

CHAPTER XII

A TIGER IN A ZENANA

ANOTHER week passed, and by the end of that time Dick was perfectly assured that his father was not at Seringapatam. It was then a question which of the hill-forts to try first. Pertaub had already procured for them an assortment of goods and dresses suitable for travelling merchants, and the purchase of these things had drawn heavily on their stock of money, although several of the traders, on receiving a hint from Pertaub of the purpose for which the goods were required, had given many articles without charge, while for the majority of the goods Dick gave an order on his mother, who had told him that he could draw up to five hundred pounds. On the day before they were about to start, their plans were interrupted by the issue of a proclamation, saying that sports with wild beasts would take place on the following day; and they agreed that, as one day would make no difference, they would stop to see them, especially as Tippoo himself would be present. Hitherto, although they had several times seen him being carried in his palanquin, they had had no opportunity of observing him closely, as he was always surrounded by his guards.

The sports were held in a great square in the fort. A strong network was erected in a semi-circle, of which the Palace formed the base; behind the network the spectators ranged themselves. Tippoo occupied a window in the Palace looking down into the square. There were always a number of wild beasts in Seringapatam available for these purposes, as a regular supply of tigers, leopards, and wild elephants, was caught and sent in every month. Six of the largest tigers were always kept in cages in the courtyard in front of the

Palace, and to these were thrown state criminals or officials who had offended the tyrant, and were devoured by them.

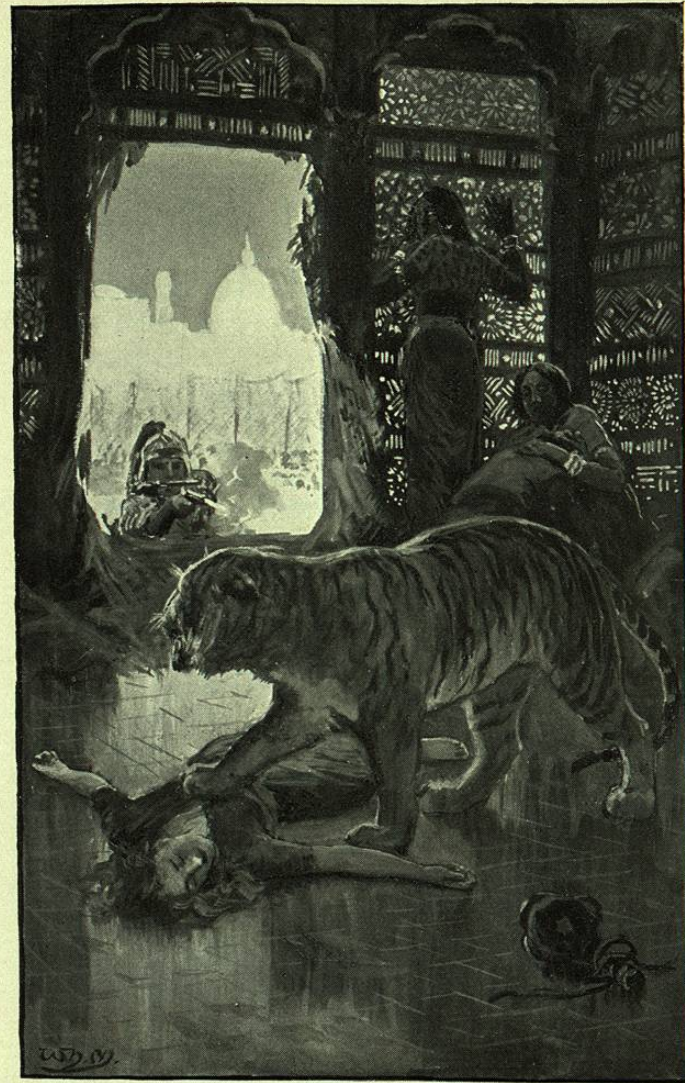
In his younger days, Tippoo had been very fond of the chase, but he was now too fat and heavy, and seldom ventured on horseback. Dick and Surajah, who had arrived early, had placed themselves at the corner, where the network touched the Palace. Some thirty yards in front of them a balcony projected; it was enclosed by a thick lattice-work; from behind this the ladies of Tippoo's harem viewed the sports. These began with a contest of fighting rams. The animals were placed some fifty yards apart. As soon as they saw each other, both showed extreme anger, uttering notes of defiance; then they began to move towards each other, at first slowly, but increasing in speed until, when within a few yards of one another, each took a spring, meeting in mid air, forehead to forehead, with a crash that could be heard far away. Both fell back, and stood for a moment shaking their heads, as if half stupefied with the blow; then they backed two steps, and hurled themselves at each other again. After this had been repeated once or twice, they locked forehead to forehead, and each strove to push the other back. For some time the struggle continued on equal terms; then the weaker began to give way, and was pushed back step by step until its strength failed altogether, and it was pushed over on to the ground, when the attendants at once interfered and separated them.

Some thirty pairs of rams fought, the affair being to Dick extremely monotonous; the natives, however, took great interest in the contests, wagering freely on the issues, shouting loudly to the combatants, and raising triumphant cries when one was adjudged victor. Then elephants were brought in: but the struggle between these was even tamer than between the rams; they pushed each other with their foreheads until one gave way, when the other would follow it, beating it with its trunk, and occasionally shoving it.

When this sport was over, two parties of men entered the

arena amid a shout of satisfaction from the crowd. After prostrating themselves before Tippoo, they took up their ground facing each other; each man had on his right hand four steel claws fixed to the knuckles. Approaching each other cautiously, they threw with their left hands the garlands of flowers they wore round their necks into the faces of their opponents, trying to take advantage of the moment to strike a blow or to obtain a grip. Each blow laid open the flesh as by a tiger's claws. The great object was to gain a grip, no matter where, which would completely disable the opponent, and render him incapable of defending himself. When this was done, the combat between that pair came to an end. After the ghetties, as these men were named, had retired, a buffalo was matched against a tiger. The latter was averse to the contest, but upon some fire-crackers being thrown close behind him, he sprang at the buffalo, who had been watching him warily. As the tiger launched itself into the air, the buffalo lowered its head, received it on its sharp horns, and threw it a distance of ten yards away. No efforts could goad the wounded tiger to continue the fray, so it and the buffalo were taken out and two others brought in.

The second tiger was a much more powerful beast than its predecessor, and was, indeed, larger than any of those in the cages of the Palace. It had been captured four days before, and was full of fight; it walked round the buffalo three or four times, and then, with the speed of lightning, sprang upon it, breaking its neck with a single blow from its powerful forepaw. Six buffaloes in succession were brought in and were killed one after the other by the tiger. Satisfied with what it had done, the tiger paid no attention to the seventh animal, but walked round and round the arena, looking for a means of escape; then, drawing back, it made a short rush and sprang at the net, which was fourteen feet high. Strong as were the poles that supported the net, it nearly gave way under the impact. The tiger hung ten feet above the ground



"DICK TOOK STEADY AIM, AND FIRED AT THE TIGER."

until some of the guards outside ran up, discharging their muskets into the air, when it recommenced its promenade round the foot of the net, roaring and snarling with anger.

As it neared the Palace it stopped and uttered a roar of defiance at those at the windows. Then, apparently, something moving behind the lattice-work caught its eye; it moved towards it, crouching, and then, with a tremendous spring, launched itself against it. The balcony was ten feet from the ground, but the tiger's spring took it clear of this. The woodwork gave way like paper, and the tiger burst through. A shout of dismay arose from the multitude, but high above this sounded the screams of the women.

"Quick, Surajah!" Dick cried, and drawing his keen dagger, he cut through the network and dashed through, followed by his companion. "Stand here," he cried, as they arrived below the balcony. "Steady! Put your hands against the wall." Then he sprang on to Surajah's back, and thence to his shoulder. Drawing his pistols, he put one between his teeth, grasping the other in his right hand. "Steady, Surajah," he said; "I am going to stand on your head."

He stepped on to his companion's turban, put his left arm on the balcony, and raised himself by it until his arms were above its level. The tiger was standing with its paw upon a prostrate figure, growling savagely, but evidently confused and somewhat dismayed at the piercing screams from the women, most of whom had thrown themselves down on the cushions of the divan. Dick stretched his right hand forward, took a steady aim, and fired. A sharp snarl showed that the shot had taken effect; he dropped the pistol, snatched the other from his mouth, waited for a moment until he could make out the tiger, fired again and at once dropped to the ground, just as a great body flashed from the window above him. He and Surajah had both had their matchlocks slung over their shoulders, and before the tiger could recover from

its spring, they levelled and fired. The tiger rolled over, but regained its feet and made towards them. One of the bullets had, however, struck it on the shoulder and disabled the leg; its movements were therefore comparatively slow, and they had time to leap aside. Surajah discharged his pistol into its ear, while Dick brought down his keen sword with all his strength upon its neck, and the tiger rolled over dead.

A mighty shout rose from the crowd.

"We had better be off," Dick said, "or we shall have all sorts of questions to answer." They slipped through the hole in the net again, but were so surrounded by people cheering and applauding them that they could not extricate themselves, and a minute later some soldiers ran up, pushed through the crowd to them, and surrounded them.

"The sultan requires your presence," they said; and as resistance was out of the question, Dick and Surajah at once accompanied them to the entrance of the Palace. They were led through several large halls, until they entered the room where Tippoo was standing. He had just left the women's apartment, where he had hurried to ascertain what damage had been done by the tiger. Dick and his companion salaamed to the ground, in accordance with the custom of the country.

"You are brave fellows," the sultan said graciously, "and all the braver that you risked death, not only from the tiger, but for daring to look upon my women unveiled."

"I saw nothing, your Highness," Dick said humbly, "save the tiger. That he was standing over a fallen figure I noticed. As soon as my eye fell on him I fired at once, and the second time as soon as the smoke cleared so that I could catch a glimpse of him."

"I pardon you that," Tippoo said; "and in faith you have rendered me good service, for had it not been for your interference, he might have worked havoc in my harem, and that before a single one of my officers or men had recovered his

senses;" and he looked angrily round at the officers standing near him. "How comes it that you were so quick in thought and execution?" he asked Surajah, as the elder of the two.

"My brother and myself have done much hunting among the hills, your Highness, and have learned that in fighting a tiger one needs to be quick as well as fearless."

"Whence come you?" Tippoo asked. "By your tongue you are strangers."

Surajah gave the account that they had agreed upon as to their birth-place, but he was quick-witted enough to see that it would not be safe to say they were in the service of the Rajah of Bhor, as inquiries might be made, and he therefore said, "We came hither to take service either with your Royal Highness, or with one of your rajahs, but have as yet found no opportunity of doing so."

"It is well," Tippoo said. "Henceforth you are officers in my service; apartments shall be assigned to you in the Palace. Here is the first token of my satisfaction;" and he took out a heavy purse from his girdle and handed it to Surajah. "You are free to go now. I will later on consider what duties shall be assigned to you. When you return, report yourselves to Fazli Ali, my chamberlain;" and he indicated a white-bearded official among the group standing beside him.

Salaaming deeply again, they left the apartments. Not a word was spoken until they were outside the precincts of the Palace.

"This makes a sudden change in our plans," Dick said; "whether for better or worse I cannot say yet."

"I was right in not saying we were in the service of the Rajah of Bhor, was I not? I thought that Tippoo would offer to take us into his service, and he might have caused a letter to be sent to the Rajah, saying that he had done so."

"Yes, you were quite right, Surajah; I had thought of that myself, and was on thorns when you were telling your story, and felt not a little relieved when you changed the tale.

I think that it has turned out for the best. As officers of the Palace we may be able to obtain some information as to what Christian captives there are, and the prisons where they are confined."

"Still more," Surajah said; "when we get to be known as being his officers, we might present ourselves boldly at any of the hill-fortresses, as sent there with some orders."

"You are right," Dick said. "I had not thought of that. Indeed, we might even produce orders to inspect the prisoners, in order to render an account to Tippoo of their state and fitness for service, and might even show an order for my father to be handed over to us, if we should find him. This is splendid, and I am sure I cannot be too grateful to that tiger for popping into the harem. He has done more for us in a few minutes than we could have achieved in a year. Well, Surajah, if my father is alive, I think now that we have every chance of rescuing him."

As they walked through the streets, many of those who had been present at the sports recognised them as the heroes in the stirring episode there, and, judging they would gain a high place in Tippoo's favour, came up to them and congratulated them on their bravery, and made offers of service. They replied civilly to all who accosted them, but were glad when they turned off to the quiet quarter where Pertaub lived. The Hindoo was surprised indeed when they told him what had happened and that they were already officers in the Palace, and might consider themselves as standing high in Tippoo's favour.

"It is wonderful," he said, when they brought their story to a conclusion. "Surely Providence must have favoured your pious object; such good fortune would never have occurred to you had it not been that it was destined you should find your father still alive. But if good fortune befalls you it is because you deserve it. That you should face a great tiger without hesitation, and slay him, shows how firm your courage is; and the quickness was still more to be admired. No doubt

there are many others there who, to gain the favour of the sultan, would have risked their lives, but you alone of them were quick enough to carry it out."

"We were nearest to the spot, Pertaub; had we been among the crowd farther back we could have done nothing."

"Let praise be given where it is due," Surajah said. "I had nothing to do with the affair. I saw the tiger bound through the window and heard screams, and stood frozen with horror. I did not even see my lord cut through the net. I knew nothing until he seized me by the arm and pulled me after him, and it was not until he sprang upon my back and then upon my shoulders that I knew what he was going to do. I simply aided in despatching the tiger when he sprang, wounded, down into the courtyard."

"And yet you are a hunter and a soldier," Pertaub said. "This is how it is that the English have become lords of so wide a territory. They are quick: while we hesitate and spend great time in making up our minds to do anything, they decide and act in a moment; they are always ready, we are always slow; they see the point where a blow has to be struck, they make straight to it and strike. The English sahib is very young, and yet to him comes in a moment what is the best thing to be done. He does not stop to think of the danger; while all others stand in consternation he acts, and slays the tiger before one of them has so much as moved from his place. But indeed, as you say Tippoo himself told you, your danger was not only from the tiger. The tyrant must indeed have been alarmed for the safety of his harem, when he forgave you what, in the eyes of a Mohammedan, is the greatest offence you can commit. This will, of course, change all of your plans."

"For the present, at any rate. It may be that later on we shall still find occasion for our disguises, as possibly we may fall into disfavour and have to assume them to make our escape. We may, as Tippoo's officers, manage to obtain entrance into