

CHAPTER X

IN DISGUISE

ON the following evening Dick appeared in the room where the others were sitting, in the dress Rajbullub had got for him, and which was similar to that of other peasants. The boys had already been told that he was shortly going on a journey, and that it would be necessary for him to travel in disguise, but had been warned that it was a matter that was not to be spoken of to any one. The early respect that Dick's strength and activity had inspired them with had been much shaken when they discovered that he was unable either to ride or shoot; but their father's narrative of his adventures when scouting with Surajah had completely reinstated him in their high opinion. When he entered, however, they burst out laughing. The two ladies could not help smiling, and Dick was not long before he joined in the laugh against himself. He had felt uncomfortable enough when he started in an almost similar dress with Surajah, although there was then no one to criticise his appearance; but now, in the presence of his mother and aunt, he felt strangely uncomfortable.

"Never mind, Dick," his uncle said encouragingly. "The boys would feel just as uncomfortable as you do now, if they were dressed up in European fashion. Now, while we are talking, make your first attempt at sitting on your heels."

Dick squatted down until his knees nearly touched his chest, and a moment later lost his balance and toppled over, amid a roar of laughter. Next time he balanced himself more carefully.

"That is right, Dick; you will get accustomed to it in time. But you must see already that there is a good deal more to be done than you thought of, before you can pass as a native. Remember you must not only be able to balance yourself

while sitting still, but must be able to use your hands—for cooking purposes, for example, for eating, or for doing anything there may be to do—not only without losing your balance, but without showing that you are balancing yourself."

"It is much more difficult than I thought, uncle. Of course I have always seen the natives squatting like this, but it seemed so natural that it never struck me it was difficult at all. I say, it is beginning to hurt already; my shin-bones are aching horribly."

"Yes; that is where the strain comes, my boy. But you have got to stick to it until your muscles there, which have never been called into play in this way before, get accustomed to the work."

"I understand that, uncle; it was just the same with my arms when I began to climb. But I can't stand this any longer. I can no more get up than I can fly;" and Dick rolled over on to his side. Again and again he tried, after a short rest between each trial. As he gave it up and limped stiffly to the divan, he said, "I feel as if some one had been kicking me on the shins until he had nearly broken them, mother. I have been kicked pretty badly several times in fights by rough fellows at home in Shadwell, but it never hurt like this;" and he rubbed his aching legs ruefully. "Well, uncle, I am very much obliged to you for putting me up to practising this position. It seemed to me that it would be quite a simple thing to walk along quietly, and to move my arms about as they do; but I never thought of this. I wonder, mother, you never told me that above all things I should have to learn to squat on my heels for any time; it would not have been so difficult to learn it five or six years ago, when I was not anything like so heavy as I am now."

"It never once occurred to me, Dick; I wish it had. I thought I had foreseen every difficulty, but it never once came into my mind that in order to pass as a native you must be able to sit like one."

"Ah, well, I shall learn in time, mother," Dick replied cheerfully. "Every exercise is hard at first, but one soon gets accustomed to it."

Dick threw himself with his usual energy into his new work. Although of a morning when he first woke his shins caused him the most acute pain, he always spent half-an-hour in practice; afterwards he would sit for some time allowing the water from the tap at the side of the bath to flow upon the aching muscles; then he would dress, and, as soon as breakfast was over, go for a run in the garden. At first it was but a sham-ble, but gradually the terrible stiffness would wear off, and he would return to the house comparatively well. Of an evening the practice was longer, and was kept up until the aching pain became unendurable. At the end of four or five days, he was scarcely able to walk at all, but after that time matters improved, and three weeks later he could preserve the attitude for half-an-hour at a time.

In other respects his training had gone on uninterruptedly every day. He went out into the town, accompanied sometimes by Rajbullub, sometimes by Surajah, in the disguises of either a peasant, a soldier, or a trader, and learnt to walk and carry himself in accordance with his dress. Before putting on these disguises, he painted himself with a solution that could easily be washed off on his return to the palace, where he now always wore a European dress.

"You cannot be too careful," the Rajah said. "There are of course Mohammedans here, and, for aught we know, some may act as agents or spies of Tippoo, just as the English have agents and spies in Mysore. Were one of them to send word that you had taken to Indian attire, and that it was believed that you were about to undertake some mission or other, it would add considerably to your difficulties and dangers. As it is, no one outside our own circle ever sees you about with me or the boys, except in your European dress, and Rajbullub tells me that in no single instance while you have

been in disguise has any suspicion been excited, or question asked by the people of various classes with whom you and he converse in the streets."

Another month passed, and by this time Dick could, without any great fatigue, squat on his heels for an hour at a time. As the date for his departure drew near, his mother became more and more nervous and anxious.

"I shall never forgive myself if you do not come back," she said one day when they were alone. "I cannot but feel that I have been selfish, and that really, on the strength of a conviction which most people would laugh at as whimsical and absurd, I am risking the substance for a shadow, and am imperilling the life of my only boy upon the faint chance that he may find my husband. I know that even your uncle, although he has always been most kind about it, and assisted in every way in his power, has but little belief in the success of your search, although, as he sees how bent I am upon it, he says nothing that might dash my hopes. If evil comes of it, Dick, I shall never forgive myself; I shall feel that I have sacrificed you to a sort of hallucination."

"I can only say, mother," Dick replied, "that I came out here and entered into your plans, only because I had the most implicit faith that you were right; I should now continue it on my own account, even if to-morrow you should be taken from me. Of course, I see plainly enough that the chances are greatly against my ever hearing anything of father; but from what has taken place during the campaign, I have seen that there must be many British captives still hidden away among the hill-forts, and it is quite possible he may be among them. I do not even say that it is probable, but the chances are not so very greatly against it; and even if I thought they were smaller—much smaller than I believe them to be—I should still consider it my duty to go up and try and find him. So, even if it should happen that I never come back again, you will not have yourself to blame, for it

is not you that are sending me, but I who am going of my free will; and indeed, I feel it so much my duty that even were you to turn round now and ask me to stay, I should still think it right to undertake this mission.

“But indeed, mother, I see no great danger in it; in fact, scarcely any danger at all—at any rate, unless I find father. If I do so, there might certainly be risk in attempting to get him away; but this, if I am lucky enough in discovering him, will not weigh with me for an instant. If I do not find him, it seems to me that the risk is a mere nothing. Surajah and I will wander about, enlisting in the garrisons of forts; then, if we find there are no prisoners there, we shall take an early opportunity of getting away. In some places, no doubt, I shall be able to learn from men of the garrison whether there are prisoners, without being forced to enter at all; for although in the great forts, like Savandroog and Outradroog, it is considered so important the defences should be kept secret that none of the garrison are allowed to leave until they are discharged as too old for service, there is no occasion for the same precaution in the case of less important places. Thus, you see, we shall simply have to wander about, keeping our eyes and ears open, and finding out, either from the peasants or the soldiers themselves, whether there are any prisoners there.”

“I wish I could go with you, Dick. I used to think that when the work of searching for your father had begun I could wait patiently for the result, but instead of that I find myself even more anxious and more nervous than I was at Shadwell.”

“I can quite understand, mother, that it is very much more trying work sitting here waiting, than it is to be actively engaged. The only thing is, that you must promise me not to trouble more than you can help, for if I think of you as sitting here fretting about me, I shall worry infinitely more than I otherwise should over any difficulties we may have to

encounter. You must remember that I shall have Surajah with me; he is a capital companion, and will always be able to advise me upon native business. He is as plucky as a fellow can be, and I can trust him to do anything just as I would myself.”

The preparations for departure now began in earnest. There was some discussion as to the arms that were to be taken, but at last it was decided that with safety they could carry nothing beyond a matchlock, a pistol, and a sword each. Great pains were taken in the selection of the matchlocks. In the armoury were several weapons of high finish, with silver mountings, that had belonged to the Rajah's father and grandfather. These were tried against each other, and the two that were proved to be the most accurate were chosen. Dick found, indeed, that at distances up to a hundred yards, they were quite equal to the English rifle he had brought out. The silver mountings were taken off, and then the pieces differed in no way in appearance from those in general use among the peasantry. The pistols were chosen with equal care. The swords were of finely tempered steel, the blades being removed from their jewelled handles, for which were substituted rough handles of ordinary metal.

Ten gold pieces were sewn up underneath the iron bands encircling the leathern scabbard, as many under the bosses of their shields, and five pieces in the soles of each of their shoes. In their waist-sashes, the ordinary receptacle of money, each carried a small bag with native silver coins. At last all was ready, and an hour before daybreak Dick took a cheerful farewell of his mother and a hearty one of his uncle, and, with Surajah, passed through the town and struck up into the hills. Each carried a bag slung over his shoulder, well filled with provisions, a small water-bottle, and, hung upon his matchlock, a change of clothing. In the folds of his turban Dick had a packet of the powder used for making dye, so that he could at any time renew the brown shade, when it began to

fade out. For a time but few words were spoken. Dick knew that although his mother had borne up bravely till the last, she would break down as soon as he left her, and the thought that he might never see her again weighed heavily upon him.

Surajah, on the contrary, was filled with elation at the prospect of adventures and dangers, and he was silent simply because he felt that for the present his young lord was in no humour for speech. As soon as the sun rose, Dick shook off his depression. They were now a considerable distance up the hill-side. There was no path, for the people of Tripataly had no occasion to visit Mysore, and still less desire for a visit from the Mysoreans. Periodically, raids were made upon the villages and plains by marauders from the hills, but these were mostly by the passes through the ghauts, thirty or forty miles left or right from the little state which, nestling at the foot of the hills, for the most part escaped these visitations—which, now that the British had become possessed of the territories and the hills, had, it was hoped, finally ceased. Nevertheless, the people were always prepared for such visits. Every cultivator had a pit in which he stored his harvest, except so much as was needed for his immediate wants. The pit was lined with mats, others were laid over the grain; two feet of soil was then placed over the mats, and, after the ground had been ploughed, there was no indication of the existence of the hiding-place.

The town itself was surrounded by a wall of sufficient strength to withstand the attacks of any parties of marauders, and the custom of keeping a man on a watch-tower was still maintained. At the foot of the tower stood a heavy gun, whose discharge would at once warn the peasants for miles round of an enemy, calling those near to hasten to the shelter of the town, while the men of the villages at a distance could hurry, with their wives and families, to hiding-places among the hills.

Dick and Surajah had no need of a path, for they were well acquainted with the ground, and had often wandered up nearly

to the crest of the hills in pursuit of game. An hour before noon they took their seats under a rock that shaded them from the sun's rays and, sitting down, partook of a hearty meal. There was no occasion for haste, and they prepared for rest until the heat of the day was passed.

"We are fairly off now, Surajah," Dick said, as he stretched himself out comfortably. "I have been thinking of this almost as long as I can remember, and can hardly believe that it has come to pass."

"I have thought of it but a short time, my lord."

"No, no, Surajah," Dick interrupted. "You know it was arranged that from the first you were to call me Purseram, for unless you get accustomed to it, you will be calling me 'my lord' in the hearing of others."

"I had forgotten," Surajah replied with a smile, and then went on. "It is but a short time since I was sure I was going with you, but I have ever hoped that the time would come when, instead of the dull work of drilling men and placing them on guard, I might have the opportunity of taking part in war and adventure, and indeed had thought of asking my lord your uncle to permit me to go away for a while in one of the Company's regiments, and there to learn my business. Since the English have become masters, and there is no longer war between rajah and rajah, as there used to be in olden times, this is the only way that a man of spirit can gain distinction. But this adventure is far better, for there will be much danger, and need for caution as well as courage."

Dick nodded. "More for caution and coolness than for courage I think, Surajah; it will only be in case we find my father, or if any grave suspicion falls on us, that there will be need for courage. Once well into Mysore, I see but little chance of suspicion falling upon us. We have agreed that we will first make for Seringapatam, avoiding as much as possible all places on the way where inquiries whence we come may be made of us. Once in the city, we shall be safe from such

questions, and can travel thence where we will ; and it will be hard if we do not, when there, manage to learn the places at which any prisoners there may be, are most likely to be kept. Besides, my father is as likely to be there as anywhere, for Tippoo may, since our army marched away, have ordered all prisoners to be brought down from the hill-forts to Seringapatam."

When the sun had lost its power they proceeded on their way again. Their start had been timed so that for the first week they would have moonlight, and would therefore be able to travel at night until they arrived at Seringapatam. It was considered that it was only necessary to do this for the first two or three nights, as, after that, the tale that they were coming from a village near the frontier, and were on their way to join Tippoo's army, would seem natural enough to any villagers who might question them. They continued their course until nearly midnight, by which time they were both completely fatigued, and, choosing a spot sheltered by bushes, lay down to sleep. It took another two days before they were clear of the broken country, and the greater portion of this part of the journey they performed in daylight. Occasionally they saw in the distance the small forts which guarded every road to the plateau ; to these they always gave a very wide berth, as although, according to the terms of peace, they should all have been evacuated, they might still be occupied by parties of Tippoo's troops. Indeed, all the news that had arrived since the army left, represented Tippoo as making every effort to strengthen his army and fortresses, and to prepare for a renewal of the war.

Several times they saw bears, which abounded among the ghauts, and once beheld two tigers crossing a nullah. They had, however, other matters to think of, and neither the flesh nor the skins of the bears would have been of any use to them. The work was severe, and they were glad when at last they reached the level country. In some of the upper valleys opening on to this they had seen small villages. Near one of

these they had slept, and as in the morning they saw that the inhabitants were Hindoos, they fearlessly went out and talked with them, in order to gain some information as to the position of the forts, and to learn whether any bodies of Tippoo's troops were likely to be met with. They found the people altogether ignorant on these matters. They were simple peasants ; their whole thoughts were given to tilling their land and bringing in sufficient to live upon and to satisfy the demands of the tax-gatherers when they visited them. They had little communication with other villages, and knew nothing of what was passing outside their own. They evinced no curiosity whatever concerning their visitors, who bought from them some cakes of ground ragee, which formed the chief article of their food.

The country through which they passed on emerging from the hills was largely covered with bush and jungle, and was very thinly populated. It was an almost unbroken flat, save that here and there isolated masses of rock rose above it ; these were extremely steep and inaccessible, and on their summits were the hill-forts that formed so prominent a feature in the warfare of both Mysore and the Nizam's dominions to the north. These forts were, for the most part, considered absolutely impregnable, but the last war with the British had proved that they were not so, as several of the strongest had been captured, with comparatively slight loss. Whenever they passed within a few miles of one of these hill-fortresses, Dick looked at it with anxious eyes, for there, for aught he knew, his father might be languishing.

After two days' walking across the plain they felt that there was no longer any necessity for concealment, except that it would be as well to avoid an encounter with any troops. Although, therefore, they avoided the principal roads, they kept along beaten paths, and did not hesitate to enter villages to buy food. They no longer saw caste marks on the foreheads of the inhabitants. The Hindoos had been compelled

by force to abandon their religion, all who refused to do so being put to death at once. Dick and Surajah found that their dialect differed much more from that of the country below the ghauts than they had expected, and, although they had no difficulty in conversing with the peasants, they found that their idea that they would be able to pass as natives of one of these villages was an altogether erroneous one.

"This will never do, Surajah," Dick said, as they left one of the villages. "We shall have to alter our story somehow, for the first person we meet in Seringapatam will see that we are not natives of Mysore. We must give out that we come from some village far down on the ghauts—one of those which have been handed over to the English by the new treaty. You know the country well enough there to be able to answer any questions that may be asked. We must say that, desiring to be soldiers, and hating the English raj, we have crossed the hills to take service of some sort in Mysore. This will be natural enough: and of course there are many Mohammedans down in the plains, especially among the villages on the ghauts."

"I think that would be best, Purseram."

"There is one comfort," Dick went on: "it is evident that Tippoo is hated by all the Hindoos. He has forced them to change their religion, and we need have no fear of being betrayed by any of them, except from pressure, or from a desire to win Tippoo's good-will."

"Yes, that might be the case with those who are fairly well off, but would scarcely be so among the poorer classes; besides, even they, were we living among them, would have no reason for suspecting our story. There seems no doubt, from what they say, that Tippoo is preparing for war again, and I think that we shall do well, as soon as we enter the city, to change our attire, or we might be forced into joining the army, which would be the last thing we want. What I should desire above all things, is to get service of some kind in the Palace."

After six days' travel they saw the walls of Seringapatam.

Dick had made many inquiries at the last halting-place as to the position of the fords on that side of the town, and learned that only those leading to the fort were guarded. The ford opposite the town was freely open to traffic, and could be crossed without question by country people, although a watch was kept to see that none of the very numerous prisoners escaped by it. It was here, therefore, that they crossed the river, the water being little more than knee-deep. No questions were asked by the guard as they passed, their appearance differing in no way from that of the peasants of the neighbourhood. After a quarter of a mile's walk they entered the town. It was open, and undefended by a wall; the streets were wide, and laid out at right angles. The shops, however, were poor, for the slightest appearance of wealth sufficed to excite the cupidity of Tippoo or his agents, and the possessor would be exposed to exorbitant demands, which, if not complied with, would have entailed first torture and then death. The streets, however, presented a busy appearance. They were thronged with soldiers; battalions of recruits passed along, and it was evident that Tippoo was doing all in his power to raise the strength of his army to its former level. They wandered about for some time, and at last, in a small street, Dick went up to an old man whose face pleased him; he was standing at the door of his house.

"We desire to find a room where we can lodge for a time," he said. "Can you direct us where we can obtain one?"

"You are not soldiers?" the old man asked.

"No; we desire to earn our living, but have not yet decided whether to join the army."

"You are from the plains?" the native said sharply, in their own dialect.

"That is so," Dick replied.

"And yet you are Mohammedans?"

"Every one is Mohammedan here."

"Ah! because it is the choice of 'death or Mohammed.' How comes it that two young men should voluntarily leave their homes to enter this tiger's den? You look honest youths. How come you here?"

"I trust that we are honest," Dick said. "We have assuredly not ventured here without a reason, and that reason is a good one; but this is not a city where one talks of such matters to a stranger in the street, even though his face tells one that he can be trusted with a secret."

The old man was silent for a minute; then he said, "Come in, my sons; you can, as you say, trust me. I have a room that you can occupy."

They followed him into the house, and he led them into a small room at the back. It was poorly furnished, but was scrupulously clean. A pan of lighted charcoal stood in one corner, and over this a pot of rice was boiling.

"I bid you welcome," he said gravely. And as the salutation was not one in use by the Mohammedans, Dick saw that his idea that the old man was a Hindoo who had been forced to abjure his religion, was a correct one. The old man motioned to them to take their seats on the divan.

"I do not ask for your confidence," he said, "but if you choose to give it to me it will be sacred, and it may be that, poor as I am, I am able to aid you. I will tell you at once that I am a native of Conjeveram and, of course, a Hindoo. I was settled as a trader at Mysore, the old capital; but when, four years ago, the tyrant destroyed that town, I, with over a hundred thousand of our religion, was forced to adopt Mohammedanism. I was of high caste and, like many others, would have preferred death to yielding, had it not been that I had a young daughter; and for her sake I lived, and moved here from Mysore. I gained nothing by my sin. I was one of the wealthiest traders in the whole city, and I had been here but a month when Tippoo's soldiers burst in one day; my daughter was carried off to the Tiger's harem, and I was

threatened with torture unless I divulged the hiding-place of my money. It was useless to resist. My wealth was now worthless to me, and without hesitation I complied with their demands; and all I had was seized, save one small hoard which was enough to keep me thus to the end of my days. My wants are few: a handful of rice or grain a day, and I am satisfied. I should have put an end to my life, were it not that according to our religion the suicide is accursed; and, moreover, I would fain live to see the vengeance that must some day fall upon the tyrant. After what I have said, it is for you to decide whether you think I can be trusted with your secret, for I am sure it is for no slight reason that you have come to this accursed city."

Dick felt that he could safely speak, and that he would find in this native a very valuable ally. He therefore told his story without concealment. Except that an exclamation of surprise broke from his lips when Dick said that he was English, the old man listened without a remark until he had finished.

"Your tale is indeed a strange one," he said, when he had heard the story. "I had looked for something out of the ordinary, but assuredly for nothing so strange as this. Truly you English are a wonderful people. It is marvellous that one should come all the way from beyond the black water to seek for a father lost so many years ago. Methinks that a blessing will surely alight upon such filial piety, and that you will find your father yet alive. Were it not for that, I should deem your search a useless one. Thousands of Englishmen have been massacred during the last ten years; hundreds have died of disease and suffering; many have been poisoned. Many officers have also been murdered, some of them here, but more in the hill-forts; for it was there they were generally sent when their deaths were determined upon. Still, he may live. There are men who have been here as many years and who yet survive."

"Then this is where the main body of the prisoners were kept?" Dick asked.

“Yes; all were brought here, native and English. Tens of thousands of boys and youths, swept up by Tippoo’s armies from the Malabar coast and the Carnatic, were brought up here and formed into battalions, and these English prisoners were forced to drill them. It was but a poor drill. I have seen them drilling their recruits at Conjeveram, and the difference between the quick sharp order there and the listless command here was great indeed. Consequently the Englishmen were punished by being heavily ironed, and kept at starvation point for the slackness with which they obeyed the tyrant’s orders. Sometimes they were set to sweep the streets, sometimes they were beaten till they well-nigh expired under the lash. Often would they have died of hunger, were it not that Tippoo’s own troops took pity on them and supplied them from their store. Some of the boys, drummer-boys, or ship’s-boys, or little ship’s officers, were kept in the Palace and trained as singers and dancers for Tippoo’s amusement. Very many of the white prisoners were handed over to Tippoo by Admiral Sufferin. Though how a Christian could have brought himself to hand over Christians to this tiger, I cannot imagine.

“Others were captured in forays, and there were till lately many survivors of the force that surrendered in Hyder’s time. There are certainly some in other towns, for it was the policy of Hyder, as it is of Tippoo, always to break up parties of prisoners. Many were sent to Bangalore, some to Burrampore, and very many to the fort of Chillembroom; but I heard that nearly all these died of famine and disease very quickly. While Tippoo at times considers himself strong enough to fight the English, and is said to aim at the conquest of all southern India, he has yet a fear of Englishmen, and he thus separates his captives, lest, if they were together, they should plot against him and bring about a rising. He knows that all the old Hindoo population are against him, and that even among the Mohammedans he is very unpopular. The

Chelah battalions, who numbered twelve or fourteen thousand, made up entirely of those he has dragged from their homes in districts devastated by him, would assuredly have joined against him, were there a prospect of success, just as they seized the opportunity to desert six months ago, when the English attacked the camp across the river.

“Now, if you will tell me in what way I can best serve you, I will do so. In the first place, sturdy young peasants are wanted for the army, and assuredly you will not be here many days before you will find yourselves in the ranks, whether you like it or not; for Tippoo is in no way particular how he gets recruits.”

CHAPTER XI

A USEFUL FRIEND

“I AGREE with you that it would be a disadvantage to go as a soldier,” Dick said, after a pause; “but what disguise would you recommend us to choose?”

“That I must think over. You both look too straight and active to be employed as the assistants of a trader, or I could have got some of my friends to take you in that capacity. The best disguise will be a gayer attire, such as would be worn by the retainers of some of the chiefs; and were it not that, if questioned, you could not say who was your employer, that is what I should recommend.”

“I saw a number of men working at a battery they are erecting by the river side; could we not take service there until something better presents itself?”

“I should not advise that,” the native replied, “for the work is very hard and the pay poor; indeed, most of those employed on it are men driven in from the country round and forced to labour, getting only enough pay to furnish them