

convulsively; "try and compose yourself. We may be disturbed at any moment, and may not have an opportunity of talking again, so we must make our arrangements, in readiness to leave suddenly. I may find it necessary to go at an hour's notice; you may, as you said, be given by Tippoo to one of his favourites at any time. Fortunately he has gone away for a fortnight, so we have, at any rate, that time before us to make our plans. Still, it is better that we should arrange now as much as we can."

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CHAPTER XV

ESCAPE

ANNIE MANSFIELD was not long before she mastered her emotions. She had learned to do so in a bitter school. Beaten for the slightest fault, or at the mere caprice of one of her many mistresses, she had learned to suffer pain without a tear, to assume a submissive attitude under the greatest provocation, to receive, without attempting to defend herself, punishment for faults she had not committed, and to preserve an appearance of cheerfulness when her heart seemed breaking at the hopelessness of any deliverance from her fate. For the last six months she had been specially unhappy, for when Seringapatam had been besieged she had hoped that when it was captured her countrymen would search the Palace and see that this time no English captive remained behind. Her disappointment, then, when she heard that peace had been made, and that the English army was to march away without even an attempt to see that the condition for the release of captives was faithfully carried out, had for a time completely crushed her, and all hope had forsaken her.

Thus, then, while she had been for a moment overwhelmed at finding that her preserver from the tiger was a countryman

in disguise, and that he was willing to make an attempt to rescue her, yet in a few minutes she stifled her sobs, hastily thrust back the hair that had fallen over her face, uncoiled herself from her crouching position in the angle of the divan, and rose to her feet.

"I can hardly believe it to be true," she said, in a low voice. "Oh, Sahib, do you really mean what you say? and are you willing to run the risk of taking me away with you?"

"Of course I am," Dick said heartily. "You don't suppose that an Englishman would be so base as to leave a young countrywoman in the hands of these wretches? I do not think that there is much risk in it. Of course you will have to disguise yourself, and there may be some hardships to go through, but once away from here we are not likely to be interfered with. You see, my friend and I are officers of the Palace, and no one would venture to question us, as we should be supposed to be travelling upon the sultan's business. There is peace at present, and although Tippoo may intend some day or other to fight again, everything is settling down quietly. Traders go about the country unquestioned; there is plenty of traffic on the roads from one town to another; and so long as your disguise is good enough to prevent your being recognised as a white, there is no greater danger in travelling in Mysore than there would be down in the Carnatic."

Annie stood before him with her fingers playing nervously with each other. Long trained in habits of implicit obedience, and to stand in an attitude of deep respect before her numerous mistresses, she was in ignorance whether she ought to speak or not. She had been but a child of six when she had been carried off; her remembrance of English manners had quite died out, and the habit of silent submission had become habitual to her. Dick was puzzled by her silence.

"Of course, Annie," he said, at last, "I don't want you to go with me if you would rather stay here, or if you are afraid of the risk of travelling."

She looked up with frightened eyes.

"Oh, Sahib, it is not that; I would go even if I felt sure I should be found out and cut to pieces. Anything would be better than this. I am not afraid at all. But forgive me, Sahib, I don't know how to thank you; I don't know what is proper to say, it is all so strange and so wonderful."

"Oh, that is all right, Annie," Dick said cheerfully. "Of course you will feel it a little strange just at starting. Well, in the first place, you must call me Dick, instead of calling me sahib; and in the next place, you must talk to me freely, as a friend, and not stand as if I were your master. While we are on this journey together, consider me as a sort of big brother. When we get down the ghauts I shall hand you over to the care of my mother, who is living at present at Tripataly with her brother, the Rajah. Now sit down again and let us make our arrangements. When we have done that we can talk, if there is time. Now, how am I to let you know if I have to go away suddenly? Do you always get out at this time of a morning?"

"Not always, but very often. I always go down at twelve o'clock, with some of the other slave girls, to fetch the food and sweetmeats for the ladies of the harem."

"Well, you must always manage, even if you are not sent out, to look out through that doorway where you met me, at eight o'clock in the morning. If we have anything particular to say to you, Surajah,—that is my friend, you know,—will be there. Which way do you go out from the harem to fetch the food?"

"Not from that door, but from the one nearest to the kitchen. You go right down that corridor, and then take the first turning to the right. There is a flight of stairs at its end. We come out at the door just at its head. At the foot of the stairs there is a long passage, and at the end of that is a large room, with tables, on which the dishes are placed in readiness for us to bring back."

"Well, if it is necessary to speak to you at once, one of us will meet you in the passage between the bottom of the stairs and the room where the food is; if you see one of us, you will know that the matter is urgent, and as soon as you can possibly slip away, you must come here. In the evening you had better again look out from the door where you first met me. Now as to the disguise: it will be better for you to go as a boy; it would be strange to see a girl riding behind two of the officers of the Palace. You won't mind that, will you?"

"Not at all, Sahib."

"Not at all, Dick," he corrected. "Well, I will have a dress ready for you here. You will find it in that corner, and there will be a bottle of stain on the table; it will be only necessary for you to colour your neck, hands, and feet, but you must cut off your hair behind to a level with your ears, so that none of it will show below the turban. You must do that of course before you stain your neck, and must stain the skin where you have cut off your hair also. I am giving you these instructions now, because when the time comes there may not be a minute to spare, though of course I hope there will be no desperate hurry."

"I understand," she said, "and will look out for you three times a day."

"Of course," he went on, "if you are suddenly told that you are to be given to any one, you must slip out at once, and come here. You will find everything ready for you to disguise yourself, and you must do that at once and wait here till one of us comes. Even if you are missed, it will be some time before any search is made, and it would be thought much more likely that you had gone down into the town than that you were hiding in the Palace, so there would be no chance of their looking for you here before we return. Anyhow, we shall be able to have another talk before Tippoo comes back; we shall be here every morning until nine, and if you are able to get away again, come and see us. It will be better perhaps for

you not to wait any longer now; I suppose you have been charged with some message or other, and it would not do for you to be too long gone."

The girl stood up at once. "I have to go down to the Pettah to get some sewing silk to match this;" and she drew out a small fragment of yellow silk.

"Very well, then, you had better go and do it, or they may think that you are too long away. Good-bye, Annie. I hope that in another week or ten days at the latest I shall have you out of this;" and he held out his hand to her.

She took it timidly, and would have raised it to her forehead, but Dick said, laughing,—

"That is not the way, Annie. English girls don't treat their friends as if they were lords and masters; they just shake hands with them, as if it were two men or two girls."

"I shall know better in time," she said, with a faint smile, though her eyes were full of tears. "I want to do something, though I don't know what. You saved my life from the tiger, and now you are going to save me again. I should like to throw myself down and kiss your feet."

"You would make me horribly uncomfortable if you did anything of the sort, Annie. I can understand that you feel strange and out of your element at present, but you will soon get over that when you come to know me better. There, good-bye, lassie, I hope to see you again to-morrow or next day, and then you will be able to tell me more about yourself. Is the coast clear, Surajah?"

Surajah looked out through the curtain.

"There is no one in sight," he said a moment later.

The girl passed silently out and went down the corridor. Surajah returned from his post by the door.

"The poor girl is shy and awkward as yet," Dick said, "but I think she will be plucky enough when the time comes. You heard what we said; the first thing will be to get her

disguise ready for her. What do you think? Had we better take Ibrahim with us? I think he is to be trusted."

"I am sure he is," Surajah agreed; "he is a Hindoo of Coorg, and was carried away as a slave six years ago. In the first place, he will be delighted at the prospect of getting away, and in the next, I am sure that he is very fond of you; but there is no occasion to tell him that you are English."

"No, it will be time enough to do that when we get over the ghats. It will be better that he should get the disguise. In the first place he will know exactly what is wanted, and in the next, it would look rum for either of us to be buying such a thing. Of course we could ask Pertaub to get it for us, but if we take Ibrahim with us he may as well buy it. We shall want a couple more horses; these, of course, we can buy ourselves, and saddles and things. When we have got them we had better leave them at some place on the other side of the river. Pertaub would help us there; he is sure to know some one who will look after them for a few days. Then Ibrahim and the girl can start together, go over there and saddle them, so as to be in readiness to mount directly we come along. We will stop at the wood and dig up the caskets; there is nothing like taking them away with us when there is a chance, and it is not likely that we shall come back to Seringapatam again—it would be like putting our heads into a tiger's den."

When Ibrahim brought in the dishes for their meal, Dick said,—

"Go down and get your own food, Ibrahim, and when you have done come back here again; I want to have a talk with you."

They had just finished their meal when Ibrahim returned.

"Ibrahim, would you be glad of a chance of getting away from here, and returning to your own country?"

"I would have given anything to do so, my lord," Ibrahim said, "before I was ordered to attend upon you. But I am

happy now ; you are kind to me, and I should not like to leave your service."

"But if I were going too, Ibrahim?"

"Then, my lord, I would go with you anywhere, if you would take me."

"Well, Ibrahim, we feel sure that we can trust you, and so I may tell you that I think it likely we shall very shortly go away. You know what the sultan is: one day he gives you honours and rewards, the next he disgraces you, and perhaps sends you into the ranks of the army, perhaps has you thrown to the tigers. We do not care to live under such conditions, and we mean in a few days to slip away and go to our friends down the ghauts. You can come with us if you like."

"I would go with you to the end of the world, my lord," Ibrahim exclaimed earnestly. "To go with you and be a free man, and not a slave, would be almost too great happiness."

"Very well, then, that is settled. Now, Ibrahim, we are not going alone; we are going to take with us a young white slave in the harem, and restore her to her friends. I want you to get a disguise for her; let it be a dress like your own—long white trousers to the ankle, a shirt and tunic with waist-belt, also the stuff for a turban. That you must wind in proper folds, as she would not be able to do it herself. I also want a bottle of stain for the skin."

"I will get them, my lord. How tall is she?"

"About half a head shorter than you are. She is about the size of an average Hindoo woman."

"Shall I get the things at once, my lord?"

"Yes, you had better get them to-day; we may leave at any time, and it is as well to have them in readiness. We shall buy two horses, one for each of you, and have them taken across the river. You can ride, I suppose?"

"Yes; I used to ride when I was a boy, before Tippoo came down and killed my father and mother and brought me up here. Will my lord want me to take the horses across?"

"I will tell you that in the morning, Ibrahim. We are going down into the town now to inquire about them, but we shall not buy any until to-morrow, as we shall have to make arrangements for them to be kept for us until we want them."

They did not go out until it was dark, and then took their way to Pertaub's house. The old Hindoo was in.

"I am glad to see you, Sahibs," he said to Dick as they entered. "I have always fears that ill may in some way befall you."

"We are going to leave, Pertaub. Surajah had, two days ago, to go up to see four English prisoners put to death at one of the hill-forts. Next time I may be ordered on such a duty; I could not carry it out, and you know that refusal would probably mean death. Moreover, we are convinced that we have no means here of finding out what captives may still be in Tippoo's hands, and have therefore determined to leave. We are going to take with us our servant Ibrahim, who is a slave from Coorg and will, we know, be faithful to us, and also a young English girl who has for eight years been a slave in Tippoo's harem. She will go with us in the disguise of a boy; this Ibrahim is getting for us. We are going to buy a couple of horses for them, and shall make straight down the ghauts, where I shall leave the girl in my mother's care."

"It is a good action," the Hindoo said gravely.

"Now, in the first place, Pertaub, would you like to go with us? Riding as we shall do, as two of the officers of the Palace, it is not likely that any questions whatever will be asked, and certainly we shall have no difficulty until it comes to crossing the frontier."

"No, Sahib; I thank you, but I am too old now for any fresh change. I have friends here, and have none below the ghauts. Nothing save the rescue of my daughter from the harem would induce me to move now, and of that there is little chance; she will by this time have become reconciled to her fate, and would probably not care to escape were an op-

portunity offered to her. Besides, with only me to protect her, what would she do elsewhere? A few months and she might be left alone in the world."

"As to that," Dick said, "I could promise her the protection of my aunt, the wife of the Rajah of Tripataly. After the kindness that you have shown to us she would, I am sure, gladly take her into her service. And there would be no difficulty about a dowry for her; I would see to that."

The old man shook his head.

"There could be no question of marriage," he said; "but should I ever hear from her that she is unhappy and I can arrange to fly with her, I will assuredly avail myself of your offer, and take her to Tripataly, rejoiced indeed that at my death there will be a shelter open to her. And now, can I aid you in any way, Sahib? One of my friends, a merchant, could get the horses for you without difficulty; he has often occasion to buy them for the purposes of his trade."

"Thank you, Pertaub. I had intended to buy them myself, but doubtless it will be safer for somebody else to do so. What I was going to ask you was to let me know of some place on the other side of the river where the horses could be kept until I want them."

"That I can do, Sahib. I have a friend a cultivator; his house stands by itself on this side of the first village—the one half a mile beyond the ford. It is the only house this side of the village, so you cannot mistake it; it lies about a hundred yards back from the road. I will go over and arrange with him that when two horses arrive they shall be placed in his stalls and remain there until one arrives who will say to him, after greeting, the word 'Madras'; to him he is to deliver the horses at once, whether he comes by night or day."

"That would do admirably, Pertaub. Of course I shall also want saddles and bridles. How much do you think it will come to altogether? I do not want showy horses, but they must be animals capable of performing a long journey

and of travelling at a fair rate of speed—the faster the better; we are likely to get seven or eight hours start at least, but must, of course, travel fast. As long as all goes well I shall keep the main roads, but if there is a breakdown, or an unforeseen accident occurs, I may have to leave the road and take to by-paths."

"The cost of such horses would be about eighty rupees each; the saddles and bridles another fifteen or twenty."

"Then here are two hundred rupees, Pertaub."

"Have you given up all hope of finding your father, Sahib? I have felt so sure that you would be successful. It seemed to me that such brave efforts could not go unrewarded."

"No, Pertaub, I have not given it up at all. I intend to stay at Tripataly for a fortnight with my mother, and shall then come up the ghauts again. That is another matter I want to speak to you about. Of course we should not dare to return to Seringapatam, and I think that we had better settle to go to Bangalore. Could you forward our packs with the merchandise to some one in that town?"

"There will be no difficulty in that, Sahib. There are many Hindoo merchants there who have been forced to change their religion, and who have frequent dealings with traders here. One of my friends will, I am sure, forward your goods with the next consignment that he sends to Bangalore; that also I will arrange to-morrow, and when you come in the evening will give you the name of the trader there, together with a letter from the one here, telling him that you are the person to whom the goods are to be given up."

"Thank you, Pertaub. I don't know what we should have done without your assistance."

"It has been a pleasure to me to be of use to you, Sahib. I had thought my time of usefulness was over, and it has given a real pleasure to my life to have been able to aid you. You will let me know, Sahib, if ever you find your father?"

"Certainly, Pertaub. I will in any case send word to you,