

out into the courtyard and across to the gate, and as the sentries saluted he stopped and asked them a few questions as to the regiment they belonged to, until Ibrahim and his companion, who had passed straight through, were well away. He saw Surajah sitting upon his horse a couple of hundred yards away, and then went to the stables.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE JOURNEY

THE syce brought out his horse as soon as he saw Dick approaching.

"You need not wait up for us after nine o'clock," Dick said, as he mounted. "It is possible that we may be detained and shall not return until to-morrow evening. If we come we shall certainly be back by nine at the latest, and we shall not be back before seven at any rate, so that until then you are free to do as you like."

He rode quietly off, and did not quicken his pace until he had got beyond the fort; then he touched the horse with his heel and cantered down to the ford. Surajah was half-way across the river when he reached it; the other two figures were just ascending the road up the other bank. Surajah checked his horse when he got across, and waited till Dick joined him.

"Shall we go on with them to the farmhouse?" he asked.

"We may as well do so as halt in the road; besides, there are the things Ibrahim took over yesterday, to put into our saddlebags. There is another thing that I never thought of. Of course, the girl has never been on a horse, and that may give us a good deal of trouble. I wonder I did not think of it, though if I had I don't see that anything else could have been done. We must see how she gets on, and if she cannot manage

I must take her before me whenever we see that the road is clear for a good distance ahead. Of course it does not matter about country people, but if we see a body of troops coming in the distance she must mount her own horse again, and follow us at a walk. If we find that things don't go well, we must halt in a wood somewhere and ride only by night."

They cantered on now and overtook the others just as they reached the farmhouse. The farmer was at his door, and looked a little surprised at seeing two of the officers of the Palace come up; he salaamed deeply.

"We have not come to requisition anything," Dick said, with a smile, as he saw that the farmer looked alarmed as well as surprised. "We have only come for the two horses that we have bought for our servants, as we are going on a journey."

"Can I assist you in any way, my lords?"

"No, our men will saddle the horses," Dick said, and, dismounting, went into the stable with Ibrahim and Annie.

"You are not afraid of riding I hope, Annie?" he said.

"I am not afraid of anything, Dick, so that I can but get away."

"We will go quietly at first, anyhow. Mind, as you mount put your left foot in the stirrup. When you are seated, carry yourself as easily as you can. The pony looks quiet enough, but if, when we get fairly off, you find that you cannot sit comfortably, you must get up before me, and Ibrahim must lead your pony. When we are fairly on the road I will fasten a bit of rope to your bridle to act as a leading-rein, and you can ride by my side, unless we see people coming along; then you must drop behind with Ibrahim."

"I won't give more trouble than I can help," she said.

Ibrahim had taken some rugs over with him on the previous afternoon, which had been bought in case they should sleep out at night. When the horses were saddled Dick rolled two of these up, strapped one on the high peak and the other on the cantle of the saddle upon which the girl was to ride.

"That will wedge you in pretty tightly," he said. "Now, Ibrahim, put the things into the saddle-bag, and then we shall be ready."

When this was done the two horses were led outside. The farmer had gone back into the house, and Dick, helping the girl into her seat, arranged the stirrups the right length for her.

"Now," he said, "you must keep your knees pressed against the roll of blankets in front, and hold on as well as you can with them, but the principal thing is for you to balance yourself with your body; don't sit up stiffly, but as if you were in a chair. Now we will start at a walk. Ibrahim will keep quite close to you, so as to be able to catch hold of your rein should there be any occasion for him to do so."

Then, mounting, he and Surajah rode off at a walk, the others following a length or two behind them. Dick looked round from time to time, and saw that Annie exhibited no signs of nervousness.

"I am quite comfortable," she said, in reply to one of his glances.

When they got into the road again Dick said, "We will go at an easy canter now, Annie. If you feel as if you could not keep on, call out, and we will stop directly; but first come up between Surajah and myself, and we will take the leading reins, so that you will have nothing to attend to but holding on."

Two cords had been attached to the bridle before setting out, and Surajah and Dick each taking one, they started again, the horses instinctively breaking into a canter, which was their usual pace. Annie at first grasped the strap of the rug in front of her, but as soon as she became accustomed to the motion, she let go. A small rug had been strapped over the saddle before she mounted, and this afforded her a much better hold than she would have had of the leather; and as the pace of the horse was a gentle one, she found it much more easy to keep her seat than she had expected. Moreover, the fact that Dick

and Surajah rode close by her side, and would be able to catch her at once if she swayed in the saddle, gave her confidence.

"It is much better than I thought it would be," she said; "it is quite a pleasant motion. I will go faster if you like."

"No, there is no occasion for that," Dick replied. "This is the pace the horses are most accustomed to, and they will go on longer at it than at any other. There is no fear of pursuit, and we have all day before us."

After a quarter of a mile's riding they came to a wood.

"We must turn in here," Dick said. "We are going treasure hunting; we hid those caskets that were given us by the ladies directly after we got them, and we are going to dig them up now and take them with us."

They rode at a walk now till they came to a very large baobab tree growing by the path they were following.

"Here we turn off."

"There is a man there," Surajah exclaimed, when they had ridden a few yards farther.

Dick checked his horse. "It is Pertaub," he said, a moment later, and in a minute they were beside the Hindoo.

"I could not sleep, thinking of you, Sahib," the latter said, as they came up, "so I came across here, partly to help you dig up the caskets, and partly that I might see you and assure myself that so far all had gone well."

"Thank you, Pertaub. You have, I see, brought a pick-axe; it will save us half-an-hour's work; and besides, I am glad to say good-bye again. All has gone well; this is the young lady."

"She is well disguised," Pertaub said, bowing his head to Annie. "She looks so like a boy that, even now you tell me, I can scarce believe she is a white girl. Truly you can go on without fear that any one will suspect her."

Leading the way to the spot where the caskets had been buried, Dick looked on while Surajah and Ibrahim dug them up. They were then wrapped up in rugs and strapped securely

behind their owners' saddles. Then, after a warm adieu to the kind old man, they turned their horses' heads and rode back out of the woods. After riding for three hours at a canter, Dick saw that, although Annie still spoke cheerfully, her strength was failing her, and on arriving at a wood, he said,—

“We will wait here till the heat of the sun has abated. We have done very well, and the horses, as well as ourselves, will be glad of a few hours' rest.”

He alighted from the saddle, gave his horse to Ibrahim, and then lifted Annie from her seat. As he set her down on her feet and loosed his hold of her, she slipped down on to the ground. Dick and Surajah at once raised her, and placed her so that as she sat she could lean against a tree. Here Dick supported her, while Surajah ran and fetched his water-bottle. Annie drank a little, and then said, with a nervous laugh, “It is very silly of me. But I feel better now. My legs seemed to give way altogether.”

“It was not silly at all,” Dick said. “You have held on most bravely. I can tell you there are not many girls who would have ridden four or five and twenty miles the first time they sat on a horse. Why, I can tell you the first time I mounted I did not do a quarter as much, and I was so stiff I could hardly walk when I got down. I should have stopped before, but you kept talking so cheerfully that it seemed to me you could not be anything like as tired as I was then. I was a brute not to have known that you must be thoroughly done up, although you did not say so. We have got some food with us. Do you think you could eat a little?”

She shook her head. “Not just yet.”

“All right. I have brought a couple of bottles of wine I got at one of the traders' stores yesterday. You must take a sip of that, and then we will leave you to yourself for a bit, and you must lie down and have a good nap.”

Dick took a bottle from his holster, opened it, and gave her some in a tin cup. Then one of the rugs was spread on the

ground, with another one rolled up as a pillow, and then they led the horses farther into the wood, leaving Annie to herself.

“She won't be able to ride again to-night,” Surajah said, as they sat down, while Ibrahim took out the provisions that he had on the previous day carried across to the farm.

“No, I must carry her before me. We will shift my saddle a little farther back, and strap a couple of rugs in front of it, so as to make a comfortable seat for her. There is no doubt she will not be able to ride again by herself. I am sure that after my first day's riding I could not have gone on again for anything. We won't start until it begins to get dusk. Of course she ought to have a good twenty-four hours' rest before she goes on, but we dare not risk that. I don't think there is any chance of pursuit for days, or, indeed, of any pursuit at all, for by the time they begin to suspect that we have really deserted, they will know that we have had time to get to the frontier. Still, I don't want to run the slightest risk, and at any rate, if we have to halt it would be better to do so fifty miles farther on than here. When we mount again we will put the saddle-bags from my horse on to hers, and Ibrahim must lead it. Her weight won't make much difference to my horse, and if I find it tiring I will change with you. You may as well put your saddle-bags on to her horse also.”

“It would be better, would it not,” Surajah said, “if you change to her horse, which will have carried nothing?”

“Yes, of course that would be best, so you had better not shift your saddle-bags.”

After they had had their meal they stretched themselves out for a sleep, and when they woke it was already becoming dusk. The horses had had a good feed, and were now given a drink of water from the skin. They were then saddled again, the blankets carefully arranged for Annie's use, and then they went back to the place where she was lying still asleep.

“Put the provisions into the wallet again, Ibrahim. We will see if we can get her up without waking her; she is so

dead beat that perhaps we may do so. I don't suppose she would be able to eat anything if we woke her. I had better mount first; then you, Surajah, can lift her up to me. I can stoop down and take her from your arms, and put her in front of me; she is no weight to speak of."

Very gently Surajah put his arms under the sleeping girl, and lifted her.

"That is right," Dick said, as he placed her on the blankets before him, and held her with his right arm, with her head against his shoulder. "She is dead asleep."

The blankets were strapped on to the horses again, the others mounted, and they started at a walk out of the wood. As soon as they were on the road, the horses broke into a canter again. Annie moaned uneasily, but did not open her eyes. Dick drew her still more closely to him.

"She will do now, Surajah," he said, in a low voice. "I hope that she will sleep till morning."

Half-an-hour later they rode through Sultanpetta. It was quite dark now, and although there were people in the streets, Dick knew that at the rate they were riding, in the darkness, the fact that he was carrying a lad in front of him would scarce be noticed; nor would it be of any consequence if it was. Even if they met any officer who should stop and question them, it would suffice to say that the lad had been taken ill, and that as their business was urgent, they were taking him on with them. Four hours later they passed through Conkanelly, and crossed the bridge over a branch of the Cauvery. Here Dick felt that his horse was flagging. Halting, he dismounted, and lifted Annie down. This time the movement woke her; she gave a little cry.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You are quite safe, child," Dick said cheerfully. "Just lie quiet in my arms. We have come five hours' journey, and as my horse is getting tired, I am changing to yours. Ibrahim is shifting the rugs that you have been sitting on."

"I can go on by myself," she said, making a little struggle to get down.

"You must be good, and do what you are told," he said, with a laugh. "Remember that you are a slave, and I am your master at present."

She said nothing more until they were seated afresh, and had got into motion.

"Oh, you are good, Dick!" she sighed softly. "Only to think of your carrying me like this for five hours, without waking me!"

"Well, it was much better for us both that you should sleep," he said, "and it is the horse that is carrying you, not I. I have been very comfortable, I can assure you. We shall go on for another four hours; after that we shall hide up in a wood, and sleep till the afternoon. Then it will depend upon you: if you can sit your horse, we shall ride on through Anicull; if not, we must wait till it gets dark again, and then go on as we are now. Are you comfortable, child?"

"Very comfortable, Dick." They were talking in English now, for the first time since they started. "I have almost forgotten how to talk English," she said. "We white girls always used to talk it when we were together, so as not to forget it; and since the last one went, three years ago, I have always talked it to myself for a bit before going to sleep, so as to keep it up; but it does not come anything like so easy as the other. Still, I like talking it to you; it almost seems as if I were at home again. You see, I have never heard a man talk English since I was carried away; even now, I can hardly believe this is not a happy dream, and that I shall not wake up presently and find myself a slave-girl in the harem."

"It is pleasant to me to talk English, too," Dick said, "though it is only a few months since I last spoke it. Now, the best thing you can do is to try and get off to sleep again."

When we stop you shall have breakfast. I am sure you must want something; you have had nothing since you ate a mouthful or two in my room before starting."

"Oh, I have slept hours and hours!" she said. "I shall not want to sleep any more."

However, before long the easy motion lulled her off again, and she did not wake until, at about four o'clock in the morning, they entered a wood that was, as Dick supposed, some three or four miles from Anicull.

"Well, how do you feel now?" Dick asked, as he set her on her feet.

"I feel stiff," she said; "but that will soon wear off when I have run about a little. Oh how tired you must be after carrying me all these hours!"

"There has not been much to hold," Dick said with a laugh, "especially since we started the last time. Before that, you were so dead asleep that I did have to hold you, but you see you nestled up more comfortably when we changed horses, and needed very little support since then."

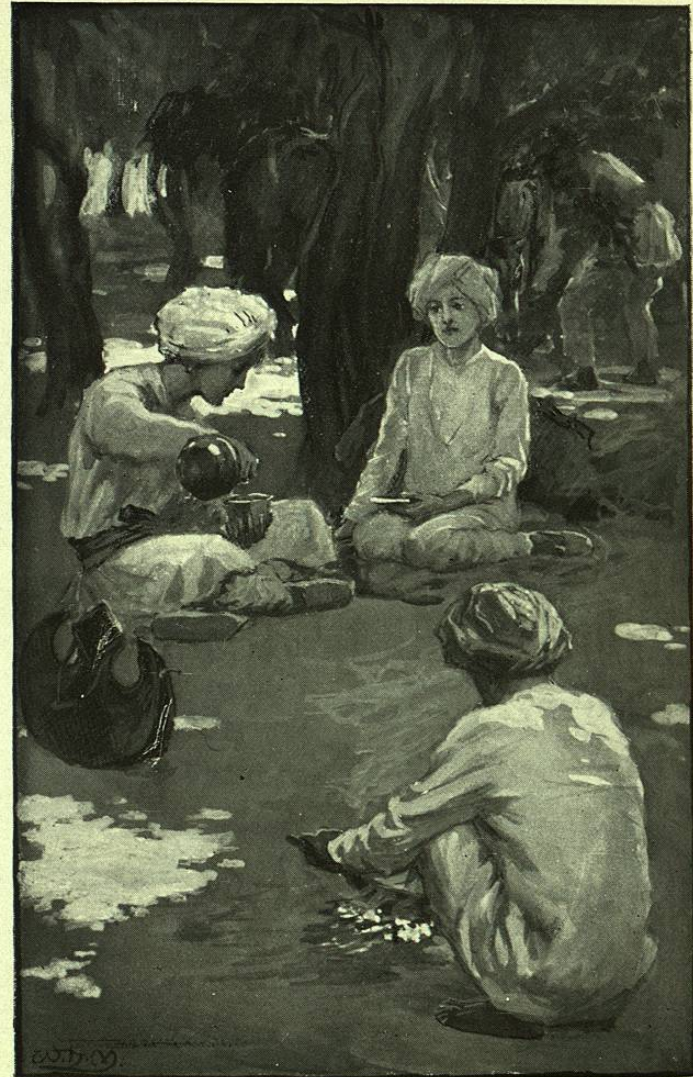
"Now, what can I do?" she asked, with a little laugh. "Please order me to do something. I am your slave, you know, and I want to be helping you."

"Well, then, I command you to aid me to gather some sticks for a fire. We have nothing to cook, but it will be cheerful, and the air is cool."

They picked up sticks while Surajah and Ibrahim loosened the girths of the horses, took off their bridles, and poured out another feed from the bag of grain they had brought with them. In a few minutes a fire was blazing, and the wallet of provisions brought out.

"I wish I had a cup of coffee to offer you, Annie," Dick said, as he poured her out some wine and water, "but we must wait for that until we get down to Tripataly."

"I have forgotten all about coffee, Dick, and what it tastes like. The white girls used to talk about it, and say how they



DICK POURS OUT SOME WINE AND WATER FOR ANNIE.