

CHAPTER VI

A PERILOUS ADVENTURE

THEY retraced their steps without adventure until they reached the village they had first stopped at.

"There are soldiers here," Surajah exclaimed, as they entered.

"We can't help it now," Dick said. "There is nothing for it but to go on boldly. I suppose that Tippoo has sent troops into all these frontier villages to prevent any chance of news of his movements being taken to the plains. Ah! there is the old chap who spoke to us last time; let us stop at once and talk with him."

"So you are back again," the peasant said, as they came up to him.

"Yes," Surajah replied; "we told you we should come back here unless we got news of some tiger being marked down near one of the other villages. We have been as far as the edge of the jungle, and although we have heard of several, not one of them seems to be in the habit of coming back regularly to the same spot, so we thought we could not do better than return here at once and make it our head-quarters. I see you have got some soldiers here."

"Yes," the old man said discontentedly, "and a rough lot they are; they demand food, and instead of paying for it in money, their officer gives us bits of paper with some writing on them; he says that when they go we are to take them to him and he will give us an order equal to the whole of them, for which we can receive money from the treasury at Seringapatam. A nice thing that! None of us have ever been to Seringapatam, and should not know what to do when we got

there; moreover, there would be no saying whether one would ever come back again. It is terrible. Besides, we have only grain enough for ourselves, and shall have to send down to the plains to buy more; and where the money is to come from, nobody can tell."

"I think I could tell you how you had better proceed, if you will take us into your house," Surajah said. "This is not a place for talking; there are four or five soldiers there watching us."

The old man entered the house and closed the door behind them. "How would you counsel us to proceed?" he asked, as soon as they had seated themselves on a divan formed of a low bank of beaten earth with a thick covering of straw.

"It is simple enough," Surajah said. "One of you would take the order on the sultan's treasury to a large village down in the plain; you would go to a trader and say that you wished to purchase so much grain and other goods, and would pay for them with an order on the sultan's treasury. It would probably be accepted as readily as cash, for the trader would send it to a merchant or banker at Seringapatam to get it cashed for him, to pay for goods he had obtained there, and either to send him any balance there might be, or to retain it for further purchases. An order of that kind is better than money for trading purposes, for there would be no fear of its being stolen on the way, as it could be hidden in the hair, or shoe, or anywhere among the clothes of the messenger."

"Wonderful!" the old peasant said. "Your words are a relief indeed to me, and will be to all the village when they hear them."

"And now," Dick broke in, "let us talk about tigers. While you have been speaking, those soldiers have passed the door twice, and have been looking suspiciously at the house. If they take it into their heads to come here and to ask who we are and what is our business, it would not do to tell them that we have been discussing the value of the orders on the

sultan's treasury. Now, if our advice has been of any assistance to you in this matter, you, in turn, can render us aid in our business of killing tigers. We want you to find out for us when a tiger was last seen near the village, where its lair is supposed to be, and whether, according to its situation, we should have the best chance of killing it by digging a pitfall on the path by which it usually comes from the jungle, or by getting a kid and tying it up, to attract the tiger to a spot where we shall be stationed in a tree."

"I will assuredly do that, and every one here will be glad to assist when I tell them the advice I have received from you—and would indeed do so in any case, for it will be a blessing to the village if you can kill the tiger that so often carries off some of our sheep and goats."

At this moment there was a loud knocking at the door. On the peasant opening it, a group of soldiers demanded to see the men who had entered.

"We are here," Surajah said, coming forward. "What do you want?"

"We want to know who you are and where you come from."

"Any one in the village could have told you that," Surajah said. "We are shikarees, and have come here to destroy tigers. We were arranging with this old man to find us guides who can point out the tracks of the one which has for some time been preying on their animals."

"Yes, and our children," the old man put in; "for three of them were carried off from the street here within the last month."

The soldiers looked doubtful, but one of them said,—

"This is for our officer to inquire about. The men are strangers to the village, and he will want to question them."

"We are quite ready to be questioned," Surajah said. "Our host here will bear me out in what I say, and there are others in the village who will tell you that we have been arranging with them to kill tigers in this neighbourhood, though

as yet we have not settled what they will pay us for each beast we destroy."

Accompanied by the peasant, they went with the soldiers to the guard-house, with which each of the frontier villages was provided. It consisted of a group of huts, surrounded by a thick wall of sunburnt bricks. They were taken into the largest hut, where the officer of the party was seated on a rough divan.

"Who have you here?" he asked irritably, for he had been awakened from a doze by their entry.

"They are two young fellows who are strangers here. They say they are shikarees who have come into the village to gain a reward for killing a tiger that has been troublesome."

"They were here three days ago, Sahib," the villager said, "and asked us many questions about the tigers, and were, when the soldiers came to the door, questioning me as to the tiger's place of retreat, and whether a pitfall, or a kid as a decoy, would be most suitable."

"Where do you come from?" the officer asked Surajah.

"We live in a little village some distance down the ghauts. We heard that tigers were more abundant in the jungle country up here than they are below, and thought that we would for a time follow our calling here. We can get good prices for the skins down below, and with that and what we get from the villages for freeing them from the tigers, we hope in a few months to take back a good store of money."

"Your story is a doubtful one," the officer said harshly. "You may be what you say, and you may be spies."

"If we had been spies," Surajah said, "we should not be here, but at Bangalore or Seringapatam. These villages are not the places where news is to be gained."

This was so self-evident that the officer had nothing to say against it.

"At any rate," he said, after a pause, "there is no confirmation to your story, and as I have orders to put all suspicious persons under arrest, I shall detain you."

"It is very hard—" Surajah began; but the officer made an impatient gesture, while two of the soldiers put their hands on the shoulders of the prisoners, and led them from the hut.

"You need not look so downcast," one of them said good-naturedly. "I don't suppose you will be kept here long, and will no doubt be released when the sultan has gone down the passes with his army. A week or two here will do you no harm—the tigers can wait for a bit. There, give us your weapons; I daresay you will get them back again when we go on, as I hope we shall do, for there is nothing to eat and nothing to do in this miserable place."

The arms were taken into the officer's hut, and as there was a sentry at the gate, no further attention was paid to them.

"I will get you some provisions and bring them in," the old man said. "It is hard, indeed, that men cannot go about their business without being interfered with."

"Thank you, but we have enough for two or three days. When that is gone we will give you some money to buy more, for we have a few rupees with us, as we knew it might be some time before we should be able to kill a tiger."

As soon as the old man had left them, they seated themselves on a large faggot of wood that had been brought in by the villagers for fuel.

"We cannot stay here, Surajah; it is most important that we should get back with the news, and I have no doubt that pig-headed brute in there will do as he says, and will hold us prisoners until Tippoo has gone down the passes. We must get off to-night if possible. We are not likely to be looked after very sharply; I don't think that fellow really suspects us, but is simply keeping us to show his authority. There ought to be no difficulty in getting out. I suppose we shall be put into one of the soldiers' huts to-night, and if we crawl out when they are asleep, we have only to make our way up those narrow steps to the top of the wall, and then let ourselves down

the other side. It is not above fifteen feet high, and even if we dropped we should not be likely to hurt ourselves."

"There will, most likely, be a sentry at the gate," Surajah observed, "and there is a moon to-night."

"There ought to be no difficulty in pouncing on him suddenly, gagging him before he can give the alarm, and then tying him. We will walk round and see if there is any rope lying about; if not, I will tear my sash into strips; we can use yours to lower ourselves over the wall. I should like to get our weapons if we could; the guns do not matter, but the pistols are good ones. And, if there is an alarm given, we may have to fight; besides, it is not impossible that we may come across a tiger as we go along. I vote that when we have secured the sentry we pay the officer a visit."

Surajah nodded. He was quite ready to agree to anything that Dick might suggest, and felt a strong desire to re-possess himself of his arms, for it seemed to him that it would be a humiliation to go back without them.

"Of course," Dick went on, "if the sentry gives the alarm before we can secure him, we must give up part of our plan; for in that case we should have to bolt. Once over the wall we should be all right. They may fire away at us as we run, but there is no fear of their hitting us, half asleep as they will be, and not quite sure what it is all about. If we get a fair start of them, we need not have much fear of their catching us."

"Not as long as it is straight running, Sahib; but if they follow us far, they may come up within range of us as we are making our way down some of those nasty places where we came up the face of the ghaut."

"If we once get well away from them we will hide up somewhere, and then strike off on another line."

"We might do that," Surajah agreed; "but you know the place where we came up was the only one that seemed to us climbable, and it would be certainly better to make for it again if we can find our way."

"I quite agree with you there, Surajah; it would never do to go and find ourselves on the edge of a precipice that we could not get down, with the soldiers anywhere near us; besides, it is of the greatest importance that we should take the news back as soon as possible, as every hour may be of importance. I only wish we could find out which pass Tippoo means to go by, but I don't suppose that will be known until he starts for it. Anyhow, our news will be very valuable, for at present he is supposed to be over on the other side, and he would have taken our troops entirely by surprise if he had suddenly poured out on to the plain. So we must give up my idea of hiding up, for if we did so we should have to lie there all day, and it would mean the loss of twenty-four hours; for I would not go down those ghats for any money, except in daylight. It is a very different thing going down hill to going up, and if we were to attempt it in the dark we should break our necks for a certainty. If we can get away early to-night we shall be at the edge of that steep place by nine o'clock in the morning, and if we strike the right point we might be back to the Rajah by nightfall."

"It will be difficult to find our way back in the dark," Surajah said.

"No doubt. Still we can keep in the general direction, and even if we do not hit upon the stream to-night, we shall find it in the morning."

It was late in the afternoon when they reached the village, and it was now growing dark; two soldiers came up to them and bade them follow them into one of the huts, and there pointed to the farther corner as their place. They wrapped themselves in their blankets, and at once lay down.

"If they take it into their heads," Dick whispered to Surajah, "to put a sentry on guard at the door, it will upset all our plans. It would not be very difficult to cut our way through the mud wall behind us, but in the first place they have taken away our knives, and even if we had them, it

would be risky work trying it. The chances are that they will sit and talk all night; of course, we might surprise the sentry, but it would be a great risk with those fellows close at hand, and we should have to run straight for the steps, and might get a dozen balls after us before we were over the wall."

"I don't think there would be much chance of their hitting us," Surajah said. "Jumping up from their sleep in confusion, they would be a minute or so before they could find out what had happened, and we should be at the foot of the steps before they saw us, and then they would fire almost at random. But in that case we should lose our weapons," he added regretfully.

"We cannot help that. The arms are of no consequence at all, compared to our getting away—unless, of course, any of them happen to overtake us."

For three or four hours the soldiers, of whom there were ten in the hut, sat eating, talking, and smoking round the fire, which they kept burning on the earthen floor. One by one, however, they left it and lay down. When but three remained, one of them got up with a grumble of discontent, took his musket, which was leaning against the wall, and went out of the hut.

"What a nuisance!" Dick whispered. "He is evidently going on sentry duty."

"Perhaps he has gone to the gate?" Surajah suggested.

"I am afraid not; I expect the other hut is furnishing the sentry there. Listen!"

During the pauses of the low conversation of the two men still sitting by the fire, they could hear a footfall outside.

"That settles the question," Dick said. "Now, the sooner those fellows go to sleep, the better."

"We had better wait for some time after they do," Surajah replied. "One or two of the men who lay down first, are sure to get up and go to the door and look out. They always do that once or twice during the night. The sentry will soon get accustomed to the door being opened, and won't look round sharp."

"That is a good idea," Dick agreed. "The moon is at the back of the hut, so we shall be in the shadow. I will spring upon him, and will try and grip him by the throat, so that he can't holloa. You wrench the musket from his hands, and snatch his belt of cartridges; that will give us a weapon, anyhow. As soon as you have got it, I will give him one sharp squeeze and throw him down; it will be some time before he gets breath enough to holloa."

In half-an-hour the two men by the fire lay down. It was not long before, as Surajah predicted, one of the sleepers sat up and stretched himself; then he rose and walked to the door, opened it, and stood at the entrance; a moment later he was joined by another figure, and for a few minutes they stood talking together. Then he came in again, shut the door, and lay down. During the next hour three of the others followed his example, the last of them leaving the door ajar behind him when he came in.

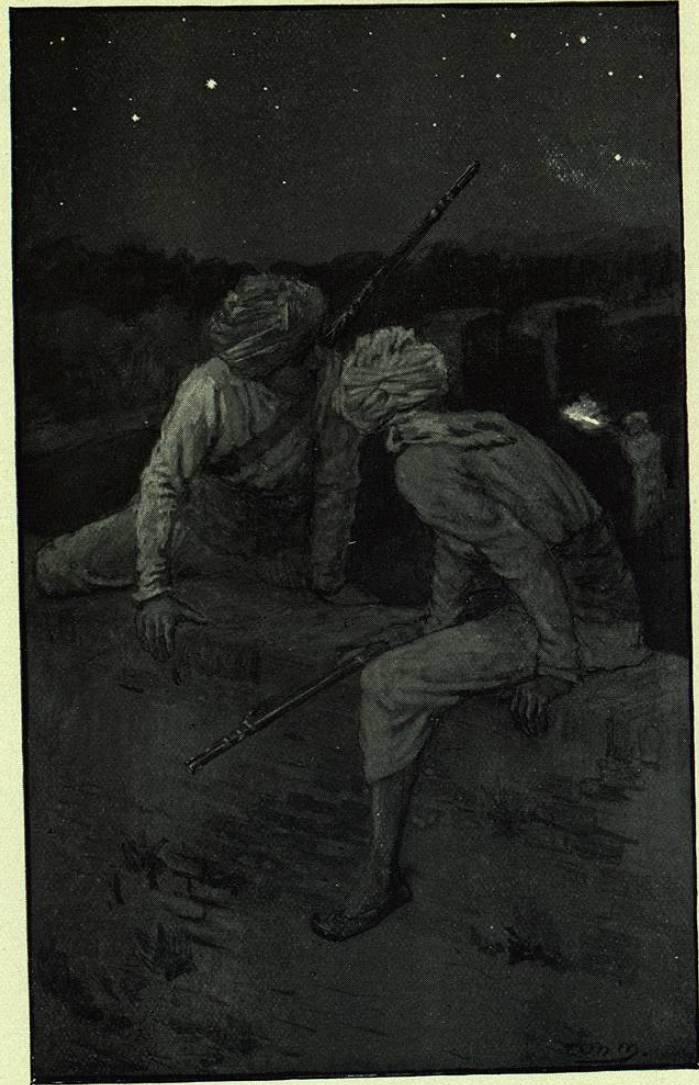
"Now is our chance, Surajah. We must give him ten minutes to fall asleep again; then we will move. Should one of them be lying awake and notice us—which is not likely, for it is too dark in here to see figures distinctly—and ask where we are going, say, 'To the door to get cool;' they won't imagine that we are thinking of escape, with one sentry at the door and another at the gate."

"Don't you think, Sahib, that it would be safer to kill the sentries?"

"Safer or not, Surajah, we will not do it. At present, they have done us no harm; they are only acting as their officer ordered, and we have no grudge against them. When they take to shooting at us, we must shoot at them; but to kill this sentry would be nothing short of murder."

After waiting a few minutes longer, Dick said, "We had better be off now; if we were to wait longer we should have another fellow getting up."

They rose quietly to their feet, made their way to the door,



DICK AND SURAJAH MAKE THEIR ESCAPE.