held him down, and the attendants and the Malay stepped aside.

The next movement puzzled Jack beyond measure. A muslin curtain, running on a light bamboo rod, was drawn before him, thus cutting him off from the main body of the apartment. With the exception that he had been firmly seized and held down while the Strangler bound him, Jack had not been roughly treated, and he was quite free to turn his head from side to side and mark all that went on.

In a few moments the Ruby King raised his hand. As if in response to the signal an attendant struck one deep booming rolling note on a great gong. Jack looked eagerly to see what would follow. And that which did follow held him spell-bound with amazement and wonder.

A door opened and Saya Chone came in. Jack recognised him at once, for the delicate filmy veil of muslin which hung just before him was so slight in texture that he could see through it easily and make out all that went on in the light of the lamps. But the part of the room where he was a prisoner was unlighted, and the veil served to hide him sufficiently from anyone standing in the brighter part of the place. Saya Chone came forward and conversed with U Saw for a few moments, then a second note was struck upon the resounding gong.

Again the door opened, and a couple of Kachins came in, leading a man between them, a tall, thin man with grey hair and pale face. Jack's heart leapt within him, and he felt suffocating under his gag. Yes, there was his father, there he was. They had been right in their suspicions all the time.

Thomas Haydon had been carried off by the men who served the Ruby King.

Jack's heart swelled within him at sight of that well-known form and face, and he strained every muscle against his bonds. But he had been secured too strongly, and his efforts were utterly in vain. He could only stare and stare at the old familiar figure, and long for the moment when his gag should be loosed and he could acquaint his father with his presence. He wondered whether his father would see him through the curtain, but he felt sure at the next moment that it was impossible. He was seated in a dusky corner, and his father stood full in the light of the lamps.

What an end was this to his quest! He had set out to find his father. He had found him: they stood within a few yards of each other. But he had found him a prisoner in cruel and merciless hands which now also held Jack captive. What an end to all his fine dreams of rescuing his father! What a mockery of his hopes! As these thoughts thronged through Jack's mind, Saya Chone began to speak. Jack was at once all attention to the words of the half-caste.

"Well, Mr. Haydon," began the latter, "you have now had several days to know whether you are more inclined to be reasonable. You have only, you know, to write down on a scrap of paper the bearings of the place where you found the big ruby, and then you are free to go where you please."

There was silence for a moment, then Mr. Haydon replied. How the well-known tones thrilled Jack through and through as they fell on his ear!

"Exactly," said Thomas Haydon, in a tone of quiet but bitter scorn. "I have only to give up the interests which were confided to my hands, to prove myself a traitor to those who trusted me, and then you say I may go. I take leave to doubt the latter statement. In any case, I shall certainly not do as you wish."

"You still refuse to disclose the secret of the ruby-mine you found?"

"I do."

"It would be better, I think, for you to reconsider that decision," said the half-caste, in his cold, cruel voice. "There are ways, you know, of making

people speak, however obstinate they may be."

"You refer to torture, without doubt," said Mr. Haydon, in as cool a tone as though he were speaking on the most indifferent subject. "Well, I do not wish to boast, but I hardly think you will get anything out of me that way."

"Why, there I am inclined to agree with you," said the half-caste, in his silkiest tones. "That is to say, so far as applying torture to yourself personally is concerned. You are a stubborn Englishman, and that means you will cheerfully die before you give in; is it not so?"

"Then, if you think it useless to deal with me in such fashion, why enter upon talk of it?" demanded Mr. Haydon.

"Oh," said the half-caste, "such a thing may be useful yet. If you were careless about torture applied to yourself, you might see it in another light when brought to bear on someone to whom you were attached?"

Mr. Haydon gave a scornful laugh. "And where will you find such a person in this den of thieves?" he asked, drily.

Upon this reply, Saya Chone and U Saw burst into a great shout of mocking laughter. They rolled to and fro in their mirth, and the room rang again with their hideous merriment. Mr. Haydon looked from one to the other, his brow knitted in puzzled wonder.

But behind the curtain Jack's heart had sunk very low indeed, and a light of terror had come into his eyes. Now he saw at a flash why the half-caste had carried him off, and pursued him so closely and fiercely, yet without doing him the least harm. It had puzzled Jack a score of times why Saya Chone had not killed him, and so put an end to any further trouble, but now he saw the whole plan only too clearly.

By this time the Ruby King knew the character of Thomas Haydon, and had learned that neither threats nor force had power to sway him from his duty in order to save himself. But what if his only son, his boy Jack, was exposed to a like danger: would that not break down his iron resolution?

The terror which had come into Jack's eyes was not for himself, not for an instant. But he saw at once what the arch-rogues meant to do, to put

pressure upon his father through him. And Jack felt sick at heart to think that he had won the thing he had longed for, that he had gained his father's side, and yet he came only as an added difficulty to a cruel situation.

"You have a son, I think, Mr. Haydon?" began Saya Chone again, in his purring tones.

"How do you know that?" replied Thomas Haydon.

"Oh, we know many things," replied the half-caste lightly. "We have even heard of your only son, Jack Haydon."

Mr. Haydon made no reply.

"You would, I suppose, be very unwilling to see any harm happen to him?"

"Thank God!" cried Thomas Haydon fervently, "that, at any rate, is far beyond your power. He is safe at home in England."

Again the mocking laughter burst out in redoubled volume until the rafters rang again. The Ruby King and Saya Chone enjoyed their mirth to the full, then the half-caste sprang to his feet, and pointed with glittering eyes and laughing face to the soft white muslin veil.

"Look there! Thomas Haydon," he cried, "look there!"

# CHAPTER XXXI.

## FATHER AND SON.

Mr. Haydon turned his calm, steady eyes on the filmy curtain, but he could see nothing. Then, as he gazed quietly at it, U Saw raised his hand, and a deep booming note resounded from the gong. The full, musical trembling of the note still rang through the room when an unseen hand drew back the curtain, and the light of the lamps fell full upon Jack.

Thomas Haydon stood for a moment with the wild, distraught look of one who sees a sight altogether beyond belief or reason, then he made to spring forward. But he was chained to the Kachins who stood upon either side of him, and two more leapt forward from their posts by the wall to check his movements. And again the mocking laughter of his enemies filled the room.

But Thomas Haydon had neither eyes nor ears for them. He could only stare and stare upon his son as if he found it impossible to believe the evidence of his own sight. At last he spoke.

"Jack!" he said in a tone of wonder beyond all wonder, "Jack, is it you?"

Jack could not reply, for the gag effectually checked his utterance, but he nodded, and his eyes spoke for him.

"My son here," murmured Thomas Haydon again, and a bitter groan broke from him. He could not restrain it; this last stroke was utterly beyond all human endurance. When his son had been mentioned by his unscrupulous enemy, his thoughts had flown thousands and thousands of miles, far away from the hot, glaring East, with its mysteries and dangers, to the cool, quiet English meadows amid which lay Rushmere School, where his only son, as he believed, worked and played in safety.

And all the time Jack was within a few yards of him, hidden, a prisoner, behind the muslin curtain. How he had got there, how he had fallen into the terrible hands of U Saw, were the most insoluble of mysteries to the elder

man, and he could only stare at his son with a white and ghastly face, for he knew only too well the character of the men in whose power they both lay.

The jeering voice of the half-caste broke out on a high note of derision. "And is there no one among this den of thieves for whom you care, Mr. Haydon?" he cried. "If there is not, what an unnatural parent you must be!"

A deep guttural chuckle from U Saw echoed this speech. The Ruby King said never a word from first to last. He sat on his cushions as one enjoying the play. His gross face was filled with an evil joy, his small dark cunning eyes twinkled for ever with laughter at the scene which was enacted before him, but he maintained, except for his laughter, a perfect silence, and there was something terribly uncanny and threatening about this.

"Where has he come from?" asked Thomas Haydon, in a low and troubled voice. Yes, it was Jack, bound there; he was compelled to believe his own eyes at last. It was not an hallucination; it was a piece of dreadful fact, and in it the elder man saw his difficulties trebled upon the spot.

"Oh, as to that, he will have plenty of opportunity to tell you himself in a short time," smiled the half-caste. "We shall shut you up together to talk things over. In the meantime, another piece of work demands U Saw's attention."

He waved his hand and the Kachins led Thomas Haydon aside and placed him against the farther wall. There was a shuffle of feet at the door, and three or four natives from the village brought in a man whose hands were bound behind his back. They were followed by at least a score more of men and women, and for the next half hour there was a fearful babel of tongues. As far as Jack could gather it seemed a sort of trial, and the Ruby King acted as judge.

The latter uttered never a word, all the questioning being done by Saya Chone; but at last he opened his mouth and pronounced a verdict. It was received with cries of joy by some, and howls of grief by one or two women. Now the bodyguard drove the whole crowd, save the prisoner, out of the apartment.

When the uproar of the noisy horde had died away in the narrow passages, Saya Chone waved to the guards to bring Mr. Haydon forward.

"Look at this man, Thomas Haydon," said the half-caste in a low, hard voice, pointing, as he spoke, to the native; "he has killed a neighbour; he is a murderer. Very good. U Saw has sentenced him to death. Now I tell you that if you do not give us the information we want, you have as surely sentenced your son to death as U Saw has sentenced this man."

He said no more: there was a far more dreadful threat in his quiet, cool words than any violence could have shown. He waved his hand once again, and Mr. Haydon was led away by the guards.

When he had disappeared, Saya Chone turned to Jack.

"You have heard what was said," he murmured. "Do not be so foolish as to think it was spoken as a mere threat. Base all that you do or say on that statement as a fact. There is no hope for you unless you get your father to do as we wish."

He turned away, and the Strangler at once released Jack from the chair and removed the gag from his mouth. Next Jack was led away by a couple of guards and conducted once more through a labyrinth of narrow, winding passages until they halted before a door, where the Malay unlocked and took off Jack's fetters. The door was opened, and he was thrust into the room, his limbs once more his own.

The room in which Jack now found himself was lighted by a small lamp, and, as he entered, a figure sprang up from a low bench. "Father!" cried Jack, and at the next moment their hands were clasped together.

"Jack, Jack," said Mr. Haydon, in a low voice which he strove to keep steady; "where, where have you come from, and how do you come to be here?"

Jack at once plunged into his story. They sat down together on the bench, and now Mr. Haydon learned the whole history of Jack's adventures.

"Your quest, Jack, was well and bravely undertaken," he said, when his son had finished the story, "but these powerful and cunning rogues have been one too many for us up to the present."

"But how were you seized, father?" cried Jack, and Mr. Haydon related his story in turn. It was short and soon told. He had gone for a walk along the shore near Brindisi, when, in a lonely spot, he had been attacked from behind and felled by a severe blow on the skull. This, however, did not entirely reduce him to unconsciousness, for he had a distinct recollection of inhaling the smell of some powerful drug before he became insensible to everything about him.

He had awakened to consciousness to find himself in a cabin of U Saw's steam yacht, and here he had been kept the closest of prisoners on the voyage back to Burmah and up the river. He had been put ashore by night on some deserted part of the river bank, and then carried, by unfrequented ways, through the jungle and across the hills to U Saw's stronghold. In the latter place he had been kept in strict confinement, and urged by threats to disclose the ruby-mine he had discovered. Hitherto his enemies had not proceeded to torture, though he had been daily expecting it.

"And now they threaten me through you, Jack," concluded his father in an anxious voice Jack laughed, a quiet, steady, confident laugh.

"They will threaten in vain, father," he said. "We shan't give way an inch. What do you think that half-caste said to me last thing before I was brought here to you?" He related the speech Saya Chone had made to him, and Mr. Haydon gave an uneasy movement of the shoulders.

"Yes," he said, "they hope that you will plead with me, Jack, to give up the secret of the ruby-mine in order to save the pair of us."

"Not likely, father," returned Jack at once. "Whatever they do to me, mind you are not to give way on my account. We'll keep a stiff upper lip and win through this yet."

His bold, brave words cheered Mr. Haydon, and the latter eyed his straight, strong lad with pride. But at the same time the look of deep anxiety never left his face. He had met his enemies boldly enough face to face with them alone, but to have Jack in their clutches too was a terrible thing.

"At any rate," burst out Jack, "it's awfully jolly to be in here with you, and be able to talk things over. I hardly expected such luck as this."

Mr. Haydon made no reply, only smiled. He saw plainly enough why they had been allowed to share the same cell. His enemies knew that the more he talked with his frank, brave boy, and looked into those bright, courageous eyes, the less would he be inclined to let ill come to Jack, the more powerful would be their hold upon him.

"And was the ruby that you found such a very fine one?" asked Jack.

"It was a most wonderful stone, Jack," replied his father. "I have never seen one like it. Unfortunately a couple of natives, old ruby-miners, were with me when I found it, and of course I could not keep their tongues quiet."

"These fellows went to a tremendous lot of trouble, the rascals, to follow you up and get possession of it," remarked Jack.

"They were well repaid, my boy," returned his father. "The stone is worth a large fortune, and the greed of a man like U Saw for a precious stone is beyond your understanding, for you do not know the tribe."

"And the mine, was that rich?" asked Jack.

"Very rich," said his father, "but it is best for us not to speak of these matters, Jack. Walls have ears with a vengeance in these places."

Their talk now turned to the channel of their own doings while they had been separated. For nearly twenty-four hours father and son stayed together, and were as cheerful as the dark fate hanging over them allowed. Then towards sunset of the day after Jack's arrival at U Saw's stronghold, the door of the cell was opened, and the Strangler appeared at the head of a strong guard.

By signs he ordered the two prisoners to follow him. As they stepped forward, they were placed in single file, and the guard closed round them. Jack and his father were now led into the courtyard, where they saw that a larger procession was awaiting them. At the head of the latter was placed the villager who had killed his neighbour. His hands were bound behind his back, a loop of cord was thrown about his neck, and he was in charge of a couple of the Kachin bodyguard.

Jack and his father were placed behind this prisoner, and were now allowed to walk side by side.

At the next moment the Ruby King and Saya Chone rode forward, and took their places at the head of the procession. They moved on, walking their ponies quietly, and the line of men on foot at once marched after them.

Neither Jack nor Mr. Haydon was bound. They were entirely free except for the Kachins who marched on either side and kept a wary eye on their movements.

"After all," thought Jack sadly to himself. "What need is there to bind us? Suppose I broke loose now and ran? Even if I got away from these fellows, where could I go to? The whole valley is a prison just as sure as the stone walls we have left behind for the moment."

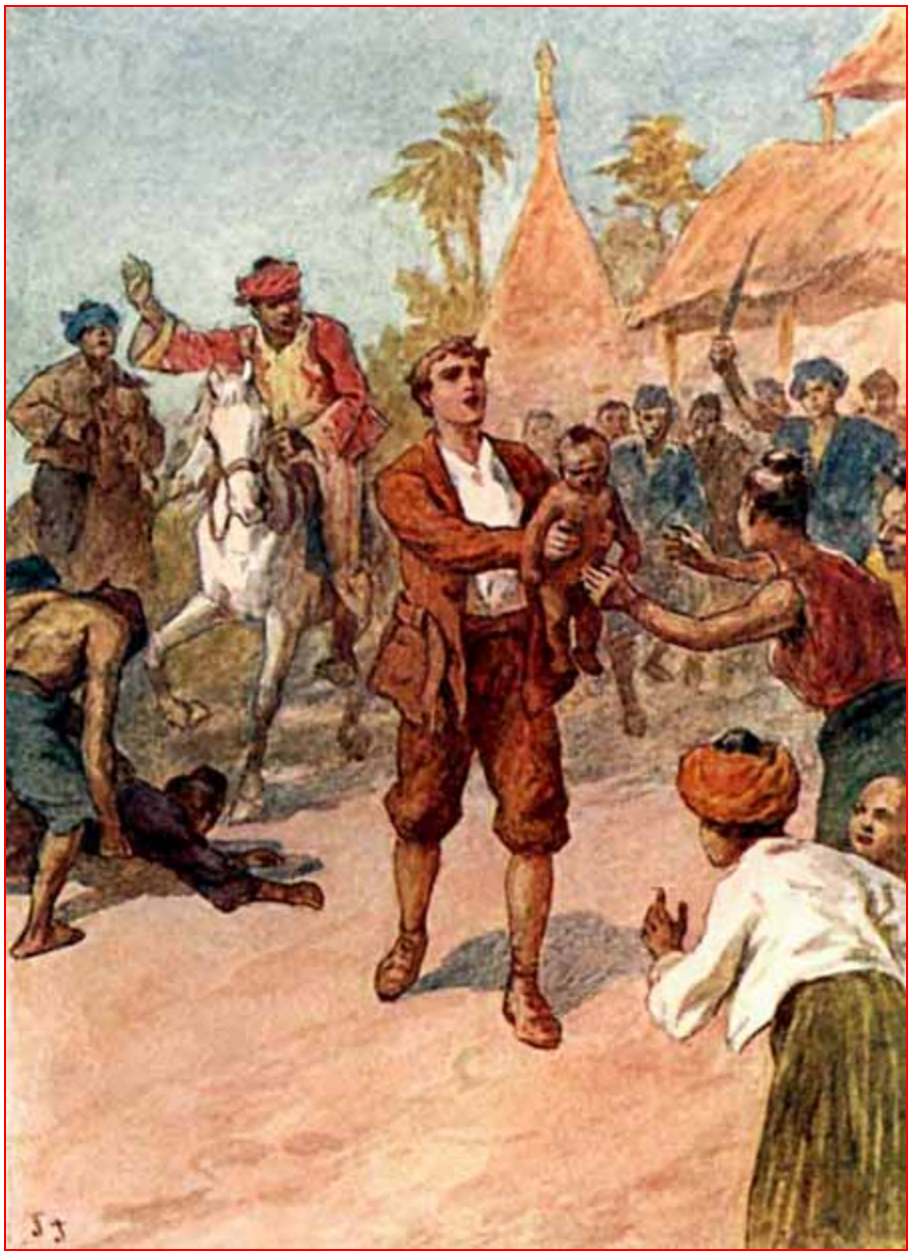
But scarce two minutes had passed before Jack had burst from the guard and was running at his fleetest. It happened in this way. They filed out of the courtyard and along a broad, ill-kept, dusty road passing the village.

Near the first houses of the village, a woman sprang out of the crowd which was waiting to see the procession pass. She rushed forward, an infant in her arms, and flung herself on the ground before the ponies ridden by the Ruby King and the half-caste. Holding the infant out at the fullest reach of her arms, she lay in their path, and poured out a string of loud, supplicating cries. Jack knew not a word she said, but he understood very well that the wife and child of the doomed man were before him.

He looked to see the riders pause upon witnessing this spectacle of wretched despair. Then, with a start of horror, he saw that they were intending, in cold-blooded fashion, to trample mother and child beneath the hoofs of the animals which bore them. The woman had stretched herself out so that her body was in front of the half-caste's pony, her infant in front of that of the Ruby King. Saya Chone's pony was more merciful than the flinty-hearted wretch who bestrode it. It started back, reared, shied, refused absolutely to step forward upon the unhappy woman. The Ruby King uttered a brutal laugh, and urged his own animal on.

The latter beast went forward willingly, and was within a stride of placing its fore feet on the little brown, naked body, when Jack gave a sharp cry of

horror and darted forward. Several of the bodyguard sprang after him, but they might as well have leapt after a deer. Jack raced forward, flew between the ponies, and caught the child from the ground. At the same instant three or four of the villagers ran to the spot, lifted the woman, and dragged her away. One of them took the child from Jack and put it in her arms.



**THE RESCUE OF THE NATIVE CHILD.**

Now the guards came up, seized Jack, and hustled him back to his place in the procession.

"Well done, Jack," said his father quietly. "You were just in the nick of time. Another second and U Saw's pony would have trampled the life out of the poor little mite."

"Really, he would have done it," breathed Jack incredulously. "Even after cutting in and picking it up, I can hardly believe it."

"Oh, he'd have done it, without doubt," said Mr. Haydon drily. "You will find out, Jack, that these people hold human life very cheaply, and human suffering cheaper still."

The Ruby King and the half-caste had taken no notice of Jack's action save to laugh derisively, and now the procession moved forward once more. They went about a couple of miles, and halted on the edge of a steep descent which ran down to a broad swamp. It wanted now about half an hour to sunset. At the foot of the descent, on the edge of the swamp, a cross had been raised. Jack's blood ran cold within him. What awful sight were they now to see? Were these monsters about to crucify the condemned man?

# CHAPTER XXXII.

## THE HORROR IN THE SWAMP.

He breathed more freely when he saw that the men who led the villager forward had coils of rope in their hands and nothing else. In a trice the man was bound to the cross, his arms at full length, his body firmly lashed to the upright.

The half-caste now beckoned to Jack.

"Come down the slope," said Saya Chone. "I want you to look at this man now. You will see him again in the morning. Perhaps you will find it useful to note the difference."

Jack was led down the descent and brought face to face with the native. The English lad saw at once that the man bound to the cross was stupefied with an extremity of terror. His brown skin was a frightful ashen shade, his eyes were wide, distended with horror, and fixed on the swamp, his mouth open, his jaw hanging limp.

"You will see him again in the morning," repeated the half-caste; "and you will see, I assure you, another kind of man."

"Yes," said Jack, "after you have practised your brutal devilries on him."

"No, no, oh no," laughed Saya Chone in his soft, cunning tones. "We shall do no more to him. His whole punishment consists in remaining here in bonds from sunset to sunrise. Then we shall loose the ropes, and he will be free."

"Yes," said Jack, who thought now that he saw daylight, "with every vein full of the fever and malaria that haunt this swamp."

"Fever," laughed Saya Chone, "this fellow is absolutely safe against fever. You could no more give him jungle fever than you could make him ten feet

high. A night here would give you a fever that would kill you in ten days, never him."

Jack was puzzled once more, and said nothing. He resolved to ask his father what it all meant.

But he soon found that this chance was not to be afforded him. He was led back up the rise, and placed at some distance from the spot where his father stood. He saw his father taken down the slope and confronted with the condemned native, then brought back. At once the procession was reformed. Jack was placed at the head, his father at the rear, and they were not allowed to exchange a word.

Jack's heart sank a little. Did this mean that they were to be separated? It did. When the great house was once more gained, Jack was shut up by himself in a room which he had not seen before, and there he spent the night.

The sun had been up a couple of hours next morning before Jack heard the sound of any movement outside his cell. Then there was a rattle of creaking bolts and the door was flung open. Saya Chone stood in the doorway with the usual band of blue-kilted and well-armed Kachins.

He did not speak, only beckoned with his hand, his malicious eyes lit up with their usual evil grin. Nor did he speak throughout the subsequent journey when Jack was led over the track he had followed the night before. Jack looked round for his father, but no sign of Mr. Haydon was to be seen. The half-caste ambled ahead on a pony, Jack and four of U Saw's retainers followed behind, and that was the whole of the party.

As they approached the edge of the declivity which ran down towards the swamp, the sound of a loud, measured voice came through the air.

Saya Chone started, touched his pony with his heel, and cantered forward. Then he dropped back to his former pace as they cleared a patch of bamboo and saw the origin of the sound. On the edge of the slope stood a man dressed something like a monk. His head was close shaven, and he carried a large yellow parasol through which the sunlight poured, and made his polished skull shine like gold. He carried a large basket on a pole slung over his shoulder.

Jack had seen such a figure before, and Buck had told him all about it. It was a *pothoodaw*, a man who, without belonging to the order of regular monks, still leads a life of prayer and pious works. The holy man had paused on the edge of the slope to recite his prayers, moved doubtless thereto by the sight of the condemned man below. Now, as the little procession arrived, he swung up his basket and moved away without a glance at them.

Nor, save for Jack, was a glance cast at him. A *pothoodaw* is a familiar sight in every corner of the country, and his wanderings from place to place take him to every nook, however desert or solitary.

Jack, too, soon had eyes for something beside the holy man. They reached the edge of the slope. Saya Chone turned with a grin and spoke to one of the Kachins. The latter at once whipped off his turban, unrolled it and folded it over Jack's eyes, and so the latter was led down the slope.

"Now you can look," said a mocking voice, and the turban was whipped aside.

Jack gave a cry of horror. He could not help it. He had meant to restrain all signs of feeling, but this was too much. He had been placed so that he stood almost breast to breast with the most dreadful and grisly horror that the mind of man could conceive. He looked upon the horrible, dry, shrivelled mummy of something which had been a man. The shape of the villager hung there in the bonds, but it was a mere framework of bones, upon which hung wrinkled brown folds of shrivelled skin. The haunting terror of the vision was beyond all description.

Jack tried to speak, to ask what had done this fearful thing. But his dried tongue refused its office; it clung to the roof of his mouth.

The half-caste at his shoulder now broke into a chuckling laugh.

"He looks pretty, does he not?" said Saya Chone. "And you see nothing has happened but what I said. He has been tied here all night." He was silent for a few moments in order to let the awful sight sink deeply into Jack's mind, then he went on. "You are puzzled. I can see it in your face. What has happened to him? I will tell you. You now see what a man looks like when *every single drop of blood has been sucked out of his body*."

The half-caste paused a little, then laughed gaily. "It is having a better effect on you than I should have hoped for, my young friend. You look sick with horror. But even through your disgust I see a glimmer of wonder as to the manner in which it is done. Simply enough, I assure you. This swamp is famous throughout the valley for the immense size and virulence of the mosquitoes which breed in it. With the fall of dusk they pour from its recesses in vast swarms, and fasten on man or beast or any creature into whose skin they may drive their stings, and from whose body they may suck its blood. Here has been a feast royal for them."

He waved his hand towards the dry, rattling, shrivelled remnants of humanity, fastened to the cross, and Jack understood the awful, the sickening cruelty of this exquisite torture.

"It is a slow death, but terribly sure," went on the half-caste. "As one gorged horde drop off, be certain that a thousand hungry swarms hover round, eager to fill the empty places, and taste also of the feast. Think of it to-day, think of it well."

He waved his hand and the Kachins marched away up the hill, leading Jack with them. The road back to the great house was taken in silence, and Jack was thrust once more into his solitary cell. There he spent the whole day alone, not seeing even those who thrust his dish of meat and rice through a small trap in the door.

The afternoon had worn far on, and he was sitting on his bench deep in thought. He had striven to keep out of his mind the spectacle he had seen that morning, but the impression it had produced upon him was one of such terrible power that it was before his eyes at every moment. What did it threaten to them, to his father and himself? His mind recoiled before the idea.

Suddenly, without a sound, the door of his cell swung back, and there was a swift rush of naked feet on the floor. Four of the guard were upon Jack before he could lift a finger, and at the next moment his hands were bound behind him, and his ankles fastened together with a rope which permitted him to walk with fair ease, but gave him no freedom to do aught beside take short steps. Within five minutes again he was in a procession such as he had walked in the night before.

In front once more rode Saya Chone and the Ruby King. The latter rode on a fine white pony, and was attended by a couple of retainers, one of whom held a huge scarlet umbrella above U Saw's head, and the other carried his betel-box of solid silver. Jack turned his head, and saw at first no sign of his father, but when they had gone about half a mile, he looked back and saw his father's tall figure, conspicuous among the short, sturdy Kachins who guarded him, among a group now setting out from the gate.

This order of the march was kept until they reached the edge of the slope. Down this Jack was hurried, and now saw a sight which filled him with the gloomiest of fears. The villager still hung in his bonds, and two yards in front of the cross to which he was bound stood two similar crosses, each surrounded with a framework of strong cane.

Jack stiffened himself for a struggle against the horrible fate which menaced him, but his struggles were all in vain. His enemies, small perhaps, but many, and with muscles of iron, had him strung up to the cross in a trice, and here he was gagged, after he had been bound securely.

In a few moments he saw his father bound in like fashion, and then, to his surprise, he saw a couple of men swiftly and thoroughly cover the framework of cane around each cross with strong mosquito-netting.

"What does this mean?" thought Jack. "Are they only putting us here to terrify us? The mosquitoes cannot get at us through this netting." But at the next moment he learned that this was but a trick to prolong their agony, and cause them to endure an extremity of mental suffering which the villager had never known. Saya Chone, as ever, was the spokesman of his master's will.

"You will be safe under these nettings until these cords are pulled," he said. Jack and Mr. Haydon looked to the ground whither the half-caste pointed. There they saw a couple of stout cords, one fastened at the corner of each mosquito-net.

"A sharp tug at the cord will displace the nets," went on Saya Chone. "But you will have a chance to save your skins before that is done. In any case, the first cord will not be pulled until an hour after sunset. Then," went on the half-caste, addressing himself to Mr. Haydon, "this is the cord which

will be pulled," and he pointed to the cord fastened to Jack's net. Mr. Haydon ground his teeth. "If you don't want it pulled," purred Saya Chone softly, "you know what you have to do, a few words, nothing more. An hour later the other cord will be pulled, and you will be left for the night. On the other hand, if you wish for release, you have only to shout that you will tell us, and a dozen men will rush down with torches and smoking green boughs to beat aside the mosquitoes, and bring you out in safety. I myself shall remain under shelter and within earshot."

Without another word he turned and marched up the slope. The attendants had already retired, and within a few moments the edge of the swamp was empty save for the prisoners and the dead villager.

Jack closed his eyes. He and his father were so placed that straight before them, almost at arm's length, was the horrible, shrivelled figure which was so dreadful a pledge of the terrible powers which lurked within the dismal swamp behind them.

Jack now heard his father begin to speak. "I see you are gagged, Jack," said Mr. Haydon. "It is a compliment to your staunchness, my poor boy, if nothing else. Had they fancied there was the least chance of your showing the white feather, they would have left you your powers of speech, that you might beg for release. This is a frightful position. I have been expecting some cunning device, but this is awful beyond what I could have dreamed of."

# CHAPTER XXXIII.

## THE POTHOODAW.

Jack could make no answer. Mr. Haydon now remained silent, and his brow was knitted in deep thought as he turned their cruel situation over and over, yet saw no hope of release for his son save in betraying the secrets of those who employed him, secrets he was in honour bound not to disclose.

The sun sank swiftly. Before it had disappeared Jack saw swarms of the dreaded mosquitoes begin to thicken in the air, like flights of gnats on a summer evening in England. The swift tropic dark swept over swamp and hill-side, and almost at once the framework which covered each of the captives was literally hidden with the vast masses of the venomous insects, which knew that a fresh prey awaited them within.

It did not need sight to tell the prisoners that an incalculable number of their tiny but deadly enemies awaited the moment when the nets would be drawn aside, the sense of hearing told them only too clearly. The air was filled with a steady hum caused by the beating of myriads upon myriads of tiny wings.

Jack shuddered. He had already been bitten severely by mosquitoes when they had invaded a camp in their dozens and scores, and he had been free to defend himself, but what hideous torture would lie in that moment when they would be exposed to the onslaught of these innumerable swarms, and be unable to move a finger to disturb them at their dreadful feast upon the life-blood of their victims.

Jack and his father had spent half an hour in silence, when a yellow glow brightened over the swamp, and presently the moon came up and cast a strong light over the scene. Now Jack saw the mosquitoes. They hovered in vast clouds around and above the netting, they hung in huge festoons from every fold, from every corner, from every point of vantage where foothold could be gained. It had seemed incredible to him at first that such tiny creatures could drain the body of a man of every drop of blood, but now

that eye and ear together assured him of the vast number of their swarming myriads, he wondered no longer.

He was still staring at them when there was a flare on the edge of the slope above. He glanced up and saw a couple of men in the moonlight. They bore burning green branches, and waved them to and fro to keep off the clouds of mosquitoes which danced about them. From the midst of the smoke came a voice. "In ten minutes more the first hour will have gone and the first cord will be pulled."

It was the voice of Saya Chone, and he added no word to that brief message. He and his attendant withdrew, and the prisoners were left in silence to stare at the horrible death which now hung with terrible nearness over the head of Jack.

Mr. Haydon gave a deep groan.

"This is too dreadful, Jack," he said, in a low, shaking voice. "I see they mean it. There can be no possible doubt of that now." Then suddenly the note of his voice changed. It became tense, vibrating, eager. "What's that?" he said, and again, "What's that?" and fell silent.

Jack turned his head and saw what his father meant. Twenty yards to their right a large patch of reeds grew on the edge of the swamp. From the reeds the figure of a man was slowly creeping towards them. Swathed from head to foot in folds of thick white linen, to defend himself from the bites of the venomous mosquitoes, the man was working his way inch by inch along the ground.

Jack watched the stranger's progress with deep and burning interest. Surely he came as a friend! The bitterest enemy could not come to make their situation worse than it was at present.

With a last swift wriggle the creeping figure was at the foot of the net which shrouded Jack. The latter looked down and saw that the man was literally covered from head to foot with masses of the swarming insects. Then, with wonderful dexterity, the newcomer jerked aside the insects which were massed upon him, raised the lower edge of the net, and shot with a swift, sinuous movement inside.

As he sprang to his feet, his linen wrapper fell aside, and, to his great astonishment, Jack saw the bald shaven head of the *pothoodaw* flash up into the moonlight. Then the holy man smiled, and Jack knew the cheerful grin. His heart leapt for joy. It was Me Dain, the Burman guide. Out gleamed a keen knife, half-a-dozen rapid cuts were delivered, and Jack's bonds, gag and all, hung in shreds about him. Jack caught a fervent, grateful whisper from the neighbouring framework.

"Thank God! a friend, a friend!" Mr. Haydon breathed in a tone of intense relief.

"Wait!" breathed Me Dain in Jack's ear, and was gone. The Burman wrapped himself again in his linen shield, wormed his way across to the framework where Mr. Haydon was a captive, and cut him free in an instant.

"Me Dain!" Jack caught the whisper from his father, and knew that the latter had recognised his old guide. A few whispered words passed between the Burman and Mr. Haydon, then the latter whispered across to his son: "Wrap your coat round your head, Jack, to keep these venomous little brutes off as much as possible, then follow us."

Jack whipped off his Norfolk tunic and folded it about his head, leaving himself a peep-hole to watch the guide. He did as he saw them do. He dropped to the ground, wriggled under the net, then sprang to his feet and hurried beside his father, following Me Dain, who led the way back to the patch of reeds whence he had crept. Skirting the reeds he raced at full speed along the edge of the swamp, keeping at the foot of the slope which ran down to the marsh, but heading away from the spot where Saya Chone and his attendant Kachins were posted.

The torture of that journey through the swamp was a thing which Jack never forgot. The mosquitoes worked their way into every crevice of the tunic he had folded about his head. They crept into his hair, down his neck, and swarmed over his face through the breathing hole he was compelled to leave open in front of it. The pain of their sting was such that he had to set his teeth to keep back a growl of malediction upon their evil fangs. Every venomous little wretch seemed to carry a red-hot needle which it thrust joyfully into the soft flesh wherever it happened to alight.

At last, after three hundred yards of silent scurry through this pestilential tract, they struck hard ground, and went at full speed up the hill-side for open country and purer air. Still following Me Dain, who pushed on as fast as he could go, Jack and his father plunged into a bamboo groove, and followed a narrow path. This brought them in a few minutes to a small clearing, where the Burman paused, and all were glad of an opportunity to draw breath, and knock off the mosquitoes which still clung to them.

Jack sprang forward and seized the guide by the hand.

"Me Dain," he cried, "wherever have you sprung from to lend us a hand in this fashion, just in the nick of time?"

"Ay, ay," said Mr. Haydon, "just at the moment of our hardest trial and greatest danger. Me Dain, old fellow, we are enormously indebted to you."

Father and son shook hands with the Burman and thanked him over and over again, and Me Dain grinned all over his broad, pleasant face.

"Better get on," he said, "Saya Chone not far away yet."

These words recalled the fugitives to a sense of the great danger in which they stood as long as U Saw's valley still held them, and they hastened to follow Me Dain, who was now walking briskly forward. Twenty minutes of swift and silent progress brought them to a native hut in a little clearing.

"Here you must stay for a time," said the Burman.

"But will it be safe, Me Dain?" murmured Mr. Haydon. "Whoever lives here must belong body and soul to U Saw. We shall be informed upon at once."

"No, no," said the Burman emphatically, "not by this woman. She tell nothing. She help you all she can. She is the wife of the man who was killed in the swamp. The young sahib save her child. She never forget that. Oh, no, I settle with her to-night. She keep you safe."

Mr. Haydon said no more, and all three crept under cover of a patch of plantains to the shelter of the broad eaves of the thatch of reeds which covered the dwelling. Here they found that a hole had been made in the

cane walls, and they crept into the house, thus avoiding the entrance by the door, which faced another house at some little distance away.

Inside the place they found no one but the woman and her child. She came forward and *shekoed* again and again, and Mr. Haydon, who had a fair knowledge of the language of the country, spoke to her and thanked her for the refuge which she offered to them.

At one end of the cottage there was a rude loft of logs where the little household had stored their stock of rice and other necessaries when the time of harvest came. The loft was now partly empty, and at its farther end there was plenty of room for two men to lie in hiding behind a row of tall earthen jars in which the paddy was stored after threshing.

In this place of safety Me Dain bestowed them, assuring them that no one ever went to the loft save the woman herself, and that he must be off at once to show himself at the local monastery in his character of *pothoodaw*, and so avert all suspicion that he had been concerned in the escape.

"The monks give me a room," said Me Dain. "I jump through the window, and jump back. No one knows then that I leave it. Must be careful. U Saw and Saya Chone, both bad men, very bad men."

We must now return to that very bad man Saya Chone, who was also about to be a very disappointed and furious one. On the stroke of the hour he reappeared at the brink of the slope, just after the fugitives had vanished round the patch of reeds. Had they not muffled their heads they would have heard his call to Mr. Haydon. Had he not been thickly surrounded by the smoke of the green boughs which partly kept off the clouds of venomous assailants, he would have seen that the frameworks were empty in the moonlight. But such an idea as that his victims could escape never for an instant came into his mind. The whole neighbourhood was under the thumb of his brutal lord, and he knew that no one would interfere to save a friend from U Saw's hand, much less a pair of strangers and foreigners.

Thrice he shouted his threats and warnings to the empty cages, and he judged that the silence meant stubborn resolution not to be conquered. Then, with his own hand, he pulled the cord which should have stripped the net from Jack.

"Now the father will give way," thought the half-caste, and strained his ears to catch a sound of yielding from Thomas Haydon.

When never a sound was heard, the half-caste played what he thought would be his trump card. He ordered a Kachin to dart down, and cut the gag loose from Jack's mouth. Saya Chone counted for certain that the son's moans of agony would be too much for the father to stand, and that the latter would give way. But in an instant the nimble blue-kilt was back, his face full of a surprise beyond description.

"The white men have gone," he gasped.

"Gone!" screamed Saya Chone, and he rushed down the slope waving a smoking bough about his head. A glance at the prisons told him that the man's words were true, and for a second he stared in stupefied amazement at the severed bonds before he rushed back up the slope. He ran at full speed to the place where U Saw was placidly chewing betel and waiting the upshot of the affair. The Ruby King was fearfully incensed at the idea that anyone had dared to meddle with the prisoners, and both he and the half-caste breathed the most furious threats of torture and death against all concerned in the affair. That they would re-capture Jack and his father they did not doubt for an instant. The fugitives must be somewhere in the valley, and within an hour they had a hundred men threading every path and searching every corner of the vale.

# CHAPTER XXXIV.

## THE HIDING-PLACE AND THE THIEF.

Jack and his father spent the night safely stowed behind the great earthen jars on the loft. Stretched out on a heap of soft, dried grass, they slept and watched in turns, for it was not safe for both to go to sleep at once.

At break of day the woman brought them a meal, and they ate and drank, and Jack gave her a few rupees. A couple of hours after dawn they heard a movement below and saw a sight which they welcomed gladly. The loft stood upon a dozen wooden supports raised six or seven feet from the ground. It had no window, but, upon moving the dried grass aside, they could peep through the chinks in the floor of logs. Peering cautiously down, they saw a yellow umbrella, and presently that was laid aside as the *pothoodaw* seated himself in shade of the loft and began busily to recite his prayers.

When these were ended he sat to all appearance absorbed in profound meditation. But had anyone been near enough, they would have found that a busy whispered conversation was going on between the *pothoodaw* and those hidden in the loft above his head.

For half an hour the holy man sat there, then went his way. But in that time Jack and his father had learned much of deep interest to them. Me Dain told them that Buck and Jim Dent were now camped in a lonely place among the hills near upon twenty miles away, awaiting the Burman's return. The latter had been sent in disguise to U Saw's village to pick up what information he could, and had only just arrived when Jack saw him on the edge of the slope above the swamp. He told them he would stay in the neighbourhood and watch for a favourable moment to make a start for the camp where their friends awaited them.

For two days the fugitives lay in hiding under the care of the native woman and in perfect safety. They proved once more the truth of the old adage that "the nearer to danger the nearer to safety." U Saw and Saya Chone urged the

pursuit with the most savage eagerness. They searched every corner of the great swamp, every cane-brake, every patch of forest, every nook, and every corner. They had a cordon of sentinels drawn round the valley, patrolling day and night, so that no one could slip through their hands. But it never occurred to them for an instant to search a cottage lying almost beneath the walls of the Ruby King's stronghold, a hut so slight that it seemed incapable of concealing anything.

Another piece of luck greatly befriended them.

On the day that they were tied up at the edge of the swamp, one of U Saw's retainers had been cruelly flogged for some misdemeanour. The man had deserted the same night, and was never heard of again. The idea at once got abroad that it was he who had released the prisoners in order to spite the Ruby King, and had guided them out of the country.

Then, on the third night, the luck of the Haydons came to an end, and their hiding-place was hit upon in a very odd fashion, a fashion which could not have been foreseen or guarded against. It was about midnight, and Jack had the watch, for one or other stood on guard all the time. He sat with his back against a great post which ran from ground to ridge-pole, and, without the least warning, he felt that it was shaking very slightly.

In an instant Jack was on the alert. He could not hear the faintest sound, but the post still trembled, and Jack felt certain that something or someone was climbing up it. In a few moments he was certain of this, for he heard faint rustlings on the reed roof as if someone was moving about. He stretched out his hand and shook his father gently. Mr. Haydon woke at once. He made no sound, only shook Jack's arm in return to let his son know that he was on the alert.

The rustling on the roof grew a little louder. The thatch was being torn aside, but so cautiously, so cleverly, that the two watching below could only catch the sound by listening intently. Suddenly the stars flashed upon them. A hole had already been made above them, and in this hole they saw the head of a native against the sky.

They remained perfectly still and silent, and watched the hole grow. Silently, deftly, the midnight marauder plucked handful after handful of the

reed thatch away and enlarged the opening. Both of those below who watched him, had grasped by this time what it all meant. This was no man in the pay of U Saw, who suspected a hiding-place; it was just a common thief, pure and simple, who had an eye to nothing save the widow's paddy. Believing that she was alone and defenceless in the house, he had come to plunder her loft.

But, whatever his motive, the risk to the Haydons remained the same. In another moment he would drop among them and infallibly discover their presence. Then his outcries would arouse the village and their capture would be certain.

Very, very slowly the thief slipped his legs in at the hole, which was now big enough to admit him, and began to slide downwards. As Jack watched the rogue gently drop upon them, he felt for a second his father's hand laid upon his throat, and he understood; the man was to be seized and choked into silence; nothing else remained for them to do.

Inch by inch the rascal slipped down. So cunning was he that he made less noise than a mouse moving among the dried grass, and, without doubt, he thought that he was carrying out his raid finely, and would make the widow's store of rice smart for it.

The thief loosed his hold upon the rafter of the roof by which he hung, and his long, slender, naked body, bare but for his waist-cloth, dropped as a great snake might drop between Jack and his father. Mr. Haydon made one clutch, and closed his fingers in a tremendous throttling grip about the rogue's neck. Jack caught him by the arms.

A most extraordinary struggle followed. The fellow was like an eel, and it proved a task of the greatest difficulty to hold him and keep him from getting loose and raising a disturbance. He was like an eel not only in his marvellous agility, his twists, his feints, his wriggling, but in his actual bodily slipperiness. The cunning rascal had smeared his naked body from head to foot with oil, so that, if seized, he could the more easily wriggle out of the hands of his captors.

How clever a device this was Jack learned to his great surprise. The arms he seized were whipped out of his clutch as if he was trying to lay hold of

quicksilver. He grabbed something which proved to be a leg. A swift jerk, and his fingers slipped off the greasy limb. Finally he settled the matter by throwing both arms round the slim, bare waist, and closing upon the rogue with a bear's hug which drove the breath out of the thief's body.

Together they threw the man upon the dried grass, and Mr. Haydon, who had made his hold good by locking his fingers about the fellow's windpipe, now eased his grip a little so that the man could breathe.

Suddenly a light flashed upon this scene of fierce but silent struggle. The woman herself had been aroused from her couch in the room below, had lighted a small lamp, and climbed the rude steps to the loft.

**THE MIDNIGHT THIEF.**

Mr. Haydon turned his head, saw her, and snapped out a single word. She set down her lamp, disappeared, and was back in an instant with a long strip of cloth in her hand. Mr. Haydon took this, and soon whipped a gag round the mouth of the intruder, while Jack held him down. In response to another whispered request of Mr. Haydon's, the woman fetched a length of cord, and in two minutes the thief was bound hand and foot. Then father and son

got up and stood looking down at their captive, who stared sullenly up at them from his dark eyes.

"If this isn't a confounded fix," murmured Mr. Haydon. "Why should this thieving rogue choose us to drop in on, of all people?"

"The unprotected house drew him, I expect," replied Jack.

"Ah, true," returned his father. "I wonder, though, if he had any accomplices."

He turned and spoke to the woman, and she at once blew out the lamp.

"The light in any case is dangerous as likely to attract attention," whispered Mr. Haydon. "Now, listen."

They listened intently for some time, but there was not the faintest sound of any movement in the neighbourhood.

"I hope to goodness this rascal was working by himself," went on Mr. Haydon, "and no one knew what he was about. We don't want a companion peering in to see what has happened to him."

"What under the sun are we going to do with him, father?" whispered Jack.

"We must leave him tied up here and run for it," replied Mr. Haydon. "I see nothing else that we can do."

"Nor I," replied Jack; "and the sooner we march the better. We don't know that there was not someone outside to help him carry off the spoil, and the accomplice may have learned of our presence."

"You are right, Jack," said his father.

"But there is Me Dain, we must pick him up," pursued Jack. "Without him we do not know where to strike. How can we get hold of him?"

"The woman will be of service there," said his father. "She is our only hope."

He spoke with the native woman for a few moments, then gave a whistle of satisfaction below his breath.

"She knows where he is lodging, and thinks she can rouse him without disturbing anyone else," whispered Mr. Haydon; "at any rate, she is going to try."

The woman shuffled down the steps, and was gone in an instant.

"We may as well go down and be ready for a move," murmured Mr. Haydon, "but we'll try this chap's knots first."

They examined the bound thief, and made certain that he could not easily shuffle out of his bonds, then they went down to the main room of the hut and posted themselves near the door.

The time they waited seemed never-ending. In reality it was not more than twenty minutes. But when they feared that every sound would see an alarm raised upon them and their escape hopelessly cut off, every minute seemed an hour.

Jack had his eye at a huge crack in the door, and to his immense relief he made out at last a couple of figures approaching the house under the dim shade of the trees.

"Here they are," he breathed. "She's brought it off all right. I can make out Me Dain."

Two seconds later the Burman shot into the hut with a stealthy, noiseless glide.

"Come on," he said. "Not stop at all. She tell me everything."

Away they went at once, Me Dain leading the way, with Jack and his father close behind. The Burman dodged round the corner of the hut, and struck at once into a hard well-trodden path which was at once swallowed up in the thick shade of a close-set grove of bamboos. It was a path leading to a pagoda much frequented by the villagers, and would show no sign by which they might be tracked on the morrow. Me Dain had made himself familiar with the ins and outs of the place, and he marched forward with a swift and assured step. Luckily, the hut stood right on the outskirts of the village, and in a few moments they were out of sight of any house, and when they

turned aside from the path to the pagoda they soon left behind all sign of human presence.

As they crossed a little clearing, Jack thought he heard a soft footfall in their rear. He turned, and saw, to his surprise, that the native woman was a short distance behind them, with her child in her arms.

"Why," said Jack, "the woman of the hut is following us."

"Yes," replied Me Dain. "She must come, sahib. If U Saw catch her, he burn her alive for hiding you."

"Likely enough, the unspeakable brute," murmured Mr. Haydon. "We must put the poor woman in a place of safety, Me Dain. We owe her a great deal."

"She not want to stop in that place, anyhow, sahib," replied the Burman. "She belong to a village over the hills. She want to go back, now her husband is dead."

"Oh, very good," said Mr. Haydon. "We'll put her right if we have the chance."

"Yes, yes," said Jack. "She's been a good staunch friend to us, the same as you, Me Dain."

"Very true, Jack," said Mr. Haydon.

# CHAPTER XXXV.

## THE FLIGHT FROM THE VALLEY.

They now went a couple of miles in silence, keeping a sharp look-out on every hand. But they gained the foot of the hills which encircled the valley without seeing or hearing anything which might promise danger.

With Me Dain still in the van, they climbed steadily up a steep slope and over a rocky saddle between two peaks which lifted sharp points against the starry sky.

As they gained the saddle, Jack whispered sharply: "Stop, Me Dain, what's this? I smell something."

"Me too," said the Burman, snuffing cautiously. "There is a fire somewhere ahead."

"A fire," said Mr. Haydon. "We must take care. Who have lighted it, and what are they doing in a lonely spot like this?"

A dozen steps again and the questions were answered. They cleared a little ridge and saw, two or three hundred yards ahead, a great glowing patch of red where a big fire blazed up, and figures moved to and fro about it.

"A watch-fire," said Jack. "We'd better dodge back. Luckily they're up wind."

The fugitives retreated until the fire was hidden from their view by a great rock, then put their heads closely together to whisper to each other.

"Watchmen," said Me Dain; "they are watchmen keeping guard over the path which runs out of the valley towards the hills."

"Then those cunning villains have set a watch over every road," murmured Mr. Haydon. "Do you know of any way to get out without following a path, Me Dain, any way by which we can clamber over the hills?"

"No, sahib, I do not," replied the Burman; "but here is the woman who has lived ten years in the valley. I will ask her."

For a couple of minutes Me Dain and the native woman held a whispered conversation, then the Burman breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"She can take us out of the valley, sahibs. She can lead us by a way, very rough and hard to follow, but very little used, where they would not trouble to set a guard. But we cannot follow it in the darkness. She will take us to the mouth of the pass, and there we must wait for daylight."

"Good, good," said Jack in a cheerful whisper, "we'll dodge these fellows after all. What luck that the woman marched with us!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a fierce yelping and snarling broke out not forty yards away, and the sound swiftly approached them.

"Confound it all, a dog, a dog!" growled Mr. Haydon.

In another instant the animal was leaping and bounding within two or three yards of them, snarling savagely, and then making the hill-side ring with its piercing barks. It belonged to one of the guards, and had been prowling about in search of food when it caught the scent of the fugitives.

"This way, this way, sahibs," cried Me Dain in low, eager tones. "Quick, quick, the men sure to come to see why the dog make a noise."

"Sure to, for a certainty," groaned Mr. Haydon. "Well, we must run for it."

Away they hurried as fast as the darkness would permit, and the wretched cur hung on their heels, yelping and barking without pause, and thus guiding the guards straight to their prey.

"We must stop this brute's mouth or we are utterly done for," said Jack. At that instant he stumbled over a large stone. He bent, picked it up, and turned round. Four or five yards behind them, and plainly to be marked by its eyes shining green in the darkness, was the dog, which, by its mere power of drawing enemies upon them, was, at the moment, the most terrible enemy of all.

For a second Jack hung on his aim, the heavy stone poised high in his right hand. Then he hurled it with all his force. Crash! He heard the missile strike the brute with a heavy thud. The dog gave one last frightful yelp of pain, then dropped and lay silent Whether the beast was dead or only stunned Jack did not know, nor did he care. He knew that he had silenced the miserable cur, and that was all he wished.

Enough harm had been done already. A bunch of dancing lights now shot into view, and he saw them borne swiftly on. The watchmen, carrying torches, were running to the spot where the dog had given the alarm.

Jack now caught up his friends with a few swift strides, and all the party hurried on, the woman leading the way and guiding them.

"Well done, Jack," murmured his father. "Well done, my lad. If you hadn't put a stop to that brute's yelping, he'd have brought those fellows on us as straight as they could run. Now they've got to look for us in the dark, and that's a very different affair."

"Do you think they'll pick up our trail from the spot where they find the dog?" asked Jack.

"Oh, no," said Mr. Haydon, "not easily. The ground is hard, and running a line by torchlight is a very different thing from running it by daylight. I hope to goodness we can make good headway before the dawn, for with the first peep of day they'll be after us as fast as they can lay foot to ground."

At this moment both looked back and saw the plump of torches come to a stand. The watchmen had reached the spot where Jack had struck down the dog, and, through the silence of the night, the eager, excited voices of the Kachins could plainly be heard as they debated hotly about the dog's fate, and what it meant.

Then the bunch of lights scattered and began to flicker here and there. The guards were looking for the trail of those who had struck down the dog. On and on ran the fugitives, and soon Jack saw that his father had been right about the difficulties of tracking by torchlight. The points of fire behind them became more and more scattered, and not one came on or followed them. Then they turned the shoulder of a hill, and all was darkness and silence once more.

It wanted an hour of daylight when they came to the mouth of the pass by which they were to escape through the ring of hills which encircled the valley.

"Must wait now," said Me Dain. "She say no man can go through the pass unless he can see the way."

"Are we to lose time, Me Dain?" said Jack. "Can't we creep on slowly and make a little headway?"

The Burman talked again to the woman, but she was most emphatic in declaring that nothing could be done until the day broke; so they crouched in silence under lee of a great boulder until the first faint bars of light began to show in the east.

As soon as it was possible to see a yard or so before them the march began. The woman led the way, with her sleeping child in her arms, Me Dain followed her closely, and Jack and his father brought up the rear.

They soon saw why daylight had been needed for the task of escaping from the valley by this road. Their way lay through a narrow pass which ran through a deep cleft of the mountains, a cleft which seemed as though it had been carved out by a blow of a Titanic axe. There was scarcely a yard of the narrow path upon which a step could be taken smoothly and easily. For ages upon ages the forces of nature had been tearing huge boulders and slices of rock from the frowning heights above, and toppling them into this crevice between the mountains. Thus the way was littered with huge stones, over which they climbed, between which they threaded their way, down which they often slid and scrambled as best they could.

For some hours they toiled steadily along this wild, rocky gorge, then a halt was called to rest and breathe. The native woman, a lithe, nimble creature, was as little discomposed by the hard, rough march as any of them, although she carried her child, nor would she allow anyone to help her with her burden.

Their breathing space was but short. They had halted on a ridge which commanded a big stretch of the country they had crossed. Jack was seated on the ground, with his back to the wall of rock behind them. Suddenly he

sprang to his feet. He looked steadily for a moment down the pass, then he said quietly, "We are pursued."

Mr. Haydon had stretched himself at full length on the ground to rest. Hearing those words from his son, he leapt also to his feet and looked eagerly in the direction to which Jack's outstretched finger was pointed. Far away a patch of the pass lay in sunlight. For the most part the narrow cleft through the hills lay in gloomy shadow of the precipices which bordered it on either hand, but the climbing sun shot pencils of light here and there into the deep rift. Across one of these sunny patches a line of tiny figures was streaming. Only for a moment were they visible. They crossed the field of light, then vanished into the huddle of rocks which littered the foot of the pass.

"Fifteen," said Jack, as the last of them disappeared.

Mr. Haydon whistled sharply and nodded.

"We've travelled fast, Jack," said he, with a troubled brow, "but these hard-bitten, wiry, little mountaineers have travelled faster. We must put our best foot foremost. It will be fatal to be caught in this narrow gully between the rocks. They will get round us and rush us from all sides at once."

"I thought we'd got a much better start than this," said Jack.

"So did I," replied his father, "but it has turned out otherwise."

Me Dain's words were short but to the point.

"Kachins!" he cried. "Come on," and pushed ahead with the woman, who was off like a deer at the first hint of danger.

"How far to the end of the pass, Me Dain?" called Mr. Haydon.

"Not more than two miles, sahib," replied the Burman.

"Good," said Jack, "if we can only clear the pass we may find some means of throwing them off. In the pass they have us tight between the walls."

"That's it, Jack," returned his father, and then they hurried over the wild broken track in silence.

Half a mile farther on Jack pointed forward. "Hallo!" he said, "here's another of those roads built along the precipice. I hope it will be a bit sounder than the last."

In another moment they arrived at a stretch of the path where the road was carried in mid-air over a deep chasm in the bed of the pass. They had already passed two such places, and at each point the road was constructed in the same manner. Holes had been cut horizontally in the sheer face of the precipice and huge beams driven into them. About six feet of each beam was left projecting from the hole, and upon these outstanding bars, smaller beams were laid parallel to the face of the rock. The earth had been heaped on all, and the result was a narrow road running along the cliff like a shelf.

The last they had passed had been very rotten, and Me Dain had gone through one hole up to his arm-pits. He had only been saved from a fall into the yawning gulf below by the promptness of Jack, who had flung himself on his knees and whipped his hands under the Burman's arms, and held him up. Warned by this misadventure, they moved slowly and carefully along the narrow track which now lay before them.

"Take care, take care," said Mr. Haydon, "this road is worse than the others. We must go in single file. These beams will not take any great weight."

They spread themselves out in a line, with a yard or more between each person, and went gingerly forward.

The truth was, that hundreds of years before, when some native ruler had gone to immense trouble and labour to build these roads, the pass had been an important highway. But a tremendous land-slide had blocked a portion of the pass, and swept away a number of the wooden roads, and the way had fallen into disuse. Since then the vast beams of teak which formed the road-bed had been slowly crumbling into decay, and many were very insecure.

As Jack brought up the rear of the little procession, he kept his eyes fixed on the road at his feet, and this for two reasons. One, to avoid the rotten places, and the other, because to look around from a roadway six feet wide into the yawning gulf which gaped beside him was very dizzying.

Suddenly he heard a scream from the native woman who guided them. He looked ahead at once, but could not see her. The little procession was now

winding its way round an acute angle of the cliff about which the road had bent sharply. The woman was out of sight; Me Dain was disappearing. Mr. Haydon quickened his steps, and Jack hurried on too. What had that scream meant? It had not been loud, but low and full of awful terror. What lay beyond the angle?

Jack turned the corner and saw, and his brown face blanched as he saw the frightful corner into which circumstances had driven them. Ten yards beyond the angle, the road ended abruptly, broken short off. Whether the beams had given way and fallen into the chasm, or whether an avalanche of rocks had beaten the road into ruins, they knew not, nor did it matter. What mattered was this, that fifty yards beyond them the road had again joined the solid bed of the pass, and that now along that fifty yards nothing was left save here and there a broken stump of teak standing out from the face of the precipice. Nothing without wings could pass over the wide space where the road had been stripped from the cliff.

For a moment no one could speak. They could only stare aghast at the gulf beside and before them, at the little strip of road broken off short and square at their feet. How were they to pass this frightful, yawning abyss?

# CHAPTER XXXVI.

## PENNED IN THE PASS.

"What's to be done now, father," said Jack in a low, quick voice; "the road's clean gone. We're trapped."

Both stepped forward and looked over the edge of the sheer descent where the road ended. A broad torrent foamed along fifty feet below. The side of the precipice fell away to the stream as smooth as a wall. It rose above them just as smooth. No way up or down. They saw that in an instant.

"Better go back and try another way," said Mr. Haydon. "Ask her, Me Dain."

A few swift words passed between the Burman and the native woman. Then the guide shook his head soberly. There was no other way that she knew of.

Jack stepped back to the angle and peered carefully round it. "The Kachins are coming," he said.

The shelf-road had risen as it ran along the precipice, and from this point he could see a long way down the pass. He saw the bunch of pursuers sweep into sight and race up the pass. His father joined him at once.

"They would see us now if we went back," said Mr. Haydon. "What on earth are we to do, Jack?"

Jack knit his brows in perplexity, but made no answer. He could not see what to answer. Behind them a band of savage and determined enemies; before them a gulf over which none but a bird could pass.

"We're in a frightful fix," he murmured at last.

"Frightful," rejoined his father. "I give you my word that I see no way out."

"Nor I, father," said Jack. "It seems to me that all we can do is to try to hold them off at this corner."

"But how?" asked Mr. Haydon.

"The road's fearfully rotten just at the bend," said Jack. "I think we could break it down pretty easily. It trembled and shook as I passed over it."

"I see," returned his father, "break the road down and keep them from rushing us. But what of ourselves? How will it advantage us to be isolated on a patch of road, stuck against the face of the cliff like a swallow's nest against a wall?"

"Frankly, I don't know, father," replied Jack. "I simply put that forward as the only means I can see of gaining a slight respite. Otherwise they will be among us and cut our throats in short order."

"Or make us captives, which would be a long sight worse," said Mr. Haydon. "Well, Jack, we'll give ourselves an hour or two longer to look at the sun. Down goes the road!"

The three men sprang to the task at once. First, with their hands, they scraped away the earth, which was very thin on the face of many of the beams. When this was removed, there was exposed to sight the flooring of small beams laid lengthways across the big beams which jutted from the rock. From this flooring each selected the soundest stick he could find.

Jack was lucky in dropping across a bit of teak in capital preservation, a bar eight feet long, four inches square, and as hard as iron. With this he began to batter at the rotten patch of roadway where the angle of the cliff was turned, and a few strokes on the rotten timbers served to tumble them headlong into the raging torrent below. His father and Me Dain were hard at work beside him, and in a very few minutes they had broken away the softest part of the road, leaving a ragged gap fifteen feet wide, just at the turn.

They made the last strokes at the outer side in the very face of their enemies. When they withdrew to the shelter of the inner angle, the racing Kachins were not a hundred yards away. In another moment the fugitives heard their pursuers gather close at hand. The little men in blue were now only a few yards away, clustered about the farther edge of the gap, and chattering to each other in a very excited fashion.

Me Dain listened intently. "They make a bridge," he whispered.

"Ay, ay," returned Mr. Haydon. "Drop a few sticks across and come at us."

Jack gripped his stout bar of teak as a plan flashed into his mind. He crept forward inch by inch until he was on the verge of the gap they had torn in the road. Yet all the time a friendly rib of rock at the projecting angle of the precipice protected him from the long iron-barrelled muzzle-loaders carried by U Saw's retainers.

The expert hands of the Kachins made short work of tearing up a number of small beams. Jack heard them dragging the timbers forward, and he poised his bar. A beam was flung across, and a second almost at once fell beside it. Out darted Jack's bar, and both were hurled into the chasm.

The Kachins gave a yell of anger, and threw the next beam across at the outer angle, as far as possible from the face of the cliff. But Jack could just reach it, and that, too, he thrust into space. Again and again they tried to make for themselves a footbridge by which the gap could be crossed, but every time Jack's ready bar foiled their purpose completely. There was a still louder yell of anger from the savage little men as the last beam they had torn up was hurled from its place. Then for a few moments there was a respite. The fugitives could hear them draw off to a short distance and hold a conference in low murmurs. Jack now looked round at his companions. His father and Me Dain were close behind him. The native woman, her child closely clasped to her breast, was watching his every movement, her face filled with mingled feelings of fear and hope.

"Well done, Jack!" murmured his father. "You've been one too many for them at that game."

The Burman now crept forward, and thrust his head as far as he dared round the angle. The voices of the Kachins had risen in eager debate, and many of their words could be caught. Me Dain listened intently. In a few moments he turned his head, and there was a very puzzled look on his face.

"They are—they are," he began, then stopped. Clearly his English could not bear him out this time. He said a few words in Burmese to Mr. Haydon.

"They are casting lots," said the latter to Jack.

"What for, I wonder?" said Jack. "Seems a queer thing."

"They're a queer little crew," returned his father. "As savage and blood-thirsty as so many ferrets. We shall soon see."

Within five minutes they did see, and the event proved how desperate an enemy they had to deal with.

Me Dain had retired, and Jack had once more taken up his place beside the gap, his bar in his hands, and his ears strained to catch the faintest sound made by those who beleaguered the little party.

Lucky for them was it that he kept so close a watch. For there was a sudden patter of feet beyond the gap, and then a figure with flying kilt, and fierce, dark face flashed into sight. Upon this Kachin had the lot fallen to leap the gap and lead an attack on the fugitives. Had not Jack's bar been ready, the fiery mountaineer would have been among them, with his gleaming *dah* poised for the stroke.

But even as he landed, his splendid bound carrying him a couple of feet over the edge, the heavy bar shot out and caught him a tremendous butting blow, full in the chest. He reeled, staggered, and his *dah* flew from his hands, as he made a frantic clutch at the bar. For a second he struggled to make his foothold good on the brink of the abyss, but failed. He dropped back and vanished into the gulf without a sound.

Jack recovered his bar, and waited with a stern, grim face for the next attack. It was a life and death struggle now, and it was his duty to guard the gap. Mr. Haydon caught up the *dah* which had flown from the hand of the Kachin, and swung it with a deep guttural sound of satisfaction. Me Dain had his great knife in his hand.

For some time there was complete silence among their enemies. The terrible fall of the man who had been chosen by lot to lead the way, seemed to teach them a little caution. But it had not the smallest effect in the direction of quelling their desire to come to close quarters with the fugitives. The Kachin is utterly too careless of human life, whether his own or another's, for that.

Half an hour passed before a fresh assault was made. The minutes dragged by with horrible slowness to those who awaited their fate on the isolated patch of ledge.

Then, with no more warning of their approach than the patter of naked feet on the earthen path, a second assault was made in the same fashion. Again a Kachin leapt into sight, but farther out, and so more out of reach of the bar. His hands were empty, too, and as Jack stepped forward and thrust at him, he clutched the end of the bar. This he did just as he alighted, and, dropping on his feet as nimbly as a cat, he strove to turn the bar aside. Swift upon his heels three more Kachins came, clearing the gulf and landing in safety, while their comrade and Jack struggled for mastery of the bar.

Upon the instant the tiny ledge was filled with the fury of a desperate combat. Mr. Haydon sprang out and cut down the second Kachin, as he ran forward to strike at Jack with his heavy weapon. The third attacked the Burman, and the fourth closed with Mr. Haydon, their heavy swords clashing together as they slashed fiercely at each other.

Jack had no eyes for any but his own enemy. The Kachin, perched as he was on the very brink of a horrible abyss, fought as coolly as possible to master the bar and avoid the swift thrusts by which at every second Jack threatened to drive him over the edge.

Suddenly the Kachin gave way and dropped flat. Jack thought his enemy was disposed of, but the shifty mountaineer had only fallen along the lip of the gulf to dodge the powerful strokes delivered by the English lad. With a swift movement the Kachin rolled under the bar, and then was up like lightning and rushing on Jack, a long dagger, plucked from his girdle, in his hand.

Jack had no weapon but his fists, but with these he sprang to meet the savage, blue-kilted figure. Taking advantage of his longer reach, he let fly with his right fist. The Kachin was clearly no boxer, for though he raised his left arm, Jack's fist went straight through the feeble guard and landed full between his opponent's eyes. This shook the Kachin so much that the vicious knife-thrust he launched went wide of its mark, and at the next moment Jack closed with him and tried to wrench the knife from his grasp.

But though the Kachin was no boxer, he was a wrestler of uncommon power and skill, and Jack felt the little man seize upon him with an iron clutch. To and fro they swung on the horrible, dizzying edge, each straining every nerve and muscle to free himself from his enemy's clutch and fling his opponent into the torrent which roared and foamed far below.

Locked in this clinging embrace, they stumbled and fell headlong, still bound together by that straining clutch. They were now actually hanging with heads over the brink of the gulf, and the uproar of the rushing waters below sounded loud in Jack's ears. Suddenly he felt that they were both going over, slowly but steadily. The Kachin was no longer trying to master his foe. So that his enemy went, he was willing to fall with him. He was now driving his heels into the roadway, and, with all the force of the iron muscles packed in his compact body, was trying to force himself and Jack over the brink.

Before Jack had mastered his meaning, the pair were head and shoulders clear of the last beam, and the Kachin was working his way outwards and downwards, inch by inch. Jack made a terrific effort and hurled himself backwards. He gained a few of the lost inches, and felt his shoulders against the edge of the beam. Getting a purchase, he strove to raise himself and fling the Kachin off. In vain. The arms were closed around him in a powerful grip, the savage face within a few inches of his own was working convulsively with hate and rage, and the Kachin now was blind to everything save the desire of destroying the white man.

Another twist and turn in the desperate life-and-death wrestle, and Jack's face was turned towards the opposite side of the gulf. But this was only to show him that a new danger hung over him with fearful menace. He looked straight down a gun-barrel. On the farther brink knelt one of his enemies, a long-barrelled muzzle-loader in his hands. He was leaning across with the evident purpose of firing a heavy iron bullet into Jack's brain. Yet, though beset with death on every hand, Jack struggled on gamely.

# CHAPTER XXXVII.

## HOW THEY MADE A ROPE.

"He may miss," muttered the plucky English lad to himself. "Anyhow, I'm not going to let this chap chuck me over here if I can help it."

At this moment an unexpected diversion was made in his favour. The native woman had crouched stolidly in rear of the combat, until she saw the Kachin about to empty his weapon into his English foe. Now she rose swiftly to her feet, a heavy stone in her right hand. Just as the Kachin was crooking his finger on the trigger she hurled it with all her force.

It proved the luckiest of shots. The missile struck the stooping man square on the top of his head and caused him to start violently. As he did so the jet of smoke and flame spurted from the long barrel and the bullet sped. But not in the direction he had intended. The muzzle of the piece was jerked a foot aside, and the wrestler received the charge full in his body. He gave a convulsive start, then his arm fell limp, and Jack was free.

Up he sprang, aflame to see what was happening with his father and Me Dain. Long as his own struggle had seemed, it had only been a matter of seconds, and Mr. Haydon and the fourth Kachin were still engaged in fierce sword play. Me Dain and the third man had closed in savage wrestle, and were trying to find each other's heart with their knives.

Jack whipped up the bar with the speed of thought, and dropped it on the head of the man with whom his father was engaged. Down went the Kachin, stunned and helpless. But at that very instant a wild scream went up from the two struggling figures close at hand. Jack turned his head to see the last flutter of their garments. The rotten foothold had given way beneath them, and, held fast in each other's clutch, they had fallen headlong into the deeps below. Jack and his father were about to leap forward to see the last of their faithful guide, when a musket cracked and a bullet flew by their heads. They sprang back into cover and looked at each other.

"We have lost Me Dain!" cried Jack. "Brave fellow, he has gone, fighting to the last."

Mr. Haydon nodded gloomily. "It is a cruel, bad business for all of us," he said.

A profound silence now fell upon the little battlefield. The remaining Kachins made no further attempt at an assault. Jack peered out very cautiously to see what they were doing, and was surprised to see them drawing off. His father joined him, and they watched the mountaineers retire to the point where the shelf-road began. Here they squatted on the ground, lighted their pipes, and calmly smoked, motionless as the rocks around them.

"There are two short," said Jack, after counting them.

"Yes," returned his father, "they have been despatched for reinforcements, and to give word that we have been discovered. Their friends are on guard."

At this moment the Kachin whom Jack had felled with the bar began to move. Jack was upon him in a moment, whipping off his girdle, and tying him hand and foot with stout strips of it. Mr. Haydon now began to talk with the native woman. As a rule he had preferred to speak with her through Me Dain, for her dialect contained many words unfamiliar to him. But now Me Dain, their stout-hearted, faithful guide, was gone, and it seemed as if no great interval could elapse before their fate, too, would be settled.

The woman had brought a small store of food with her. She ate, and offered some to her companions. But they would not touch it, though hunger was gnawing keenly at them.

Mr. Haydon sat down with his back against the cliff, but Jack could not keep still. He moved restlessly to and fro on their narrow patch, and glanced into the depths on every side. Was there nothing to be done? Must they wait idly here until their enemies were strong enough to rush them in overwhelming force?

Jack had gone to the farthest point of their refuge, and was lying at full length with his head over the edge of the last beam. He was staring into the wild foaming torrent, when an inequality in the face of the descending cliff

caught his eye. He looked intently, and saw that some fifteen feet above the river a narrow ledge ran horizontally along the cliff. He followed the ledge with his eye. It ran down towards the river, narrowed, and disappeared. He raised his head and called his father. Mr. Haydon was by his side in a moment. Jack pointed out the ledge.

"If we could drop on to that," he said, "we might get away up the pass after all."

"I'm afraid there's not much of a chance there," returned his father. "The ledge shelves away to the river. But in any case, how are we going to descend a precipice as smooth as glass? It's a good five-and-thirty feet down to that point."

Jack bit his lip in perplexity for a moment. Then his brow cleared, as a sudden idea slipped into his mind.

"We'll make a rope," he said. "There's stout stuff in these fellows' kilts and jackets," and he pointed to the Kachins lying near at hand.

Mr. Haydon slapped his son on the shoulder. "Good for you, Jack, my boy!" he cried. "We'll have a try at it."

He spoke a few words to the native woman, and she laid her child down and sprang at once to help. She proved by far the deftest and cleverest of the three at the task now to be performed. Jack and his father quickly stripped off belt, jacket, girdle, and turban from the fallen Kachins, and their clothes were tossed over to the woman. With a small, sharp knife which she produced from the little basket in which she had carried her food, she swiftly cut up kilts and jackets, while the other two knotted together turbans and girdles. Half an hour's hard work saw the heap of clothing converted into a stout, well-knotted rope. Jack took a glance at the men on guard. They were still seated at the end of the shelf-road, smoking calmly, and confident that their prey could not escape them. Jack now tied a heavy stone at the end of the rope and let it down. The stone slid along the face of the precipice and rested on the ledge. Nine or ten feet of their rope were still unpaid out.

"Plenty long enough," said Jack, and they hauled the rope up quickly.

The woman and her child were, of course, sent down first. With a broad strip of the strong home-spun the child was bound on its mother's breast, so that she might at least have one hand free to hold herself steady as she was lowered. At the end of the rope they made a broad loop, and this was drawn tight about her body. When all was ready, she slipped over the edge of the abyss with all the coolness and bravery of her race, and the strong hands began to lower her. Foot by foot she slid down the face of the cliff, and at last those above felt the strain upon their muscles suddenly relieved. The woman was safely on the ledge.

They now made the rope secure around the outer beam, which, luckily, was fairly sound. The Kachin who was their prisoner was shouting and yelling at the full pitch of his voice to warn his comrades that the fugitives were escaping. His dark eyes snapped and glittered with fury. He cared not what danger he brought upon himself if he could but warn his friends. Jack and Mr. Haydon took no notice whatever of the man's clamour. A hundred voices would have been drowned in the hoarse roar of the torrent which thundered below.

"I'll go down now, father," said Jack, "and hold the rope steady for you." He slipped over the side and was gone. Hand below hand he swung himself swiftly down the rope, and was on the ledge in a few moments. He held the rope steady, and Mr. Haydon descended in safety.

They left the rope where it hung, and crept forward along the narrow ledge. Jack led the way, the woman came next, and Mr. Haydon brought up the rear. There was very little room on the ledge, but it was sound and smooth. It had clearly been made by the river eating away the softer rock in times of flood. It descended gently towards the stream, and within thirty yards it broke short off. The river was now not more than five feet below, and Jack bent and looked into it. Then he swung himself off the ledge, and dropped into the stream with a cry of delight. It was clear and shallow, and he stood in it barely knee-deep. He helped the woman down, his father sprang after them, and they all waded on in a shallow backwater, where the furious torrent of the main stream died away to an easy flow.

Moving on in this manner, they gained the farther side of the ravine, which had been spanned by the shelf-road. Here a vast mass of rock and boulders

lay piled along the cliff wall.

"That's the landslip which carried away the road," said Mr. Haydon.

Jack eyed it critically.

"We can get up into the pass again by it," he said. "It'll be a rough climb, but we can do it."

Jack was right. They did it. It took them an hour's hard climbing, but at last they stood at the point where the shelf-road had joined the main path along the pass. Here they rested awhile, for the steep climb under a burning sun had been very exhausting.

Then Jack sprang to his feet "Come on," he cried cheerily. "We'll hit on Buck and Jim's camp yet, and with them at our back we'll stand off U Saw and his men easily enough."

"I think I can strike towards it all right once we clear this path," said his father. Mr. Haydon had had much talk with Me Dain about the spot where he had left Buck and Jim, and he believed that he could find the place.

"Poor old Me Dain," said Jack, in a tone of bitter sorrow; "if we'd only brought him up with us out of the fix there, it would have been all right. He was a fine, brave chap."

"He was," said Mr. Haydon; "it is a terrible loss to us that he has gone."

They pushed on in silence, thinking of the good, faithful Burman who had fallen, close-grappled with his enemy, into the raging torrent. From this sad reverie they were roused by the voice of the native woman speaking to Mr. Haydon.

"She says that we shall soon be out in the open country," said he to his son.

"Good business!" replied Jack. "As long as we are between these walls of rock, there seems a trap-like feeling about the affair."

Ten minutes later they crossed a low ridge, and at once the precipice which had encompassed them opened out swiftly on either hand. Before them lay a huge, cup-like hollow, filled with buildings.

"A town!" gasped Jack. "We shall be seen!"

"Deserted, my boy," said his father quietly. The more experienced eye had at once seen the true nature of the place. Jack looked again, and saw that all was silent, and that the buildings were empty shells. The walls of the houses stood up along the streets, the vane of a pagoda darted aloft and glittered in the sun, but no form moved along the narrow ways, no face peered out upon them as they passed.

Their way lay along what had been the main street of the city, and the silence, which had been pleasant in the pass, became strange and creepy here. It told of utter ruin, and seized upon the spirit of those who passed with a sense of haunting desolation.

Suddenly, into this eerie silence, there broke a sound which set every heart leaping. It was the swift rattle of a pony's hoofs galloping towards them. The sound had broken out sharply and near, for the main street was paved, and the rider had burst on to it from the sandy track beyond, where he had ridden in silence. They could not see the rider, for the way bent sharply just before them, and their only thought was to hide from this newcomer, for to be seen by anyone in this country spelled danger.

Close at hand was a narrow alley, and into this they hurried. Just inside the opening was an empty doorway, and they ran through it, and paused inside a house which turned a blank wall to the street A huge crack seamed this wall from top to bottom, and Jack, springing forward softly, clapped his eye to it.

The wall stood at an angle to the street, and the rider darted into sight as Jack peered out. The latter turned and shot a single whisper over his shoulder, "Danger," and all stood silent.

# CHAPTER XXXVIII.

## IN THE DESERTED CITY.

Jack had known the rider at once. It was the tall Malay, the Strangler. He was mounted on a nimble pony, and flogging it to its utmost speed. A few yards from the house the pony slipped on the smooth stones and nearly came down. This, perforce, checked its headlong career, and the Malay drew it in to a walk. Everyone held their breath, and Jack watched the dark, sinister figure pace by, wishing that his furious speed had not been interrupted.

He was past, he was gone, and Jack breathed more freely. Then, oh, unhappy turn of luck, the infant in its mother's arms stirred and gave a feeble cry.

The mother hushed it at once, and the fugitives looked at each other aghast. Had that cry been heard? The answer came at once. They heard the pony swiftly wheeled on the stones without. A second later it dashed back the way it had come, the Malay flogging fiercely, reckless of slips or stumbles.

"It was U Saw's man, that big Malay," said Jack to his father. "What shall we do?"

"We must push on and see what lies beyond the town," said Mr. Haydon. "It is clear that he suspects something. All depends now on whether our line into the open country is blocked."

The little party swiftly sped up the farther part of the alley, and worked their way through the town by the narrow lanes which threaded the mass of buildings like runs in a rabbit warren. Through these by-ways the native woman proved a sure guide, and soon, through a gap, they saw the open, sandy waste which lay around the deserted town.

From the last patch of cover they looked out cautiously and saw a dismal sight. The town, as has been said, lay in a great cup-like depression. On the

rim of the farther rise, straight in their path, a horseman sat motionless. Jack knew him again at once. It was the Malay. He had drawn up his pony on the ridge above the town, and now sat there, watching intently, a dark figure on the sky-line.

"We are beset front and rear," groaned Mr. Haydon. "He is waiting for companions, and watching to see which way we break cover."

Mr. Haydon had hit upon the truth. At earliest dawn skilful trackers had been set upon the trail of the fugitives at the point where Jack had silenced the dog. Thence they had followed them to the mouth of the pass, and had divined their number and the identity of those who made up the party.

U Saw and Saya Chone had been on the scene without loss of time. The Ruby King ordered that a party of his men should march up the pass and pursue the fugitives. He himself, with the half-caste, the Strangler, and a score of other men, all well mounted, had galloped by a long detour to gain the other end of the pass, in hopes of cutting them off. It was a long journey which the mounted party had to make, and they would have failed if Jack and his friends had been able to keep steadily forward. But the long delay on the shelf-road had told heavily against the fugitives, and now, as they suspected, fierce enemies lay between them and the open country.

As the Ruby King and his followers approached the place where the pass ran out on to the plain, the Malay had been sent forward to gallop at breakneck speed down the path the fugitives must follow, and report any sign he could observe of their presence. He had heard the cry of the child, and suspected at once their presence in the deserted city. Now he sat watching the hollow and waiting for his companions.

"Can we dodge back through the city, and slip out on the other side?" said Jack anxiously. His father shook his head.

"The lie of the ground is dead against that," said Mr. Haydon. "The place is built in a cup. Leave it where you may, you must go up open hill-side, and he will see us at once."

"Then we must find a hiding-place among the ruins until nightfall," said Jack.

"That's all there is for it now," replied his father. "If we can keep out of their hands until the dark, we can slip off and travel by the stars."

He told the native woman what had been decided upon, and she nodded. She knew perfectly well what terrible fate awaited her and her child if they fell alive into the merciless hands of U Saw. The little party turned in search of a hiding-place, and their steps were quickened by seeing the figures of half a dozen mounted men rise over the rim of the ridge and join the Strangler.

In a few moments the fugitives had lost all sight of the men without the city; they were swallowed up in the maze of narrow lanes and by-ways which had once been thronged by busy crowds of city folk, and were now given up to the snake, the owl, and the wolf.

Here and there they glided, looking on every hand for some secure hiding-place, but found none; every house, every room seemed open to the sun and the broad light of day.

"Surely among so many houses we should hardly be found, if we lay close in some of these open places," murmured Jack, but Mr. Haydon shook his head.

"They will split up, and every man will take a patch of the city for himself," replied Mr. Haydon. "And they are adepts at a search of this kind."

"Hallo, what's that?" said Jack in a low voice. They paused and listened, then looked at each other. The chase was afoot. They could hear afar off the voices of men shouting to each other as they hunted through the deserted city.

"That sounds as if they were about the main street," said Mr. Haydon.

"Sure to be there first," replied Jack. "They're searching the place where the Malay heard the youngster cry."

"Very true," said the father. "Let's strike towards the pagoda. It lies away from the danger zone, and there may be a chance for us there."

As they hurried towards the tall shaft which shot high above the maze of ruined houses, Mr. Haydon chatted coolly about its possibilities.

"A pagoda, my boy, is often a solid piece of masonry, built above a relic chamber. The latter is a large room of immense strength, and if anything has stood in the place, that is the most likely. If it has stood, and we can find the way in, we may be able to hide till nightfall. In any case, we can make it an awkward job to attack us."

Both father and son had brought a *dah* from the battle-ground, and at close quarters no better lethal weapon can be found.

They arrived before the pagoda, and Mr. Haydon, leaping on the first platform, ran swiftly to and fro in search of the entrance. His wide knowledge of such buildings guided him to the spot where it would most likely be found, but, as it happened, the entrance was not difficult to find. They saw a low doorway half-blocked by a huge fallen stone, but with ample room left for them to creep in.

"Here's the spot," said Mr. Haydon. "In we go. But," he hesitated for a moment, "we don't know what may be inside. I'd give a trifle for a torch."

"We'll make one," said Jack. "There are heaps of dried sticks and grass about, and I've got some matches."

He put his hand into an inner pocket of his tunic, and pulled out a waterproof metal box half full of vestas.

"Good! good!" ejaculated Mr. Haydon. "I haven't had a match for a long time, and I'd forgotten you might have a few."

He caught up a bundle of dried grass, and Jack took up several sticks, dry and tindery, ready to burst into flame as soon as a light was set to them. All three now crawled through the low, half-blocked doorway. As soon as they crept into the darkness, a strong, fetid, musty smell, mingled with a horrible scent of decay, made the air pungent and choking.

"Some beasts or other here," murmured Mr. Haydon calmly. "Let's see if they're dangerous."

He struck a match and applied it to the great bundle of dried grass which he had collected. The flame ran through it at once, and it flared up strongly.

Jack thrust a stick into the blaze, and they now had ample light to see around them.

They found themselves in a large, low room, whose floor was littered with bones and the remains of animals dragged there for food. They darted glances on every side to discover what kind of beast it was whose lair they had entered. But for a moment they saw nothing. There was a movement in a bed of dried reeds in one corner, and presently they saw two pretty little creatures, having the appearance of big cats, bound out and begin to yowl plaintively. At sight of them the native woman gave a shrill scream of terror.

"Tiger cubs!" snapped Mr. Haydon.

He glanced quickly around the place, but there was no sign of any other living creature there save the two cubs, which now began to frisk about the light.

"Lucky for us Mrs. Stripes isn't at home," said Jack, "or it would have been a case of out of the frying-pan into the fire."

"It would," agreed his father. "But it isn't long since she was here," he added. "Here's a fresh kill."

He pointed to a small buck lying almost at their feet. The blood was still wet on the graceful creature's coat, and it was untorn save for the rents made by the huge claws which had brought it down and dragged it to the tiger's lair.

"If this is the only place available," said Mr. Haydon quietly, "we shall have to creep out again. It isn't healthy to ask a tigress to go halves in her den when she's rearing a family."

"We'll have a look round in any case," laughed Jack, and they crossed swiftly to the other side of the place, holding their torches high, so that a red, dancing light was cast before them.

"What's this?" cried Jack, who was a little ahead. "What's this?" He was standing at the foot of a narrow flight of stone steps which ran upwards and was soon lost to sight in the thickness of the wall.

"Up, up!" cried Mr. Haydon. "This is what I hoped for."

The little party climbed the narrow, winding stairs as fast as they could go. Round and round in the wall the steps twisted, and then they saw a dim light ahead, and came out into a second room, as large as the one below. A broken door of teak hung loosely at the narrow opening which led into the room, and Mr. Haydon put his shoulder to it at once.

"Here's our refuge, Jack," he cried joyously.

"Half a minute, father, before you clap that door to," said Jack. "I'm frightfully hungry."

"So am I, ready to drop," returned his father. "What of that?"

"I'm going to fetch that buck up, or a good piece of it," remarked Jack. "It's a fresh kill, and quite sweet."

"I'll come with you," said Mr. Haydon. "Food is priceless at present, for we may well need all our strength."

"No, no," said Jack, "I don't want to brag, father, but I can leg it a lot quicker than you if the old lady comes home suddenly."

"Very likely," said his father. "I don't doubt that for an instant, Jack, but I'll come all the same." They lighted a couple of fresh torches and went quickly down the steps and across the room below. They found the tiger cubs, drawn by the scent of blood, playing with the new kill, trying to fix their baby fangs into it, and leaping to and fro like a couple of kittens.

"Clear off," said Jack, thrusting one of them aside with his foot, "we want this."

The buck was only a young one, not more than forty or fifty pounds' weight, and Jack swung it up from the ground by its horns. As he drew it away from them, both cubs gave a loud cry of complaint. Their cry was answered upon the instant by a frightful roar, and turning their heads, the two men saw a long, low, huge form gliding in at the opening with lightning speed.

# CHAPTER XXXIX.

## THE SECRET CHAMBER.

"Shout, shout!" cried Mr. Haydon, and the two yelled at the top of their voices and waved their torches as they ran for the steps. But neither the noise nor the fire saved them. They owed their safety to the cubs. These ran at once to their mother, and the fierce creature stayed a moment to lick and fondle them and assure herself of their safety.

Jack and his father used the respite to full advantage. They tore up the steps and hurled themselves into the room above. Mr. Haydon and the woman pushed the broken door into place before the opening and held it, fearing a rush from the great savage beast But the tigress made no charge. They heard her prowling about the foot of the steps below, and growling horribly, but she made no attempt to pursue them farther, and presently her fierce notes of anger died away.

"She has gone back to the cubs," said Mr. Haydon with a deep breath of relief. "That was a close shave, Jack. If she'd come straight at us instead of staying beside them for an instant, it would have been all up with us."

"We could have had a chop at her with a *dah*," said Jack. Mr. Haydon shook his head grimly.

"Not good enough to tackle a charging tigress," he said. "Might as well chop at a hurricane."

"Well," said Jack, "a miss is as good as a mile; and anyhow, we've landed the buck."

Jack had hung on to their quarry like grim death, and the buck now lay on the floor at their feet. But before they satisfied their hunger, they looked carefully around the place in which they found themselves. Like the vault below, the room was large and low, and it was lighted by a number of small apertures on two sides. They approached these little holes, and found that

none was of greater size than to admit of a fist being thrust through them. Mr. Haydon looked carefully at them. "These holes," said he, "are hidden among the ornaments and carving of the exterior. The room below is in the base of the pagoda. This room is built in the second of the three terraces known as Pichayas. Above us the pagoda is solid right away to the vane."

"We're in a queer fix now," said Jack. "Mrs. Stripes below is very useful to keep out U Saw and his friends, but she'll keep us in as well. It will be an awkward job to slide out after dark and take the chance of blundering into her with claws and fangs ready for business."

"Yes," replied his father, "it cuts both ways."

"Well, we won't worry about it now," said Jack. "Let's have something to eat. Here's plenty of meat, but how shall we cook it?"

It would have been easy to make a fire, for the remains of a couple of large chests lay in one corner, but smoke curling from the holes would betray their hiding-place.

"We'll make some biltong, as I've done many and many a time in South Africa," said Mr. Haydon. "In this sun the meat will parch very quickly."

He cut some long and very thin slices from the leg of the buck. Then he thrust them through one of the holes which lay towards the sun, and spread them on the flat stone outside. The stone was burning hot, so hot that the hand could not be borne upon it, for the sun had been beating there with immense power for many hours. Between the fiery sun and the hot stone, the meat parched swiftly, and ere long they were satisfying their ravenous hunger with the excellent venison. They offered some to the native woman, but she preferred to eat from her own stock of food.

"I wonder why this city was deserted," said Jack, as he devoured his venison.

"War, pestilence, or famine," replied his father briefly. "I'll pump this woman and see how the local tradition runs."

He conversed with her for some time, then turned to his son.

"I can begin as I used to begin stories when you were a nipper," said Mr. Haydon. "Once upon a time there was a great king."

"How long ago?" queried Jack.

"Goodness knows," said his father. "Time is a mere blur in these old stories. A hundred, two hundred, five hundred years, all are one to a people who keep no written records. Well, a great king ruled here over a busy and wealthy people. He built this pagoda and was immensely proud of it He delighted to deck it with gold and precious stones. She says that once the whole of the exterior was covered with plates of solid gold, and the *Hti*, the umbrella, that is the topmost stage of the pagoda, was hung with thousands of golden and silver bells, and decked with huge rubies and other precious stones. Most of these didn't belong to him. For he had a habit of marching upon neighbouring rulers and stripping their treasuries to brighten up his pagoda.

"At last the usual thing happened. A better fighting man came along and stripped him. He and his people fought well, but in the end they were overcome and the whole city was put to the sword. The conqueror had the plates of gold and a vast number of rubies, emeralds, and diamonds. But many of the finest rubies slipped out of his grasp. The priests fled and carried them off. Since that day the city has been a desert. And so you have the legend."

"Is it true, do you think?" asked Jack.

"Substantially true, without a doubt," replied his father. "The thing has happened again and again. It might easily happen to-day in Burmah itself, were it not for the British Raj. These local rulers were forever cutting each other's throats."

At this point the low murmur of his voice became mingled with a louder noise without. The sound of busy Kachin tongues in full flow came through the tiny apertures which lighted the room, and Jack and his father sprang to their feet.

"The enemy have arrived," murmured Jack, and his father nodded. They stole swiftly across the room and peered through the little apertures which lighted the place. No better spying-place could be needed. They looked

straight into the broad open space before the pagoda, and saw their pursuers defiling from a narrow street. One man was mounted, and they knew him at once for U Saw, the great ruby in his head-dress glinting scarlet fire in the rays of the sun. At the tail of his horse strode the Strangler, and a dozen busy little blue-kilted figures ran hither and thither, chattering and calling to each other, and searching eagerly for traces of the fugitives.

A loud shout presently told the Haydons that something had been discovered. Half a dozen Kachins began to yell together, and Mr. Haydon listened intently.

"They've found the hole," he murmured coolly. "What next?"

"It's very lucky for us that Mrs. Stripes is at home and on guard," said Jack. "We could hold them in the narrow stairs there with our *dahs*, but she'll do the job much better."

"Yes, for a time, without doubt," replied his father, shaking his head. "But these chaps are splendid little shikarees, and fear nothing that stands on four legs."

They could not see the group of Kachins which had gathered before the opening, but they saw the Ruby King wave his hand, and knew that the blue-kilts had been ordered to explore. They listened breathlessly, but, for some moments, all was silence. Then in the vault below there broke out a frightful roar of anger, and mingled with it came yells and outcries. The two watchers looked eagerly from their apertures, and saw the Kachins recoiling in a disorderly body, carrying among them a man whose legs dragged along the ground.

"Looks as if she'd settled one of them," remarked Mr. Haydon. It was soon apparent that the tigress had thinned by one the number of their enemies. The man was laid down in the open space, and his fellows gathered about him. But very soon they left the body lying where it had been placed, and collected about the Ruby King in a chattering crowd.

"Clearly the man is dead," said Jack. "They do not attempt to do anything for him."

"I should say she smashed his skull in, by the look of things from this distance," remarked his father. "See how the blood spreads in a pool about his head!"

Their eyes were fixed on the debating crowd, and they were wondering what the next move of the Kachins would be, when they heard a low call behind them. Both whirled round at once, and saw that it was their companion who was attracting their attention. She was kneeling on the floor, and they ran to her at once. She knelt beside a large stone which was sunk three or four inches below its fellows and shook easily under the touch.

"This is strange," said Jack. "We dried our meat and ate our meal just about here, and the stone was not out of its place then."

"Perhaps our movements loosened it," replied his father. He spoke with the native woman for a little, then turned to his son. "It sank a moment back when she stepped on it," he said. "Just when she cried out. She feared she was going to fall through the floor."

Jack knelt down and pressed heavily on the stone. It slid away from his hands, and, had he not grasped the edge of the hole quickly, he would have rolled after it The stone vanished, and was heard to land with a heavy ringing crash on stone below.

"By Jove, I nearly went head first after it," said Jack. "It was as loose as possible. Where does this lead to?"

Mr. Haydon knelt down and looked carefully around the sides of the square hole left in the floor.

"It's a secret entrance to some place or other," he said. "See, Jack, the wooden bar on which this stone worked. It has rotted through, and the stone held its place, as you may say, by clinging to the neighbouring stones. But a slight weight was sufficient to start it moving."

"What's underneath, I wonder?" murmured Jack.

"Some chamber built in the thickness of the floor between this room and the vault below," replied his father.

"We ought to have a look into this," remarked Jack.

"We will," said his father; "but I hardly see how it will avail us. There might be a chance to make it useful if we could get the stone into place, but it is very heavy, and the machinery on which it worked has rotted away."

Jack took a half-burned torch, whose flare had been quenched upon their regaining the room from the raid in which they had secured the buck, and relighted it. He held it as far into the darkness as he could, and the red light showed that a ladder, built of heavy beams of teak, ran downwards from the edge of the hole. Mr. Haydon sniffed cautiously. "The air doesn't smell bad," he remarked; "close and musty, but no mephitic vapours. I think we'll go down."

Jack swung himself over the lip of the hole, dropped his feet on the stout ladder, and went down first, holding the torch before him, and his father followed. They found themselves in a low room of fair size, but not one-half as large as that above and below.

"What's that?" said Jack, and pointed to the far corner, where something gleamed white. They crossed to it, and stood before a knot of skeletons. Nine they counted, each lying as the dead man had fallen long, long ago. In the houses of the city, where roofs had fallen in, where wild beasts had devoured the flesh, and where sun and rain and wind had worked their will upon the bones, all trace of the citizens of that long bygone day had utterly disappeared, but here, where the secret chamber had protected their remains, the skeletons were perfect.

"These are some of the men who fell in the sack of the city," said Jack.

His father bent and carefully examined them by the light of the torch.

"I scarcely think so, Jack," he said. "The bones are perfect and bear no sign of injury. It is more likely that they were priests of the pagoda who took refuge here, and perhaps died of famine, not daring to leave their hiding-place."

Jack moved a little, and started. In his new position a ray of red fire darted at him from one of the heaps of white bones. He stepped forward, bent, and picked up the glittering object.

"Look here," he said to his father, "this is something in your line, if I'm not very much mistaken."

His father turned it over, rubbed the dirt off it, and held it up to the light. It lay in his palm and winked in the light of the torch with dancing gleams of deep scarlet fire.

"Whew!" whistled Mr. Haydon, "a magnificent ruby, large, and of the purest water. Where did you get it, my boy?"

Jack pointed to the skeleton at his feet, among whose bones it had lain.

"Could this have been their secret treasure-room?" said Mr. Haydon, looking round. "Yet it is very unlikely. It is too large, and hardly in the place where they would have built it."

At this moment they heard a murmur at their shoulders. The woman had followed them, and they turned to see that she had picked up a couple of rubies from among the bones of another skeleton, and was holding them out to Mr. Haydon.

The great expert took them and examined them swiftly.

"Finer than the one you found in point of size," he said to his son. "As to purity, they are all of the highest quality. These three stones in my palm represent a substantial fortune."

Jack had never before seen such magnificent stones. He gazed in wonder at the three gleaming splendours, and turned them over with his finger.

"They are true oriental rubies," said his father, "of the finest colour and without flaw. Any one of them is ten times as valuable as a diamond of the same weight."

The native woman was turning over the bones of another skeleton. She straightened herself, came forward, and dropped another noble ruby into Mr. Haydon's hand.

"Jack, Jack," cried the latter to his son, "don't you see what this means, my boy? Here is proof positive of the truth of the legend."

"I see," said Jack, "these are the monks who were said to have fled with the pick of the rubies."

"These are they without a doubt," said his father. "They disappeared, and the conquerors believed that they had escaped, and so the story of their flight was worked into the tradition. But they had hidden themselves here, and here they died. The rubies were shared among them, and concealed in their garments. The ants have made short work of the robes long since, and the stones have fallen among the bones."

"Then among these skeletons lie the chief treasures of the ancient city?" said Jack.

"The thing is beyond all question," replied his father. "These glorious stones bear ample witness."

The intense interest of this marvellous find had almost driven the thought of their enemies from their minds. But the recollection of their deadly peril came back in full flood when a hoarse thunder broke out beneath their feet in the lower vault.

"The tigress!" cried Jack. "Is it a fresh assault?"

Not another thought did they give to the gleaming treasures within their grasp. Life was worth a mountain of rubies.

They rushed at once to see what U Saw and his retainers were doing. Mr. Haydon did not even pocket the rubies, such was his haste. He tossed them aside among the mouldering bones, where they had lain for so many generations, and flew after his son, who was already climbing the ladder.

They raced across the room, and now heard the savage roars of the tigress pealing louder and louder up the narrow stairway. In the vault below they heard shots and yells.

"They have attacked her in her lair, there is no doubt of it," said Mr. Haydon in a tone of deep anxiety. "They have without doubt flung torches in to light the place up, and shot her as she stood before her cubs, checking her charge with fire, noise, and spears. I have known a band of them take as desperate

a risk for the sake of a mere skin to sell, so they would certainly take it to seize us."

The growls of the tigress became more furious and deafening.

"They are running out!" cried Jack. "They are flying before her."

In the open space below, the Kachins were running swiftly from the entrance to the vault. Some looked over their shoulders, as if fearing pursuit.

"Very possibly," said his father. "They are running for the moment, but I fear they have done their work. See how joyous they look!"

This was quite true. The dark faces of the little mountaineers were bright with smiles, and their teeth flashed white as they grinned at each other, and shouted as if in triumph.

"Their muskets at close range are not to be despised," murmured Mr. Haydon uneasily. "They fling a heavy ball, and drive it with great smashing power. And again, the bullets may be poisoned. They often are."

The Kachins did not run far. They faced about, and three or four who were armed with spears threw their weapons forward, ready to receive the charge of the wounded creature. But no charge was made. Had the tigress been alone, she would have rushed out, but the presence of her cubs made a great difference. She stayed beside them, growling and roaring with rage and pain until the very building shook.

Half an hour passed, and the tigress was now making no more than a low moan. Little by little her growling had died away. The Haydons heard the sound diminish with uneasy hearts. They knew that the strength of the great fierce beast was going with it, and that very soon the Kachins would be at the foot of the stairs.

They talked the situation over, and looked at it from every point of view, but could see only one thing to do. That was to wait for the enemy on the narrow winding steps, where but one could pass at a time, and hold them at bay.

Jack looked round. "Where's the woman?" he said, "she has not come up."

"No more she hasn't," said his father. They had been so deeply engaged in watching every movement of their enemies that they had utterly forgotten their companion. When Jack rushed up from the secret chamber, he had thrust the flaring torch into her hand, in order that she might follow at her leisure, but there was no sign of her in the room behind them.

Jack ran across to the spot where the square black hole yawned in the floor.

"It's all dark down here," he cried in surprise. "Has the torch gone out? But why has she not come up?"

Near at hand lay a large lock of dried grass, part of a bundle which the woman herself had gathered and brought up on their first entrance.

Jack caught it up, struck a match, and thrust the burning vesta into it. In an instant the tuft of grass was ablaze, and he flung it into the secret chamber. It dropped to the floor, and the flame shot up brightly, lighting the little room from corner to corner, from roof to floor.

"She's gone!" gasped Jack in utter amazement "She's gone!" Save for the skeletons, the little room was completely empty. There was not the faintest sign of the native woman. She had disappeared absolutely and entirely.

# CHAPTER XL.

## THE BATTLE ON THE STAIRS.

Jack was about to spring down the ladder and see what had become of their companion, when a low cry of warning burst from his father's lips. The elder man had been watching the enemy, and now he called out, "They are coming! they are coming!"

Jack caught up his *dah* and ran at once for the stairs. The mystery of the woman's disappearance must wait; the first thing to be done was to keep the Kachins from their throats.

He and his father had already settled upon the point which they would occupy for defence. Halfway down the narrow winding flight there was a small landing, about six feet long, with a sharp turn above and below. Jack felt his way down to this in the darkness, then stood and listened eagerly for any sounds of movement in the vault below. He heard his father softly tiptoeing after him, and then all was silence, save for the mournful cries of the tiger cubs trying to rouse their dead dam.

"They have not come in yet," whispered Jack to his father.

"No," replied Mr. Haydon, "but I saw seven of them start across the open space, clearly bent on a fresh attack."

At this moment a muffled sound of voices rang through the vault and came up the narrow stairs. The Kachins were at the entrance. Then there was silence for a short time. The next sound was a joyous yell, which rang and re-echoed from wall to wall. The Kachins had discovered the dead tigress. Then the vault resounded with voices as they ran to and fro, searching every corner.

The fugitives knew that the flight of steps running upwards must be discovered at once, and Mr. Haydon gave a low murmur as they heard a party of searchers gather at the foot of the stairs. Up to this moment Jack

and his father had stood in complete darkness, but now a faint glimmer of light began to shine up from below, and they knew that the flare of their pursuers' torches was being reflected along the winding walls.

The preparations of the savage little men in blue were quickly made, and up they came. As Jack heard their feet shuffle swiftly up the steps, and saw the shine of the torches become brighter and brighter, he poised his heavy blade and prepared to launch a swinging blow. Nearer, nearer came the light and the chattering voices, for they talked as they came. Then a gleaming spear-head flashed round the bend below. It was held by the leading Kachin, and the second man carried a torch to light his comrade's way.

Jack drew aside to the wall, and waited for the man's head to appear. In an instant it came, and the dark face and glittering eyes of the mountaineer were filled with excitement as he saw the white men within arm's length. He shortened his grasp of the spear to strike at Jack, but the broad, gleaming *dah* fell at that very instant with tremendous force.

The Kachin whirled up the spear to guard his head, but the trenchant blade, wielded by those powerful young arms, was not to be denied. It shore clean through the stout shaft of the spear, it fell upon the shoulder of the Kachin, and clove him to the spine. He pitched backwards among those following, and the torch was dashed from its bearer's hand. But it was caught as it fell, and another of the dauntless little men sprang up to cross swords with the defender who could strike so dreadful a blow.

Again Jack launched a sweeping cut at his assailant, but this time his blade was caught upon a blade of equal strength and temper, and the iron muscles of the wiry Kachin turned the slashing stroke. He fetched a swift return blow at Jack, and the latter avoided this by springing a pace backwards as he recovered his own weapon.

The little man followed with the leap of a cat, and gave a grunt of satisfaction. This was his aim, to make ground, and Jack saw it in an instant. It allowed another man to come round the turn and support the assault with a long spear. The second Kachin was crouching low, and at the next moment the shining head of a spear darted past the first assailant and was directed at Jack's thigh. Jack avoided it by a miracle. He did not see it, did not know the man had struck at him, for he was too busy cutting and

parrying with the leader. But as the spear-head was darted at him, he sprang aside to avoid the *dah*, and so dodged both sword and spear.

The Kachin with the spear had made his stroke so heartily, and with such certainty of reaching his mark, that on missing his blow he sprawled forward. Mr. Haydon bent down, gripped the strong shaft behind the spear-head, and tore the weapon from the baffled Kachin's grasp. Then, with a growl of satisfaction that he could take a share in the fray, he reversed the long weapon, and swung its keen point forward.

The spear came to his hand at a most opportune moment. A third man was creeping on hands and knees beside the wall, aiming to pass his leader. He gripped a huge knife in his hand. In another instant he would have seized Jack by the ankles and dragged him down, had not Mr. Haydon driven the spear into him with such force that the head was completely buried in his body. He dropped to the floor with a frightful yell, and at that moment the leading Kachin gave way and leapt back among his friends. Jack had half cut through the swordman's right arm, and the latter could no longer wield the heavy *dah*.

"Come back a few steps, Jack!" cried his father. "They are meeting us on the flat, and that is to their advantage."

Father and son darted up half a dozen steps from the landing, gained the sharp turn above, then faced about again. But no Kachin was following them. The little men chattered and yelled, argued and disputed with each other, but did not advance. Finally, they retired to the vault below, taking their fallen with them.

"First round to us," breathed Jack. "How strange they brought no muskets with them! My dread from first to last was of a bullet being loosed into us."

"I observed as they crossed towards the door that they carried only spears and swords," said his father. "That is U Saw. He wishes to take us alive, wounded, perhaps, but still alive. So he forbade shooting."

"What next?" murmured Jack.

"I wish we knew," replied his father, "then we might be prepared for it." But no preparation within their power could have availed against the cunning of

the next assault. They had been watching and waiting half an hour or more in the darkness, when again the red shine of fire began to glow on the walls below them.

"What is this?" muttered Mr. Haydon. "This light is far too strong for torches." And now with the gleam of fire came gusts of heat sweeping up to them, and clouds of thick pungent smoke. Half choked, and with smarting eyes, they watched for the fire to appear. Presently they saw it below them, and saw that a furnace of leaping flame was advancing towards them, flame which filled the whole of the space, licking walls, roof, and floor. They watched it with horrified eyes. It was impossible to meet this subtle and dreadful enemy with spear or *dah*.

"What is it?" cried Jack.

"A cunning trick, a cruelly cunning trick," replied his father. "They are thrusting great burning bundles of dried reeds and grass before them. The draught comes up the stairs and keeps the air cool and sweet for them, while it drives suffocating smoke and heat upon us."

Jack ground his teeth as he saw how perfectly the plan was calculated to drive them out of the staircase into the open room above, where the numbers of the Kachins could be used to deadly purpose.

"The fire is flagging," gasped Jack.

"For the moment, yes," said his father.

The glowing mass of flames wavered and began to sink. Then they saw how it was fed. A huge bundle of dried canes and reeds on the end of a spear was thrust into the flickering glow, and at once took fire and burned with the utmost fury. Fresh bundles were pushed forward beside it, and these, too, flared up with a shrill crackle of snapping canes and the roar of a fire fanned by a strong draught. Inch by inch the flames moved forward, themselves a terrible enemy, and behind them crept up and up a savage and merciless foe.

# CHAPTER XLI.

## THE SECRET PASSAGE.

Within that confined space, the heat became that of a fiery furnace, the pungent smoke became overpowering.

"We must get back or we shall be overcome," gasped Mr. Haydon, and they climbed the steep steps of stone.

"Who's here?" snapped Mr. Haydon, as they turned the last bend. Jack looked under his father's arm.

"It's the woman," he gasped, for the pungent smoke had almost stopped his breath. "She's come back. Where has she been?"

Now the woman's voice came to them calling earnestly, "Sahib, sahib, sahib!" she cried.

Jack and his father leapt into the room, where the wider space, though dim with smoke, made the air taste wonderfully fresh and sweet after the choking passage.

The woman at once sprang at Mr. Haydon and seized his arm, talking earnestly. As she spoke, the elder man's face lighted up with a great hope.

"Jack! Jack!" he cried. "Come on! come on! Here's a wonderful chance turned up."

Jack asked no questions. He only followed as the other two hurried for the hole which led to the secret chamber. The woman went swiftly down the teak ladder, and the other two followed. At the foot of the ladder a torch, freshly lighted, was thrust into a wide crack between two stones, and stood there burning steadily. The woman caught it up and led the way. They passed the heap of skeletons, and went to the far corner, where a very low, small door stood open. It had been closed when Jack looked into the

chamber, and so he had been able to gain no idea of the fashion in which the woman had left the place.

The woman shot through the opening, and the light of her torch showed that she had entered a low tunnel not more than four feet in height and about the same in width.

"Duck your head down and come on," said Mr. Haydon, and Jack brought up the rear in the march along this tiny passage, where he had almost to scramble on hands and knees.

"What is this?" he called to his father, as the latter scrambled ahead of him.

"This," said Mr. Haydon, "explains the secret chamber. It is a passage by which the priests could enter or leave the pagoda without the knowledge of worshippers. The secret chamber was merely its ante-room, as one may say."

"How did the woman hit on it?" asked Jack.

"Looked round the place and saw the door and found it would open easily. She crept along the passage till she saw daylight, then she returned to give us the word."

"Good for her!" said Jack. "She's a first-rate sort. But I wonder how long it will be before those little ferrets behind are after us. They'll come along here in double-quick time."

"We've got a fair start," replied his father. "They'll come up the steps very slowly, having to push the fire before them."

They had gone fifty or sixty yards along the tunnel, when the woman looked over her shoulder and spoke to Mr. Haydon.

"We've got to be careful here," said the latter to Jack. "The roof is sagging and hangs very low. We must go through one at a time."

At this moment the woman threw herself on the floor and began to wind her way along like a snake. By the light of her torch Jack saw that the roof threatened at every second to fall in and block the passage. One great stone hung half-released from the grip of its fellows, as if about to topple

headlong. The woman went through the tiny space in safety, and then crouched down on the other side and threw the light into the gap to show her companions the road.

"For heaven's sake, be careful how you come through, Jack!" breathed his father. "Don't touch this huge stone for your life. It trembles now, and there isn't thirty inches fairway."

Very slowly and cautiously Mr. Haydon and then Jack wriggled along flat to the ground until the dangerous spot was cleared.

At last all were on the other side, and the woman began once more to hurry forward. Mr. Haydon began to follow her, but Jack sang out, "Half a moment!"

"What for?" cried his father.

"Can't we put a stopper on the pursuit here?" said Jack. "Seems to me we can tumble these wobblers down, and block the route." He pointed to the over-hanging stones.

"Right, right!" called his father. "Where's my sense? I never thought of it."

Mr. Haydon took the torch from the native woman and looked at the roof above his head. "Mustn't fetch too much down," he remarked, "and pin ourselves under the ruin."

"There's no fear of that," replied his son. "Look at the roof over us. It's as sound as a bell. The loose stones come from a flaw in the masonry, not from general decay of the roof."

"I believe you're right, my boy," said Mr. Haydon. "You hold the torch and I'll have a try at it."

Jack took the torch, and Mr. Haydon raised the spear which he had brought with him. He thrust the head into a long crack above the great stone, and bore with all his weight and strength on the extremity of the long shaft. Luckily the latter was very stout and of a tough wood, enabling him to bring a great stress on the big stone.

"Look out!" cried Jack, "it's going, it's going!"

Both of them moved back, as the huge stone toppled swiftly to the ground. It was followed in its fall by a dozen more, and in an instant the path through the tunnel was blocked by a heap of ruins which rose from floor to roof.

"That's all right," said Jack, in a tone of deep satisfaction. "It will take an hour or two to shift those whacking big stones. This tunnel's a case of no thoroughfare at present."

The torch was handed once more to the native woman, and on they went. The next time she paused was to dash the head of the torch against the wall of the tunnel and put out the light. As soon as the red flare had been extinguished, they saw that the beams of day were pouring faintly through branches and brushwood a little before them.

"Ah," said Mr. Haydon, "that's why the air was fairly sweet in the tunnel. There has been a draught through, more or less."

Jack sprang forward, *dah* in hand, and began to slash at the network of creepers and saplings which blocked the mouth of the tunnel. In a few minutes he had cut a path out, and they crept cautiously forth and looked round to see what place they had gained.

They found themselves in the broad courtyard of a large, ruined house.

"May have been a monastery," said Mr. Haydon. "Now for U Saw and his men. Are we clear of them or not?"

He moved cautiously forward to reconnoitre, Jack following him.

"Where's the pagoda?" murmured Mr. Haydon. "That will give us our bearings."

"I see it through this doorway," said Jack, and pointed to a gap in the wall. Mr. Haydon looked at the pagoda, and noted how it stood with regard to the sun and their present position.

"This is capital," he said. "We've come out on a side opposite to the open space where U Saw is waiting for reports from his men. We can go ahead in safety. He will have men on the watch all round the pagoda, of course. But

we've come clean under their feet, and risen to earth amid the ruins behind them."

"I should say our best plan now would be to try to get clear of the city before they push a way through the tunnel," said Jack. "We've certainly got a couple of hours before they find where we came out. Then, very likely, they'll start a fresh search for us among the ruined houses. That would give us a bit more pull in making a flit of it."

"We can't do better," said his father, and the latter spoke a few words to the native woman, who would be by far the best guide to set them on the line they wished to follow. Led by her, they threaded once more the narrow by-ways and lanes tangled with creepers, and sometimes so choked with growth that they had to turn back and choose another way. At last they came to a broken gap in what had once been the city wall, and from it they looked across the bare, bright, open plain.

"There's no one to be seen," murmured Jack, "and if we can once get over the rim of the hill, we shall be out of sight. What is it? Not more than four hundred yards."

They stayed for a few moments longer in shelter of the ruined wall, and looked warily on either hand again and again. But there was not the slightest token of danger to be seen or heard. The sun, now sloping to the west, shone brilliantly upon the open space of stones and sand, stones too small to hide a spy, and sand too bare of brushwood to afford him an ambush.

"There's a risk, of course, in venturing into the open," murmured Jack. "But there's risk whichever way you take it. We may as well make a dash for it as hang about in the ruins till someone drops on us or on our tracks."

"That's true," agreed his father.

"Come on, then," said Jack in a low voice, and he led the rush across the open.

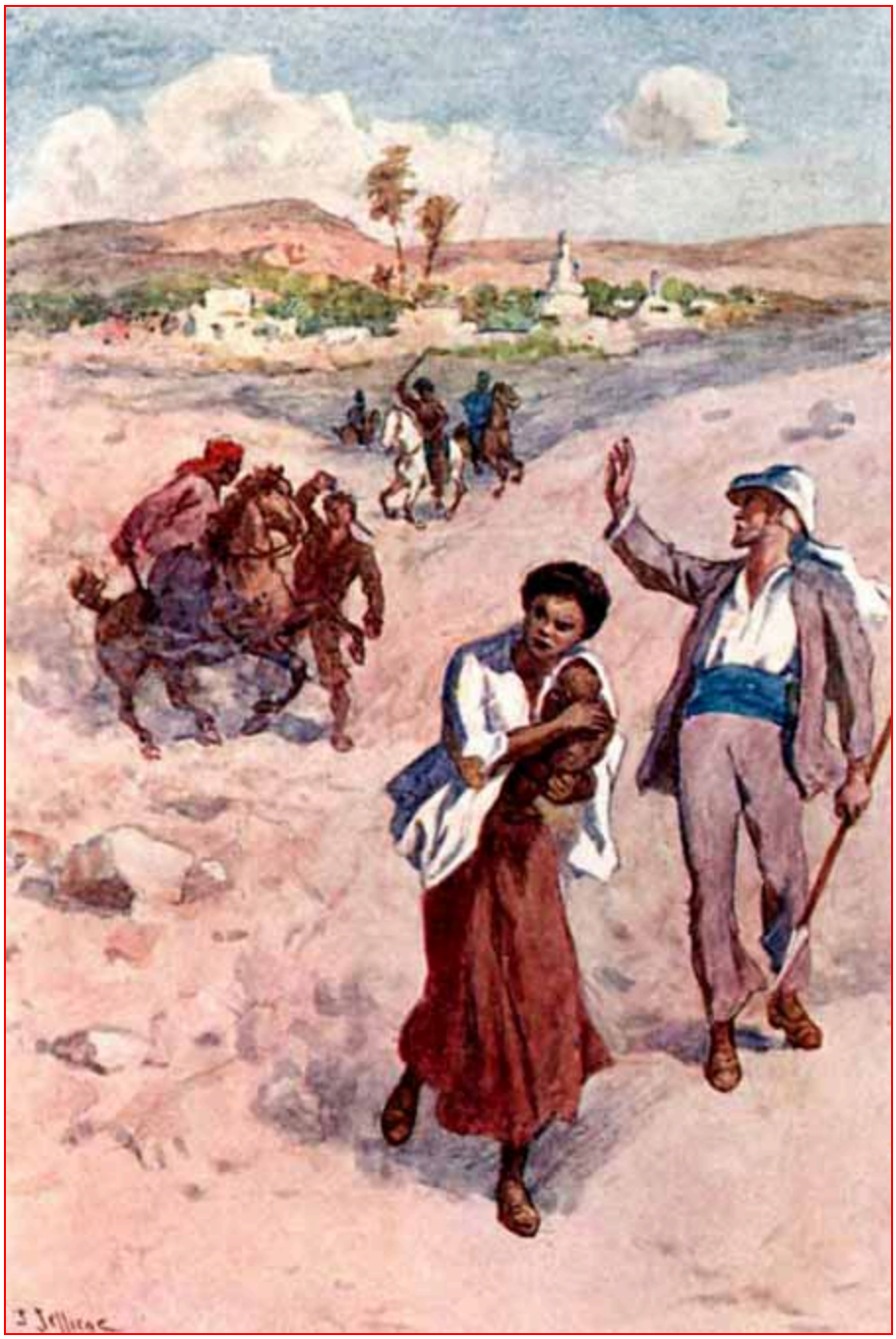
For the first hundred yards they ran breathlessly. How naked and bare the land seemed around them after the friendly shelter of the narrow lanes and alleys they had just left! Then, as they forged steadily ahead, and the rim of

the cup-shaped hollow came nearer at every stride, hope awoke in their hearts and they strained forward, counting on the moment when they would slip over the sky-line, and be lost to sight of the broken walls and towers amid which their enemies sought them.

"See that big white stone," said Jack, who had to draw himself in to an easy trot lest he should outrun his companions, "we have only got to make that, and we're clean out of sight."

Thirty yards from the white stone the woman tripped, stumbled, and fell. Before they left the ruins Jack had wished to carry the child, but she had refused.

"Push ahead, father," called Jack. "I'll pick her up and bring her on."



**THE INTERCEPTED FLIGHT.**

He sprang to the woman's side, and swung her to her feet by main strength. He glanced back as he did so—he had looked back every few yards as he ran. He gave a mutter of deep satisfaction, "All quiet!" But the words on his lips came to a sudden end in a gasp of dismay and horror. Round a far angle of the ruined wall four horsemen swept into sight at a gentle trot.

For a second Jack stared at them aghast He knew at once what it was. Their enemies had foreseen the possibility of such a bolt from cover as they were now making, and a patrol was on guard about the deserted city.

Jack hurried the woman forward, hoping against hope that no eye would be raised to catch sight of the knot of fugitives on the hill-side. A wild yell raised from four savage throats told him a moment later that his hopes were vain. He glanced back, and saw that the riders had lashed their speedy ponies to a furious gallop and were climbing the slope towards them at terrific speed.

The fugitives exchanged not a word. They ran now in silence, looking on every hand for some way of escape from the horsemen who followed. Jack burned to gain the ridge and see what was beyond. "If it's broken and rocky ground," he thought, "it may prove too rough for their ponies to face."

He looked eagerly out as they gained the ridge, and a bitter exclamation broke from his lips. The ground was more open and easy than that they had just crossed. They still ran on, but now without hope of escape, merely running forward with the instinct of flight which possesses every hunted creature. They heard the ponies' hoofs rattle over the ridge, they heard the thud of the galloping feet close at their backs, they heard the mocking laughs and yells of the triumphant riders.

"I can run no farther, Jack," gasped Mr. Haydon, and pulled up.

Jack whirled round, *dah* in hand, and stood at bay, his blood on fire to have a stroke at those who hunted them.

The riders were now not more than a score of yards away, and coming on at the same furious speed. Scarce had Jack turned, when the leading horseman was upon him. Jack looked up and saw the tossing mane and fiery eyes of the pony straining to its utmost speed, and above the tossing mane leaned forward the half-caste, his dark eyes shining with savage fire, his mouth widened in a cruel grin. Jack sprang aside and launched a sweeping blow at Saya Chone. The latter, with hand and knee, swung his pony round and hurled the animal full on Jack. The knees of the powerful beast, just rising to the first movement of the gallop, caught the English lad square in the body and dashed him headlong to the ground. Stunned and unconscious,

Jack was left in a heap on the sand, while the horsemen encircled the other fugitives.

# CHAPTER XLII.

## IN THE COURTYARD.

When Jack came to himself after that rough tumble he felt bruised from crown to heel, and his head was aching dully. For a few moments his mind was in a puzzle as returning consciousness began slowly to array before him the last things he remembered. Then he came to himself with a start, and looked round eagerly to see where he was and what had happened to his companions.

The first glance told him that he was once more within the deserted city. He lay in the corner of a ruined house, bound hand and foot; two Kachins, with muskets across their knees, squatted within six feet of him, and watched him with a fixed stare. Over his head the sky was still bright with sunshine, but the low rays told him that the night was not far off.

"They've got us after all," thought Jack bitterly. "We're in their hands as tight as ever, and they'll take care, I know, that we don't slip out of them again."

It was heart-sickening that after their struggle through the pass, their fight in the pagoda, and their escape by a way which seemed to open for them in a magical fashion, that they should end by falling once more into the hands of their cruel foes. As the light faded, Jack lay and wondered what had become of his father and the native woman, and what would be the next turn in their strange and wild adventures.

The sun sank, and the night fell with tropic swiftness; soon he was gazing at a velvety sky, full of bright stars. Still no one came near them, and his guards sat before him like two statues.

An hour after nightfall a voice called to them from the lane without, and they obeyed the command at once. They sprang up, and removed from Jack's ankles the thong which bound them together. Next they dragged him to his feet and led him forward.

At the gap in the wall, where once a door had been, two other guards awaited the prisoner, and marched one before and one behind him. Thus closely watched, Jack was led along the narrow lane. They went fifty yards or more, and then entered the very courtyard into which the secret passage opened. Here a huge fire of brushwood and broken beams was burning, and the place was as light as day, and filled with busy figures. Jack was led across the courtyard and placed near the opposite wall.

He looked round, but could catch no glimpse of his father. He saw the native woman, their companion in misfortune, seated in a corner, a Kachin beside her as if on guard. The woman's head was bent upon her breast, and her child was closely clasped in her arms. She did not look up when Jack was brought in, and her attitude was one of utter dejection. She had already learned her fate. She was to be taken back to the village from which she had fled, and there suffer by fire in the presence of the other villagers. Thus would U Saw teach a lesson of obedience to all.

The Ruby King himself was seated on a rug spread over the stones of the courtyard on the other side of the great fire. A meal was just over. A smaller fire was smouldering near the entrance to the courtyard, and beside it lay cooking-pots and the long, square baskets in which food had been carried. Several of the retainers were still devouring the last fragments of their portion, and the rest were placidly smoking as they moved to and fro. U Saw was quietly pulling at a huge cheroot, his eyes fixed dreamily on the leaping flames of the great fire, and, save for the prisoner and his armed guards, the whole scene had the air of a peaceful camp, of a caravan of merchants resting for a night on their march.

An hour passed, and the scene had but changed to this extent that the moving figures had settled down to a man to give themselves up to the soothing influence of tobacco. On his rug, U Saw had not stirred a limb save to flick the ashes from his cheroot, nor had his gaze wandered aside from the glowing flame. The quiet had become profound. Then, in deep silence, there was a sound of footsteps approaching the courtyard. Without turning his head, U Saw raised his hand. The gesture was scarcely begun when Jack felt himself gripped from behind by more than one pair of hands, and he knew among them the deadly clutch of the Strangler.

He was gripped at the same instant by the throat, the waist, and the heels, nor, so cunning had been their approach, had he dreamed that an enemy stood behind him. In an instant the thong at his wrists was severed and his arms drawn out to their fullest extent, a rope tight about each wrist, while his ankles were lashed together with magical swiftness and dexterity. He was swung against the wall despite his struggles, and his body and feet bound to an upright beam. Then the ropes which were about his wrists were drawn taut and made fast, and he was a helpless prisoner.

Just as the last twist was given to the bonds, a group of four entered the courtyard. Saya Chone, the half-caste, came first, and he was followed by Mr. Haydon, under guard of a couple of Kachins. Now U Saw slowly rose from his rug and moved forward, his silken kilt catching the light and glowing with the softest, brightest hues of crimson and gold.

"How are you, Jack?" called out Mr. Haydon anxiously. "Any bones broken?"

"Not one, I believe, father," replied Jack; "only bruises."

"If either of you speak another word," said the half-caste smoothly, "I'll gag you till you choke."

Jack and his father knew that much significance lay under the quiet words, and they remained silent. U Saw and Saya Chone now spoke together in a low tone, and then father and son were brought face to face.

"You are such a slippery couple, and have evaded us so often," said the half-caste, "that we are going to pay you the compliment of dealing with you once and for all upon the spot. Now you can be assured that your last chance of saving your skins has arrived. Here and now we settle the matter. You can start for Bhamo or Mandalay with the break of dawn, or you can become food for wild beasts. It remains with you to decide."

"Don't say a word, father," broke in Jack impetuously. "Don't you see that we're done for in any case? If you told, do you think such men as these would keep their word? Dead men tell no tales."

"That's horribly true, Jack," said his father in a low voice.

The faces of the Ruby King and the half-caste had blackened with rage upon hearing this swift, shrewd speech, which laid bare their motives and intentions, for Jack had hit the mark fair in the centre. Saya Chone thrust his face forward till it was within six inches of Jack's.

"Bold words," he hissed viciously, "bold words; but we shall see before we have done with you."

At this moment there ran into the courtyard a man who panted as if he had travelled far and fast. He bore beneath his arm a small basket made of rushes very closely and strongly woven. The Ruby King gave a grunt of satisfaction, and moved towards him.

Saya Chone now sprang forward and seized the collar of Jack's tunic. He fixed both hands in it and ripped it open. Then he gripped the collar of the flannel shirt beneath and made a snatch at that With a grin of vicious pleasure he rent that open too, and tore a piece of the stuff clean out. He raised his open hand and struck the bare breast of the English lad with a resounding slap.

"Now we shall see," he cried, "now we shall see!"

At sight of this Mr. Haydon had attempted to spring forward, but half a dozen of the iron-muscled little men had leapt at him like cats, and kept him in his place. They hung on to him and held him a close prisoner during the scene which followed.

Jack was little affected by the slap. He had his eyes on U Saw. He felt strongly that the grim, silent Ruby King was the man to be feared above all.

U Saw and the man with the basket had retired to the other side of the fire, and a group of Kachins watched the Ruby King respectfully from a little distance. The watching group now gave a loud murmur of wonder and admiration, as if they had divined some superlatively clever trick of their master's, and were applauding it. Then U Saw turned and came across the courtyard, his right arm oddly and stiffly extended.

Jack watched him come, and wondered what it was that seemed to move and writhe about his arm as he came. The Ruby King stepped into the full

light of the great, blazing pile, and Jack saw what it was that moved, and felt his blood run cold within him.

Upon his right hand U Saw wore a thick leathern hunting glove, and his right arm was heavily swathed with a woollen girdle. About his arm the body of a snake was twisted, and he held the head firmly in his hand. A terrible groan of agony burst from Thomas Haydon's lips as he saw the venomous reptile coiling and uncoiling its short, thick body round the arm of the Ruby King. It was a small cobra of the most venomous kind, a creature whose bite took effect at once, and was followed swiftly by death.

U Saw walked up to Jack and held the head of the horrible creature within a foot of Jack's face. The latter tried to look steadily at the frightful death which menaced him, and, for a few seconds, was fascinated by the dreadful sight. The tiny, glittering, bead-like eyes of the reptile sparkled with rage, and its hood swelled and swelled in its fury as it sought something to strike, something upon which it might expend its store of deadly venom. But the grip of the Ruby King held head and neck immovable except as he wished, and the cobra had no power save over its coils. These were in constant and furious motion. They were now wrapped tightly round U Saw's arm, now flung loose, and then tightened anew as the angry snake twisted and writhed and sought to free itself from the clutch which imprisoned its head.

Inch by inch U Saw advanced the frightful flat head until the forked tongue played immediately before Jack's eyes, and the grip on the head was now slightly loosened, and the cobra opened wide its horrid jaws and disclosed its poison fangs, and made convulsive efforts to reach and strike the face just before it.

Jack closed his eyes and drew a long, quivering breath. This torture was exquisite beyond any bodily pain. But there was no thought of yielding in his heart. Among these dark-skinned Asiatics he and his father stood alone, and it lay with them to maintain the English name and credit in this moment when men of a weaker race would have given way and cringed and begged for mercy.

Summoning up his utmost resolution, Jack opened his eyes again, resolute to deny to his enemies the smallest token of their triumph. But he found that the horrid, gaping jaws were no longer close to his face. U Saw had stepped

a pace backwards, and was adjusting his grip of the reptile with the greatest care.

He grasped it anew and more tightly, and stepped forward once more. Now he advanced the flat head little by little towards Jack's naked breast. At last it was so close that the cobra's tongue, darting in and out, was touching the lad's body. Ah! that was horrible. To feel the cold, forked tongue playing upon the warm flesh above the beating heart, that heart which would be silenced for ever were but the keen fangs advanced an inch or so farther.

The natural repugnance of the flesh to so horrible a situation was too strong for the spirit, and Jack could not restrain a convulsive shudder, which shook him from head to foot. His father groaned in rage and agony.

# CHAPTER XLIII.

## THE FACE AT THE DOORWAY.

The sullen face of the Ruby King was lighted up with a smile of deep relish. His savage nature was pleased to its depths to see the effect this simple but exquisite torture had upon the Englishman within his grasp. Again he drew back a pace, and waited a moment for Jack to recover himself. Next he waved to the men who were holding Thomas Haydon to bring their prisoner closer to the bound captive. They did so, and now the position of those gathered in the ruined courtyard was as follows. Jack faced the doorway, and the Ruby King and the half-caste, with their followers clustered behind them, were on his left. His father, under charge of the guards, was on his right, and the fire, which was now at its highest, lighted the whole scene in most brilliant fashion.

Now U Saw raised his arm and stepped forward. His evil grin shone out once more. He was enjoying himself to the full. Jack braced his back against the post and clenched his fists as tightly as the ropes around his wrists would allow, and set his teeth to endure without flinching. His eyes were staring straight before him, into the blackness of the ruined doorway.

Suddenly into that patch of darkness there flashed a face, peeping in on the scene, and as suddenly vanishing. Jack gave a great start and a gasp. Was the torture turning his brain? He had known that face, but it was not the face of any living man. It was the face of Me Dain, their brave guide, who had fallen headlong into the raging torrent, close-grappled with his foe. Jack's movement was hailed by a grim chuckle from the ring of hostile faces. They misjudged it altogether.

U Saw once more held the cobra forward, and glanced with savage meaning at both father and son. Thomas Haydon watched the evil creature with fascinated eyes, and saw that the Ruby King was loosening ever so slightly, and little by little, his grasp of the head, so that the venomous reptile was working forward through the leathern grip towards Jack's breast.

By tiny degrees the cobra worked itself on and on, but Jack saw it not. His eyes were strained into the outer darkness. What had it meant, that face? Was it a mere fancy, or was there more behind it than he dreamed of? Then, with another great start of his frenzied, overwrought body, he saw something else, a thing which none saw save himself, for every eye was fixed on the deadly, wriggling serpent, fighting to get his venomous fangs into that smooth white breast.

There slipped into the light of the fire a little round gleaming tube of steel. Six inches beyond the doorway was it thrust, then held still and steady. Jack knew it for the muzzle of a Mannlicher, and realised with a swelling heart what it meant. He turned his eyes on the dark face of the Ruby King, who, with an air of infinite enjoyment, was giving the writhing reptile a little and a little more liberty, and Jack knew that U Saw was a dead man.

A moment later the rifle spoke. There was a sharp jet of flame, a crack, and a scream. The three were practically simultaneous, and the scream rose from the wildly-parted lips of the Ruby King as he whirled round and staggered against Saya Chone, a slip of lead driven through his brain.

The fate of the half-caste was striking and dreadful. The mortally-smitten man flung out his right arm, and the cobra was swung full against the man who stood beside him, and, at the same instant, the Ruby King's grasp was loosened. Here was the chance for which the creature, irritated to the utmost fury, had longed. It struck, struck with all its might, and drove its deadly fangs deep into the throat of the half-caste.

The latter staggered back with a frightful yell, and tore the horrible reptile from its grip, and cast it away. But the work was done, and the full-filled poison sacs had emptied their store of venom into the blood of Saya Chone.

All this happened in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye; and before a hand could be lifted among the retainers, a whirling hurricane of lead smote with crushing fury among the close-packed group of Kachins which had been clustered behind the leaders. A stream of bullets was poured into them as swiftly as magazines could be worked, and half their number went down headlong. None of the rest stayed to face this awful and mysterious foe. To them it seemed as if evil spirits must be encompassing their destruction, and they fled from this dreadful attack, which leapt upon them so suddenly from

the darkness and the silence. Those who could move ran for a low place in the ruined wall, climbed it frantically, and fled into the darkness, yelling and terror-stricken.

Now there burst into the courtyard three familiar figures. Buck Risley led the way, Jim Dent followed, and Me Dain raced after.

"Say," cried Buck, "we only dropped on this little fandango just in time. Stand steady, Jack." With a few swift strokes of his knife he severed Jack's bonds, and the English lad staggered aside, and was caught by his father. They exchanged a strong, silent hand-grip, but neither could speak.

Jim Dent, a reloaded Mauser pistol in hand, was standing on guard. But they had nothing to fear from the groaning wounded, nothing from the Ruby King who lay with his evil smile fixed for ever on his dark face, nothing from the half-caste, now writhing in the agonies of a terrible death.

"Say, Professor, this is great to see you again!" cried Buck joyfully, as Mr. Haydon seized his faithful follower's hand.

"Buck, Buck, this is wonderful," said Mr. Haydon in a shaking voice. "You have come to our rescue at the moment of our utmost need. And Dent and Me Dain. A thousand thanks. But what are words to tell you how we feel?"

"We know just how you feel, Professor," said Jim Dent. "We're only too glad we turned up in time to put a stopper on their fiendish tricks. Now the word is march."

"Right, Jim," said Buck; "off we go. Come on, Me Dain."

The Burman was bending over the body of the Ruby King, and stripping off his rich silken girdle.

"I come," he said, and they trooped across the courtyard together.

Jack had not spoken a word. He had clasped the hands of his faithful friends, but he was too overwrought and bewildered to be able to frame his feelings into speech. He stumbled as he walked, for his limbs were numbed from his bonds, and his father and Buck supported him. Near the doorway the native woman waited for them. Her guard had fled, and she had at once sprung to join her companions in flight.

Their path ran across the open space before the pagoda. Here the ponies of U Saw and his men had been picketed, and were now left without watchers, for all had been drawn to the courtyard. Three of these were caught and saddled, and led with the party till the ruins were cleared and the open hill-side was gained.

"Now we're right," breathed Jim Dent. "I don't reckon there was much to fear from that lot we sent scuttling. They're dangerous enough as a rule, but this time we rattled 'em all to pieces. Still, I'm glad to be in the open."

"Me Dain!" cried Jack, who was rapidly becoming himself again. "Is it really you, alive and in the flesh? How did you escape after that frightful fall from the ledge?"

"I had very good luck, sahib," chuckled the Burman, "very good luck. The Kachin was under when we drop down, and that break my fall. I very near drowned, but at last I got on bank. Then I go on up the pass, and run to the other sahibs."

"Here's the road," said Jim Dent. "There's no moon, but we can see all we want by the stars. Up you go."

Jack, Mr. Haydon, and the native woman were set on the ponies, and then the little cavalcade moved briskly forward, talking as they went, and exchanging experiences.

Me Dain's story made it plain that he had cleared the mouth of the pass just before U Saw and his men blocked the way. He had put his best foot forward and regained the camp, made in a solitary glen among the hills, where Buck and Jim awaited him. The three of them had started back at once well armed, but had travelled on foot in order the more easily to escape observation. Thus the night had fallen by the time they had gained the outskirts of the ruined city. They saw the flare of the fire, and heard the voices of the encampment. Little by little, and with the utmost care, they crept upon the Kachins and brought aid in the very nick of time.

"Say, I don't guess we need trouble much about these little blue-kilts any more," remarked Buck Risley.

"Not in the least, Buck," replied Mr. Haydon. "The death of their leaders sets them at once free from their allegiance. I've no doubt in the world but that the survivors will hurry back home and plunder U Saw's house."

"And how did that little half-caste come off?" asked Jim Dent. "I hope he had something for his trouble."

"Say, Jim," cried Buck, "didn't you twig that? It was about the best touch in the show. The snake they'd got ready for Jack worked loose when you dropped the King, and nipped the half-caste, and he hit the long trail right away."

"Serve him right, the little varmint," was Jim's comment.

They had covered a league or more from the deserted city, when the tinkle of running water fell on Jack's ears.

"That sounds like a brook," he said. "I'm fearfully thirsty."

"So am I," said his father. A brook it was, and they halted beside it and drank their fill.

"Better stop here till daylight," said Me Dain. "Not easy to find the way over hills in the dark." So it was agreed to make a camp beside the brook. The fugitives were quite willing, for they were exhausted by fatigue, and when they had eaten a little of the food which Me Dain had carried in a wallet across his shoulders, and drunk once more of the water of the brook, they lay down and slept the deep sleep of utter weariness. Their fresher companions, Buck and Jim, took turns to watch through the night.

By an hour after dawn they were all on the move, and did not halt again till they reached the secluded hollow where the pack-ponies, securely hobbled, were quietly grazing. In a trice Me Dain had a fire blazing, and he and Buck soon made ready a good meal. When the meal was over they sat in the shade of a clump of bamboos and discussed affairs.

Suddenly, with a grunt of surprise as if at his forgetfulness, Me Dain sprang up and fetched the wallet which had been slung over his shoulders. He laid it before Mr. Haydon, and began to draw forth a long band of rich, glittering silk.

"Why, you've brought U Saw's girdle, Me Dain," said Mr. Haydon.

"Yes, sahib," said Me Dain, a broad smile lighting up his dark face as he looked up at his old master. "And for why? You lose a big ruby. U Saw got it."

The meaning smile on his face broadened.

Mr. Haydon slapped his knee with a crack like a pistol shot. There was no need of words between them.

"By Jove, Me Dain!" he cried, "I shouldn't be surprised if you are right."

"Right, quite right," said Me Dain. "U Saw never leave great stone like that at home. Carry it everywhere. U Saw trust no man."

By this time the others had grasped the meaning of this conversation. Was the great ruby in U Saw's girdle?

# CHAPTER XLIV.

## HOW THINGS ENDED.

All eyes were fixed in breathless excitement on Me Dain. His swift, practised fingers rapidly explored the intricacies of the long, soft band which had been wound twice or thrice round the waist of the Ruby King.

"Lump here," grunted Me Dain, drawing his knife. He made a couple of rapid snicks, pulled the silk open, glanced in, then looked up at his old master.

"Hold your hand, sahib," he said.

Mr. Haydon held out his hand, and the Burman shook the girdle sharply. A cry of admiration and wonder burst from every watcher as an immense ruby fell into Mr. Haydon's palm and lay there glittering with richest, deepest fire.

The great expert did not need to take a second glance. "That's my stone," he said. "Me Dain, I am indebted to you for ever. Its value to me is beyond all money, for it represents my honour and the good faith which I owe to those who employ me. Me Dain, my good friend, I shall give you ten thousand rupees."

"Oh, sahib," cried the Burman, overcome with the vision of so much wealth, "it is too much for your servant."

"Not a penny," said Mr. Haydon earnestly, "not a penny too much. You have rendered me a service which no money can repay."

Amid a buzz of wonder and surprise and delighted congratulation, the huge stone was examined and passed from hand to hand. Then Mr. Haydon took it again, wrapped it up in a piece of silk cut from the girdle, and carefully bestowed it in an inner pocket.

"I'll have another try to get to London with it," he said. "We ought to manage it this time among us."

Jack stood looking at his father with shining eyes, and Mr. Haydon now turned to his son. As he did so, Buck slapped the tall lad on the shoulder.

"Say, Jack," he cried, "is this good enough for you? You've got your father and the big pebble. Seems to me you've worked your way through this business pretty successful. I reckon you've been the king pin of this outfit."

"Right, Buck, right," said Mr. Haydon in a tone of deep feeling. "I was just thinking of what I owed to my boy."

The next morning they struck south across the hills for Mogok, the great mining town, and their journey thither, under the skilful guidance of Me Dain, was made in safety. The native woman accompanied them for the first half day of their journey, and then her path branched off to the west. She took leave of them with a thousand thanks and good wishes, and, from the store of ready money, carried on one of the pack-ponies, she was furnished with a bag of silver pieces which would make her a rich woman when she reached her native village.

Her parting words were mysterious. She said, "Tell the young sahib that he will find that I have not forgotten him."

Me Dain asked her what she meant, but, with a smile, she refused to explain, and presently was lost to sight along a forest path, and they saw her no more.

From Mogok the travellers pushed on straight to Mandalay, where, through a merchant of his acquaintance, Mr. Haydon obtained sufficient money to pay Me Dain the reward he had promised. So that this time the Burman retired to his native village with wealth beyond anything he had ever dreamed of.

This business detained them in Mandalay for some days, but one evening Mr. Haydon said, "We'll take the first train to-morrow morning," and the others nodded agreement.

Jack went to his room to pack the big bag which he had bought to contain his share of the baggage. The latter had been carried to the room he occupied in the hotel, and he now began to look over it and lay things in order. Presently he came to a torn flannel shirt, and he looked at it with interest. It was the shirt which the half-caste had rent from his breast, and he had replaced it with a spare one which had been among their store. He raised it, and it felt oddly heavy. He unrolled it, and found that it was wrapped round a small parcel.

"What's this?" murmured Jack. "I never wrapped anything up in this shirt."

He took up the parcel and examined it. The outer covering was of native cloth of a dull blue shade. Jack wondered where he had seen such cloth before, then remembered that the head-dress of the native woman, their companion in so adventurous an escape, had been made of it.

"Looks like a bit of that great bundle of stuff she twisted round and round her head," reflected Jack. "Let's see what she's wrapped up for a keepsake."

But the chuckle with which these thoughts passed through his mind was suddenly cut short. A lamp burned brightly on the table beside him. He untied the scrap of cloth which was fastened about the parcel, and unwrapped the folds. He gave a jump of astonishment and a cry of amazement. For there before him, gleaming softly and richly in the strong light of the lamp, lay a heap of magnificent jewels, glorious rubies every one.

He was still staring entranced at this extraordinary find among his traps when the door was opened and a head thrust in.

"Say, Jack," began the newcomer.

"Buck!" cried the lad, "run and fetch my father and Jim, and come back with them."

Buck hurried away, and in less than a minute the four of them were gathered about the heap of precious stones.

"Oh, thunder!" breathed Jim Dent, in a soft tone of amazed wonder.

"Say, Jack, who've you been stickin' up on the trail?" murmured Buck. "Well, if they ain't got a shine on 'em!" and he could say no more.

Mr. Haydon was whistling softly, his eyebrows raised. At last he opened his mouth. "I fancy we've seen these before, Jack," he said.

"Rather," said his son. "These are the rubies that lay among the bones of the priests in the secret chamber. I dropped to that at once."

"We never thought of them again," went on Mr. Haydon, "but the woman gathered them and carried them off. Now she has passed them on to you in this fashion. She must have tucked them into the baggage at some moment when our backs were turned."

"And this is what she meant by saying that he'd find she hadn't forgotten him," broke in Buck. "Say, Jack, you've struck it rich this time."

The fingers of the expert were busy at the next moment among the rich stones. Mr. Haydon handled each carefully, sorted them, then took a pencil and began to appraise them roughly on a scrap of paper. While he did this, Jack related in a low voice to the other two the story of the secret chamber in the pagoda.

"Well," said Mr. Haydon at length, "there are thirty-seven altogether. They vary very much in size, but all are of excellent colour. Speaking in round figures, they are worth about ninety thousand pounds."

"Bully for you, Jack!" exclaimed Buck.

"Bully for all of us, Buck," replied Jack quietly. "If you fancy I'm going to pocket these, you've missed your kick by a long chalk. We'll all share and share alike. Where would my father and myself have been if you hadn't come to the rescue?"

"Right, Jack, quite right," said Mr. Haydon. "But you will count me out, if you please. We'll realise this parcel of stones in London, and then divide the money squarely among you three;" and so it was settled.

"Then I'll come home with you!" cried Jim Dent. "I've had enough of Rangoon, and this trip'll set me up as a rich man for life."

"I hope the woman kept a few stones for herself," said Jack. His father laughed.

"If she's a wise woman she most certainly did not, my boy," he answered. "The possession of rubies would lead to her getting her throat cut as sure as she had a throat. No, no. She's much better off with her bag of rupees."

Five weeks later, about eleven o'clock on a Thursday morning, Jack and his father walked into the city, and sought the offices of Messrs Lane and Baumann. They had come through from Rangoon without a hitch, and had run into Charing Cross by the boat-train the day before.

As they walked along the crowded streets, Mr. Haydon smiled, and said quietly to his son, "You've seen a thing or two, Jack, since last you paid a visit to Lane & Baumann."

"I have, father," said Jack. "It seems years ago since I was here instead of a few months."

Mr. Haydon had insisted on Jack accompanying him on this visit. "It was in their offices that you vowed to begin your quest, Jack," he said; "and in their offices you shall end it, as far as the great stone is concerned."

They were expected, and were at once shown up to Mr. Lane. The latter sprang forward and greeted Mr. Haydon and Jack most warmly.

"Welcome home," he said, "welcome home. I am delighted to see you safe and sound in England once more, Mr. Haydon."

"And I am very pleased to see you, Mr. Lane," said the famous expert, "and glad to say that I have brought home in safety, after all, that big stone, an account of which I cabled to you."

He drew from his pocket the great ruby still wrapped in the fragment cut from U Saw's girdle, and laid it before Mr. Lane. The latter gazed spell-bound at its size and beauty.

"A marvellous stone, Mr. Haydon!" he murmured at last. "A marvellous stone! Ah," he went on, "I wonder what Baumann would say to-day if he were confronted with this wonderful proof of his folly in leaving us."

"Mr. Baumann is no longer your partner?" cried Thomas Haydon.

"No," said Mr. Lane. "We disagreed, and he withdrew from the partnership." Mr. Lane had too much delicacy to say that the quarrel had arisen over their respective opinions as to Thomas Haydon's honesty. Finding that he could not induce the senior partner to make public what he believed to be the theft of the great jewel, Baumann had broken off his connection with the firm.

"I have a long story to tell you, but this is not the time to tell it," said Jack's father. "You are too busy."

"Will you both dine with me to-night?" cried the great merchant. "Then we can have a good talk over things," and the invitation was accepted.

As Jack and his father walked away from the offices, the former remarked, "In one way I was much disappointed that Baumann was not there. It would have been a cheerful arrangement to make him eat his words. But on the whole it just caps the affair nicely to find that he won't benefit by it. Now we'll turn our parcel of rubies into cash and set up Jim and Buck with a good banking account apiece."

His father nodded absently. Between his fingers he held the piece of shining, delicate silk in which the great ruby had been wrapped.

"I see you've brought the scrap of U Saw's girdle with you," said Jack.

"Yes, my boy," returned his father. "I shall never part with this patch of silk. It stands in my eyes for a good deal. I am here safe and sound, and the big stone is at last in the right hands."

"Yes," said Jack quietly, "with the aid of staunch friends, I have come to the end of my quest."

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