

except that we shall have to run the risk of being shot by those fellows on the wall. We shall be a pretty easy mark on that white road by moonlight. Our only plan will be to keep close to the wall when we are through the gate, get down into the bed of the stream again, and then crawl along among the rocks; the bottom will be in shadow, and we may get off without being noticed; the only fear is that we shall make a noise in opening the gate. Now let us try it."

Keeping close to the wall, they crept to the gateway; this projected two feet beyond the gate itself, and standing against the latter they could not be seen, even in the unlikely event of one of the sentries looking down. The only risk was of any one in the guard-house coming out. This, however, could not be avoided, and they at once began to examine the fastenings of the gate, which consisted of two massive bars of wood running across it; these, by their united strength, they removed one after another. But when they tried it they found the gate still immovable.

"The beastly thing is locked," Dick said; "there is nothing to do but to blow it open."

He broke off the ends of three cartridges, poured the powder in at the keyhole, and then inserted the slow match.

"Stand in the corner there, Surajah. I will go down to the stream again to light the tinder. The noise is less likely to be heard there."

He stole back again, sat down at the edge of the water, placed his tinder-box in his lap, took his turban off and put it over his hands so as to deaden the sound, and then struck the steel sharply against the flint. The first blow was successful. The spark fell on the tinder, and at once began to extend. He listened intently. The men on the wall were still talking, and the sound had evidently not reached their ears.

CHAPTER VII

BESIEGED

DICK hastily clambered up the wall, ran to the gate, blew the tinder, and then applied it to the slow match. A moment later this began to fizzle.

"Round the corner of the wall, Surajah!" he exclaimed, running back himself. A few anxious seconds passed, then came a sharp explosion; in an instant they ran up. The gate stood two or three inches open; it yielded to a push, and they ran out. Loud shouts were heard from the men above, and a hubbub of cries from the guard-house.

"Run, Surajah! We must risk it. Keep on the edge of the road, and dodge as you go. The chances are they will run down below to see what has happened."

At the top of their speed they dashed down the road. No shot was fired from the wall, Dick's conjecture that the first impulse of the sentries would be to run down below having been justified. They were a couple of hundred yards away before two shots were fired from the gate. The bullets whistled by harmlessly.

"We are all right now," Dick cried. "They can scarcely see us, and we shall soon be out of sight altogether."

Five or six more shots were fired a few seconds later, as the men from the guard-house reached the gate. On looking back when they had gone another hundred yards, they saw a number of figures on the road.

"Not quite so fast, Surajah," Dick said. "It is going to be a long chase now. We have got three hundred yards start, and they won't be able to load again, running at full speed."

For a time their pursuers gained somewhat upon them; then gradually they began to straggle, as the effect of the speed at

which they were running told upon them. When they reached the ruined village there were four men running together some three hundred yards behind ; the rest were a considerable distance in the rear.

“ Another mile or two and they will all give up the chase except these four, Surajah, and if they turn out better runners than we do, we can make a stand ; there are some more huts another two miles farther, and we will fight them there.”

They were going slower now, for although the downward course of the road helped them a good deal, the run was telling on them. Not a word was spoken until they reached the second village. When they came to the first house they stopped simultaneously and looked round. Their pursuers were not more than two hundred yards behind them.

“ In here, Surajah,” Dick said, as he ran into the ruined hut. Its roof was gone, its door hung loose on its hinges. It had but one window, a small one, looking up the valley. Dick laid his gun on the sill, which was nearly level with his shoulder.

“ I must wait until they get pretty close,” he said, “ for I am panting so that I can’t keep the barrel steady, even with this rest.”

“ I will kneel down outside,” Surajah said.

“ Mind, I will fire first, Surajah. Don’t you fire until they are within twenty yards of you ; by that time I shall have loaded again.”

Dick had more time than he had expected, for as soon as their pursuers saw them enter the hut they slackened their pace considerably. They were within about eighty yards, when Dick held his breath, and standing for a moment immovable, took a steady aim and fired. One of the men stumbled in his run, took a step or two forward, and then fell on his face ; the others paused for a moment, and then, with a fierce yell, ran forward. The moment he had fired, Dick dropped the stock of his gun on to the ground, snatched a

cartridge from the bandolier, bit off the end, and emptied the powder into the barrel, gave the gun a shake, so as to be sure that it ran into the touch-hole, and then rammed down the bullet. As he was in the act of doing so, Surajah fired, and a loud yell told that his shot had been successful. Dick sprang to the door as Surajah entered. Two shots at the same instant rang out ; but, at even so short a distance, the bullets went wide. Dick stepped out, and in turn fired. One of the two men fell ; the other threw down his musket, and fled up the road.

“ Thank goodness that is over,” Dick exclaimed. “ I thought they had no chance with us here. Now the first thing is to get our wind again. They stood for two or three minutes breathing heavily ; then, as their breath came again, they prepared to move, when Dick exclaimed suddenly, “ What is that noise ? ”

There was a dull, confused sound in the air, and then Surajah, pointing up the road, exclaimed, “ Cavalry ! ”

Far away on the white road a dark mass could be seen. At first, Dick instinctively turned to resume their flight, but then he said,—

“ It is of no use, Surajah ; the sides of the valley are too steep to climb, and they will be up in five or six minutes. We must fight it out here. Run out to that man I shot, and bring in his gun, bandolier, pistols, if he has any, and sword ; I will take them from these two. It will make all the difference having spare weapons.”

Surajah, without a word, hurried up the road, while Dick ran over to the house opposite, which seemed to be larger than the one they had first entered. He looked round. It contained only one room, but this was twenty feet square. There were three small windows, one looking into the street, one looking up the valley, and one behind. The floor was littered with the beams of the roof ; the door was still in its place. Having ascertained this, he ran back to the bodies of

the two men, picked up the three guns, took off their bandoliers, and removed the pistols from their sashes; and with these, and one of their swords, returned to the house, just as Surajah came back.

"This is the best house to defend, Surajah. There are some beams with which we can block up the door."

Laying down the arms inside, they set to work with the beams, and barricaded the door so firmly that, short of its being splintered to pieces, no entry could be effected. This done, they re-charged the six guns, examined the pistols, and finding that they were loaded, placed three of them in each of their sashes, and hung the swords by their sides. Then they went to the window looking up the valley. The horsemen, some twenty in number, were but a short quarter of a mile away, and were coming along at a gallop.

"Don't fire, Surajah," Dick said. "They will have heard from the man who has got away that we are in the house opposite, and if they don't find us there, they will think that we have gone on, and will ride down the valley till they are sure they must be ahead of us. Then they will search the ground carefully as they come back, and altogether we may gain an hour; and every moment is of use. It must be two o'clock now; and our troop generally gets here soon after seven."

As he spoke the horsemen drew up in front of the opposite hut. There was a momentary pause, and then a voice said,—

"It is empty."

Then followed the command, "Ride on, men; they can't have got very far. We shall overtake them in ten minutes."

As soon as they started, Dick said,—

"Take a ramrod, Surajah, and make some holes through the walls to fire through. If we were to show ourselves at the windows we might get shot."

The walls were built of mud and clay, and with the iron ramrods they had no difficulty in making four holes an inch wide and two inches high, on each side of the house.

"Now we are ready for them," Dick said, when they had finished. "They have been gone half-an-hour, and it won't be long before they are back." In a few minutes they heard the clatter of horses' hoofs. It ceased some forty or fifty yards away, and by the sound of voices and orders, it was evident that the other houses were being searched. Voices were also heard at the back of the house, and they guessed that the ground was being closely examined up to the foot of the rock walls which enclosed the valley.

"Now, Surajah, you can take a shot from the window on that side. The others will be here in a minute, and it is just as well to let them know where we are before they get close up to our door."

Surajah went to the window at the back. Four horsemen were making their way at a walk along the level ground between the rocks and the huts; the nearest was but some forty yards away. Surajah fired, and the man at once fell from his horse; the others instantly galloped on at full speed up the valley, and from the window at the end Surajah saw them gather on the road three or four hundred yards away, and then, after a short consultation, cross to the other side of the valley, with the intention, he had no doubt, of rejoining their comrades.

The sound of the gun had been followed by shouts and exclamations from the party in the village. Dick could hear a conference in low tones; then all was silent. He went to the loop-hole at the corner, laid his rifle in it, and waited, looking along the barrel. Two or three minutes later the hole was darkened, and he fired at once. There was a sound of a heavy fall, followed by cries of rage, and a moment later there was a rush of men against the door. Surajah ran across. Two spare guns were pushed through the loop-holes, one on each side of it; these had not been bored straight through the wall, but at angles that would enable them to fire at any one attacking it. Looking along the barrels, each

could see one of the group in front, and fired at the same moment. With a yell of rage and surprise, the assailants of the door sprang back and ran down the street.

"There are four less, anyhow," Dick said, as he and Surajah reloaded the empty guns. "Those loop-holes will puzzle them, and I don't think they will care to come on again for a bit."

There was a pause for some minutes, and then from the huts opposite, and from various points higher up the valley and behind, a dropping fire was opened.

"Keep out of the line of the windows, whatever you do, Surajah; and it will be just as well to lie down for a bit, until we see whether any of their shots come through the wall. I think we are quite safe from the distant fire, but from the house opposite it is possible they may penetrate it. Anyhow, don't stand in the line of a loop-hole; a stray ball might find its way in."

For a few minutes the enemy fired away unanswered, and then Dick, who had been seated on the ground with his back against the end wall, got up and went along that facing the street, carefully examining it.

"I don't think any of their balls have come through, Surajah. I should be able to see out into the moonlight if they had done so. Now it is time for us to be doing something. I expect they are getting a little bolder, and will perhaps give us a chance. You take this loop-hole; it is exactly in a line with the opposite hut, and the fellows in there must come to their door to fire. I will take this slanting hole by the door-post. I can see one of the windows of the next hut to that we were in; I have no doubt that they are firing from there also. Don't wait for them to shoot, but fire directly a figure shows itself."

In a very short time Surajah fired. Dick heard the clatter of a gun as it fell to the ground.

"You have hit him, Surajah."

"Yes, but only wounded him. I think I hit him on the shoulder; he let his gun drop and ran into the house."

"Take a spare gun at once. If there are others there, they will think that you are loading, and may show themselves again."

A moment later Dick saw a gun thrust out through the window he was watching; then the head and shoulders of a man appeared behind it. He fired, and the figure disappeared. Almost at the same instant, Surajah fired again.

"I had one that time, Sahib!"

It was now quiet for some little time; then a horseman dashed suddenly past and galloped up the valley at full speed.

"The end window, Surajah! Bring him down if you can."

Surajah ran there and fired.

"I have missed him!" he said, in a tone of deep disappointment.

"It does not make much difference; if you had hit him, they could have sent another off close to the opposite side of the valley. There is no doubt as to what he has gone for; you see they have lost six killed and one wounded, and they must know that they have not the slightest chance of taking this hut. I have no doubt that he has ridden back to bring down the infantry from the fort. From the number of huts round the gate, and the sound of talking, I should think there were fifty or sixty at least—perhaps a hundred. If they send down fifty we shall have sharp work. Our difficulty will be to prevent them from making a rush at all the windows together. If they were to get there they could riddle us with balls."

"Could we block them up, Sahib?"

"That is just what I was thinking," Dick replied. "We might try, anyhow. It will be an hour and a half before they are down here; it must be past four now, and in another hour daylight will begin to break. There is any amount of the old thatch down on the floor. The best way would be to fill up

the window-holes with it first, then to put two or three bits of wood across, and a strong piece down behind it, and to keep that in its place by wedging one of the long beams against it. If they came up and tried to pull the thatch out, we could fire through it with our pistols; and we will make a loop-hole below each when we have got the work done."

It was not so difficult a business as they thought it would be. The windows were little more than a foot across and two feet high; it was but the work of a few minutes to fill these up with the masses of thatch. When this was done, they picked out thick pieces of wood for cross-bars; then they took a beam eight feet long, made a hole with their tulwars in the clay floor close to the wall, put one end of the beam into it, and reared it upright against the window. Dick held it in its place while Surajah hacked a deep notch in it—a by no means difficult matter, for it was half rotten with exposure. The notch was cut just opposite the middle of the window. The three cross-pieces were then put into their place, and the upright pressed firmly against them; one end of a long beam was placed in the notch, the other in a slight hole made in the ground, thus forming a strut, which held the rest firmly in their positions.

"That is a good job done," Dick said, "but a very hot one. Now, Surajah, sharpen three or four pieces of wood, and drive them down into the ground at the foot of that strut; then it will be as firm as a rock."

They then proceeded in the same way with the other two windows.

"It is getting light fast," Dick said, as he wiped the perspiration from his face. "Take a look out up the valley; they ought to be coming by this time."

Surajah applied his eye to one of the loop-holes.

"I can see them," he said; "they are half a mile away. There are two mounted men; I expect one is their officer, and the other the man who rode back to fetch them."

"Let us set to work at the loop-holes under the windows, Surajah; it is most important to get them done. You make the one at the end, I will do that one looking into the street; put it as close to the beam as you can."

They worked hard, and it was not long before the walls were pierced.

"Now, Surajah, you do the one at the back. The fellows will soon be within range, and I will give them a lesson to be careful. They will naturally break up, and go round behind the houses opposite, as they can find shelter nowhere else; and, for a bit at any rate, we shall get them all on one side of us, which is what we want."

Dick carried the six guns to the end of the hut, and then applied his eye to the loop-hole there. The enemy were coming along at a run, in a confused mass.

"I can't very well miss them," he muttered to himself, as he thrust his gun through a loop-hole and fired.

Without waiting to see the result, he thrust another gun out, aimed, and fired.

"Never mind the hole, Surajah," he said. "Come here and reload."

The four other shots were discharged in rapid succession. The Mysoreans at first opened an irregular fire on the hut. When the sixth shot was fired they left the road in a body, and ran across the valley, leaving four of their number on the ground behind them.

As soon as the guns were reloaded, Surajah returned to his work. It was now broad daylight, and the sun was shining upon the hill-tops. A quarter of an hour passed without a movement from the enemy. Dick and his companion occupied the time in further strengthening the door with cross-beams, kept in their place by struts.

"If they break it to splinters," Dick said, when they had finished, "they will hardly be able to force their way in, for if they were to try to crawl in between those cross-beams, they