

wards, the commissioners were ordered to make special inquiries as to this child, and to demand her restoration. They reported that Tippoo denied all knowledge of the affair, and neither she nor any of the other girls there were ever given up. The letter went on:—

“There can be no doubt that the young lady you rescued is the child who was carried off, and the initials you speak of on the cross may certainly be taken as proof of her identity. Her father retired from the Service last year with the rank of colonel. I am, of course, ignorant of his address. As you say that Mrs. Holland will gladly continue in charge of her, I would suggest that you should write a letter to Colonel Mansfield, stating the circumstances of the case, and saying that as soon as you are informed of his address the young lady will be sent to England. I will enclose the letter in one to the Board of Directors, briefly stating the circumstances, and requesting them to forward the enclosure to Colonel Mansfield.”

To Annie the letter came as a relief. It would be nearly a year before a letter could be received from her father; until then she would be able to remain in her new home.

CHAPTER XVIII

A NARROW ESCAPE

MRS. HOLLAND undertook to write the letter to Annie's father, and did so at very much greater length than Dick would have done, giving him the story of the girl's life at Seringapatam, the circumstances of her meeting Dick, and the story of her escape. She assured him that his daughter was all that he could wish her to be.

“She is of a very affectionate disposition; she is frank, outspoken, and natural—qualities that are wonderful, considering the years she has passed as a slave in the harem. Now that

she has been with us for a fortnight, and has recovered from the fatigue of her flight, and is beginning to feel at home, she has regained her natural spirits after their long repression.

“Personally she is of about the average height, and of a more graceful figure than is usual with girls of her age. The stain has now worn off her face, and I should say she will, as she grows up, be pretty. She is fair rather than dark, has expressive eyes and a nice mouth. Altogether, had I a daughter, I should be well content if she resembled your Annie. I shall, I can assure you, do my best to supply the place of a mother to her until I receive a letter from you, and shall part from her with regret. She is, of course, at present entirely uneducated, but she has already begun to learn with me, and as she is quick and intelligent I hope that before I resign my charge, her deficiencies will be so far repaired that she will be able to pass muster in all ordinary matters.”

“You will be back before I go, won't you, Dick?” Annie said, as she sat by his side on a seat in the garden, on the evening before he was to start.

“I think so,” he said. “We can calculate on your being here ten months anyhow. I have been talking it over with my mother. If it had not been for those jewels I should have given up the search for my father after another six months, because it would have been high time for me to get to work in some profession. I had, indeed, made up my mind to enter the Company's service, for Lord Cornwallis promised me a commission, and my uncle received a letter some time ago from the governor of Madras, saying that on the very strong recommendation of Lord Cornwallis, and his report of my services, he was authorised to grant me one; it was to be dated back to the time I joined Lord Cornwallis, more than two years ago. However, now that I am really made independent of a profession, I shall probably continue my search for a somewhat longer time. But at any rate, I will promise

to come back at the end of ten months from the present time, so as to say good-bye to you before you start."

The girl's face brightened.

"Thank you, Dick. I don't think I should go, anyhow, until I saw you again—not even if I got a letter saying that I was to sail by the next ship."

"My uncle would take you down bodily and put you on board," Dick laughed. "Mind, Annie, when I come back at the end of ten months I shall expect to find you quite an educated young lady. I shall think of all sorts of hard questions in geography and history to put to you."

"I will try hard, Dick, really hard, to please you. I have had three lessons, and I have learnt all the letters quite well."

"That is a good beginning, Annie. It took me a lot longer than that, I know."

The next morning Dick and Surajah started. They were to ride up the ghauts to the frontier line at Amboor, two troopers accompanying them to bring back their horses. There they were to disguise themselves as traders, and make their way direct to Bangalore. Dick said good-bye to his mother up in her own room.

"You must not be down-hearted, mother," he said, as she tried in vain to keep back her tears. "You see, I have come back to you twice safely, and after passing unsuspected in Tip-poo's palace there is no fear of my being detected elsewhere; besides, of course, every month I am there I become better acquainted with the people, and can pass as a native more easily."

"I am not really afraid, my boy. You have got on so well that it seems to me God will surely protect you and bring you back safely. And I can't help thinking that this time your search may be successful. You know why I feel convinced that your father is still alive, and, in spite of past disappointments, I still cling to the belief."

"Well, mother, if he is to be found I will find him. There are still many hill-forts where he may be living, and his very

existence forgotten, and until I have visited every one of them I don't mean to give up the search. Anyhow, I shall come back at the end of ten months, whether I have heard of him or not. I have promised Annie that I will be back before she sails. It is not a very long journey down here, and I shall drop in for a fortnight's stay with you, as I have done this time."

"She is in the next room crying her eyes out, Dick. You had better look in there, and say good-bye to her. She is not fit to go down to the door."

After parting with his mother, Dick went in to see Annie.

"You must not cry so, child," he said, as she rose from the divan with her face swollen with crying. "I am sure that you will be very happy here until I come back."

"I know, Dick; but it won't be at all the same without you."

"Oh, you will have plenty to do, and you will soon fall into regular ways; besides, you know you have got to comfort my mother, and keep up her spirits, and I quite rely upon you to do that."

"I will try, Dick," she said earnestly.

"Now, good-bye, Annie."

He held out his hand, but she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"You have never kissed me, not once," she said reproachfully, "and you were going away without it now. Your mother kisses me, and the English girls in the harem always used to do so."

"But that is different, Annie. Girls and women do kiss each other, but boys and girls do not kiss unless they are brothers and sisters, or are relations, or something of that sort."

"But you are not a boy; you are a great big man, Dick."

"I am not much more than a boy yet, Annie. However, there is no harm in kissing when one is saying good-bye, so there. Now be a good girl, and don't fret;" and he ran down-stairs to the door where his uncle and the two boys were standing.

"Take care of yourself, lad," the Rajah said, as, after bidding them good-bye, Dick sprang upon his horse. "Whenever you get a chance, send down a letter as we arranged last night, to the care of Azol Afool, trader, Tripataly. That will seem natural enough, whoever you send it by, while a letter directed to me might excite suspicion. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, uncle;" and with a wave of his hand Dick rode off and joined Surajah, who was waiting for him a short distance off, and then, followed by Ibrahim—who had begged so earnestly to be allowed to accompany them that Dick had consented to take him, feeling indeed that his services would be most useful to them—and the two troopers, they rode off at a sharp pace.

At Amboor they assumed their disguises. Dick purchased a pack-pony and some goods suitable to their appearance as peddlers, and then they started up the pass on foot. They passed the frontier line without any interruption, stopped and chatted for a few minutes with the guard, and then passed on up the valley.

"There is the house where we had our fight, Surajah," Dick said, as they reached the ruined village. "Though there is peace now, I fancy we should not get much farther than that fort ahead, if they guessed that we were the fellows who gave them such trouble two years and a half ago."

"There is no fear of our being recognised," Surajah said. "The guard has probably been changed long ago; besides, they never once caught sight of our faces."

"Oh, no; we are safe enough," Dick agreed. "If I had not been sure of that we would have gone up one of the passes to the south that has been ceded to us, though it would have been a great deal longer round to Bangalore—unless, indeed, we had gone by Kistnagherry, and that would have been too dangerous to attempt, for the officers on the frontier would probably have recognised us."

It was late in the afternoon before they arrived at the gate.

It stood open, and there was no sentry on duty. A few soldiers could be seen loitering about in the street, but it was evident that now the war was over and everything finally settled, it was considered that all occasion for vigilance was at an end. Upon making inquiries they soon found a house where they could put up for the night. They had, as is the custom in India, brought their provisions with them, and after leaving their goods in the house, and seeing that the horse was fed, Ibrahim set to work to cook a meal, while the others opened one of the packs and went round the village, where they disposed of a few small articles. They arrived without any adventure at Bangalore. There, as soon as they had established themselves at one of the caravanseries for travellers, Dick and Surajah went to the house of the trader to whom Pertaub had promised to consign their goods.

"We have come for some packs that have been sent by friends of ours at Seringapatam to your care," Dick said, making as he spoke the sign that Pertaub had taught him, as enabling those who were Hindoos to recognise each other at once. "We were to use the word 'Madras' as a sign that we were the parties to whom they were consigned."

"The goods arrived a week ago," the trader said, "and are lying for you at my warehouse. I will hand them over to you to-morrow morning."

"Thank you. We may not come early, for we have to purchase two pack-horses to carry them, and three tats for ourselves and our man. This may take us some time, and it will be perhaps better for us to come to you early the next morning, and we can then start away direct."

This was arranged, and on the following day two strong animals were bought for the packs, and three tats or ponies for their own riding; Dick had disposed of the horse he had ridden down to Tripataly for a good price, and had also been supplied with funds by his mother, although, as he said, the contents of their packs ought to suffice to pay all their ex-

penses for a long time. Then they purchased some provisions for the journey. The pack-horse they had brought with them was laden with these and the goods brought up from Amboor. The new pack-horses were taken round to the trader's, and the goods sent from Seringapatam packed on them. Then they mounted and rode off at a walk, the pack-animals following Ibrahim's horse, tied one behind the other.

They had already debated upon the course to pursue, and finally decided that they would, in the first place, again visit Savandroog; for the conviction Dick had entertained that there was at least one white captive there had increased rather than diminished.

"I can't give any good reason for it, Surajah," he had admitted when they talked it over before starting, "but it is just because I have no good reason to give that I want to go there again. Why should I have such a strong conviction without a good cause? One has heard of a presentiment of evil—I can't help feeling that this is a presentiment of good. The question is how can we best go there again? I don't think it is in the least likely that the governor will have heard of our flight, as this would be the last direction any one would think of our taking, for had we done so we might have met the Sultan on his way back from Bangalore. It will naturally be supposed that we have made for the frontier, and have descended the western or southern ghauts. The affair will, of course, seem a mystery to them altogether; for why should two young fellows, so recently promoted, and in such high favour, desert Tippoo's service? If they do not associate Annie's disappearance with our flight—and there is no reason on earth why they should do so, as no one ever saw us speaking to her—they will most likely think that we have fallen into the hands of the Dacoits, or Thugs, and have been murdered. Numbers of people do disappear every year, and are, as every one supposes, victims of that detestable sect. My uncle has told me of Thugs. He warned me to be very careful if I travelled with

strangers, for that these men travel in all sorts of disguises. So I think, that, as far as that goes, we could boldly put on our uniforms and badges again, and ride into Savandroog. The disadvantage of doing so is, however, plain. The commander would remain with us all the time. We should get no opportunity of speaking privately with any of the soldiers, and, taking us to be in Tippoo's confidence, he would, as before, shirk the question of prisoners. On the other hand, if we can get in as traders we shall be able to move about unwatched—to go to the soldiers' huts and offer goods to their wives, and be able to find out to a certainty if there is a prisoner there, and, if so, where he is kept. We may even see him; for while, if the governor wished to keep his existence a secret, he would have shut him up when he heard that two of Tippoo's officers were coming, he would not trouble about it one way or the other in the case of a couple of traders. The only objection to that course is that we were here but two or three months since, and he and his servants and that artillery officer we went round with would know us at once. If we go we shall have to alter our appearance completely. At any rate, we had better provide means for disguise, and we can use them or not, as we please."

While they were at Tripataly, therefore, they had two false beards made for themselves, and tried many experiments in the way of painting their faces, and found that by tracing light lines on their foreheads and at the corners of their eyes, they were able, by the help of beards, to counterfeit the appearance of old age so well that it could only be detected on close observation.

Dick, too, had purchased a pair of native spectacles, with large round glasses and broad black-horn rims, that made him look, as he said, like an astonished owl. It was agreed that Surajah should wear, under his dress, a very thickly padded vest, which would give him the appearance of being fat as well as elderly.

They proceeded for seven or eight miles at a walking pace, and when the heat of the day rendered it necessary for them to stop, turned into a grove by the roadside, as they had no intention of going on to Savandroog that day, intending to halt some miles short of it, and to present themselves there the next afternoon. They therefore prepared for a stay of some hours. The pack-horses were unloaded, and the saddles taken off the other animals. Half-an-hour later a party of twelve men, travelling in the same direction as themselves, also halted and turned in among the trees. The man who was apparently the leader of the party came across to where they were sitting.

"We do not disturb you, I hope, brothers?" he said. "The grove is large enough for us all. I see that you are traders like myself."

"By no means," Surajah replied. "The wood is open to all, and even were it not, we should be discourteous indeed did we refuse to share our shade with others. Sit down by us, I beg of you, while your people are unloading your animals."

"I marked you as you left Bangalore," the trader said, as he seated himself beside them, "and when I saw that you were taking the same route that we should follow, I wondered how far our roads might lie together."

"We are travelling west," Surajah replied. "It may be that we shall stop at Magree, and there, or at Outadroog, stop for a day or two to trade. Thence we may go north."

"Then as far as Outadroog our paths will lie together," the merchant said. "There we shall strike the river and turn south to Seringapatam. I am sorry that you will not be going farther in our direction, for the roads are far from safe; since the war with the Feringhees ended, there are many disbanded soldiers who have taken to dacoity, and it is always better to travel with a strong band. I wonder that you venture with three loaded animals and only one man beside yourselves."

Surajah was about to speak; but a quick glance from Dick stopped him.

"We think there is less danger in travelling in a small body than there is with a large one," the latter said; "there is less to tempt any one to interfere with us. Moreover, we could not travel with a caravan, because the greater part of our goods are such as would tempt the peasantry only. We therefore stop at small villages to trade, leaving the towns to those who travel with more valuable merchandise."

After chatting for some minutes, the traveller got up and joined his party.

"I don't much like that fellow's looks," Dick said, when they were alone.

"Why? He looks a very respectable man."

"Oh, yes, he looks respectable enough, but for all that I don't fancy him. It may be that he regards us as rivals, and was only trying to find out where we intended to stop, and whether we were likely to spoil his trade. That was why I said what I did, so that he might perceive that we were not likely to interfere with him. Then again, Surajah, I remembered my uncle's warning against joining other travellers, as these Thugs, who, they say, commit so many murders, generally travel in bands, disguised sometimes as traders, sometimes as men seeking work, sometimes as disbanded soldiers. Anyhow, it is as well to be careful. We have each got a brace of double-barrelled pistols in our girdles, in addition to these old single-barrelled Indian ones that we carry for show, and our swords are leaning against the tree behind us, so we can get hold of them in a moment. I know, of course, that the betting is all in favour of these people being peaceful traders, but I don't want to leave anything to chance, and there is nothing like being prepared for whatever may happen."

Presently Dick got up and sauntered across to Ibrahim, who was engaged in cooking. "Ibrahim," he said, "don't look round while I speak to you, but go on with your cooking. I

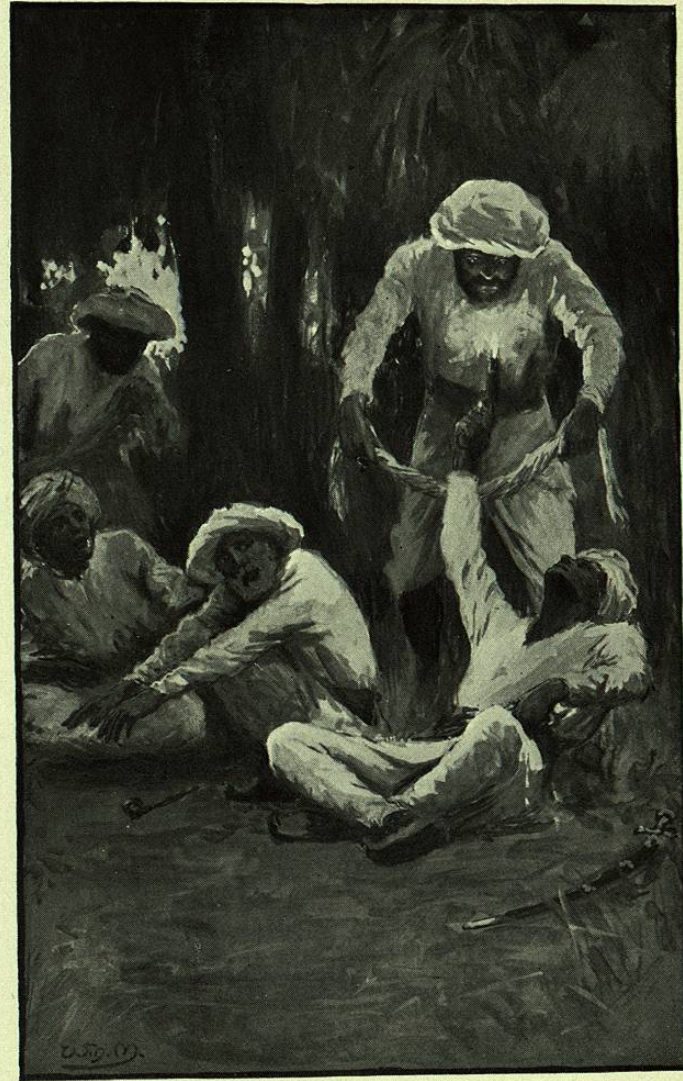
don't like the look of the leader of this party. He may be a respectable trader, he may be a Dacoit or a Thug. I want you to keep a sharp look-out without seeming to do so. See that your pistols will come out of your girdle easily. Keep your sword handy for use; if you see anything suspicious, come over and tell me, and if there is not time for that, shout."

"I will watch, Sahib," Ibrahim said. "But they seem to me peaceable men like ourselves. Of course they carry weapons; no one would travel about with merchandise without doing so."

"They may be all right, Ibrahim, but I have a sort of feeling that they are not, and at any rate it is best to be cautious."

The other party did not light a fire, but sat down and ate some provisions they carried with them. When Surajah and Dick had finished their meal, the leader again strolled over to them. He asked whether they intended to sleep, and on hearing that they did not, he again sat down with them. He proceeded to discuss trading matters, to describe the goods he carried, the places where he had purchased them, and the prices he had given. As he talked, Dick noticed that three or four of the others came across. They did not sit down, but stood round listening to the conversation, and sometimes joining in. Dick's feeling of uneasiness increased, and thrusting one hand carelessly into his girdle, he grasped the butt of one of his hidden pistols.

Suddenly a loud cry came from Ibrahim; at the same moment something passed before Dick's face. He threw himself backwards, drawing his pistol as he did so, and fired into the body of the man behind him. A second later he shot another, who was in the act of throwing a twisted handkerchief round Surajah's neck. Then he leapt to his feet, delivering as he did so a heavy blow with the barrel of his pistol on the head of the trader who had been sitting between him and Surajah. It had all passed in a few seconds, and the other men started back in their surprise at



DICK AND SURAJAH ARE ATTACKED BY THUGS.

this unexpected failure of their plan. Surajah was on his feet almost as quickly as Dick. Even yet he did not understand what had happened. At this moment there was the crack of another pistol, and then Ibrahim came running towards them, having shot a man who had suddenly drawn his sword, and tried to cut him down. At his heels came the six men who had, up to this point, been standing in a group near their horses. Without hesitation Dick drew out one of his single-barrelled pistols and shot the pretended trader, whose turban had saved him from the effect of the blow, and who, shouting loudly to his companions, was struggling to his feet. The remaining eight men had all drawn their swords, and were rushing upon them.

“Fire, Surajah!” Dick shouted. “Are you asleep, man?”

Surajah was not asleep, but he was confused by the suddenness of the fray, and was still doubtful whether Dick had not made an entirely unprovoked attack upon the strangers. However, he perceived that it was now too late to discuss that point, and was a question of fighting for his life. Accordingly, he fired both barrels of one of his pistols. One of the men dropped.

“Your sword, Surajah!” Dick exclaimed, as he grasped the scabbard of his own weapon in his left hand, while in his right he held his other double-barrelled pistol. Their antagonists, with yells of fury, were now upon them. Dick shot one, but the next man he aimed at darted suddenly aside when he fired. Dick dropped his pistol, and grasped the hilt of his sword just in time to ward off a blow aimed at his head. Blow after blow was showered upon him so quickly that he could do no more than ward them off and wait his opportunity. He heard Surajah fire two more shots in quick succession; then Ibrahim suddenly dashed forward and cut down his opponent, and then furiously engaged another who was on the point of attacking him from behind. Dick drew his remaining pistol, and shot the man through the head.

He had then time to look round.

Both Surajah's shots had told, and he was now defending himself against the assaults of two others who were pressing him hard, while a third stood irresolute a short distance away. Dick rushed to Surajah's assistance; as he did so, the third man fled.

"After him, Ibrahim!" Dick shouted. "Not one of them must get away."

The two Thugs defended themselves, with cries of fanatical fury, but their opponents were far better swordsmen, and, fighting coolly, were not long before they cut them both down.

"What on earth is it all about, Dick?" Surajah asked, as, panting with his exertions, he looked round after cutting down his opponent.

"Thugs," Dick said briefly.

"Are you sure, Dick?" Surajah asked presently. "It may be a terrible business for us if there is any mistake."

For answer Dick pointed to the bodies of the two men he had first shot. One still grasped the roomal, or twisted silk sash, while a like deadly implement lay by the side of the other.

"Thank Heaven!" Surajah ejaculated. "I was afraid there might have been a mistake, Dick, but I see that you were right, and that it was a party of Thugs. If it had not been that you were on the watch for them and had your pistol ready, we should have lost our lives."

"It was a close shave as it was, Surajah. One second later and you and I should both have been strangled. I had my hand on my pistol and felt so sure that an attack was intended that the moment something passed before my face, although I had no idea what it was, I threw myself back and fired at the man behind me, with an instinctive feeling that my life depended on my speed. But it was only when, on looking at you, I saw a man in the act of throwing a noose round your neck, that I knew exactly what I had escaped."

"It was fortunate that they had not pistols," Surajah said. "We should have had no chance against them if they had had fire-arms."

"No; they could have shot us the moment I first fired. But uncle said, when he was talking to me one day, that he had heard that the Stranglers did not carry fire-arms, because the reports might attract attention, and that it was a matter of religion with them to kill their victims by strangling, but that if the Strangler failed, which he very seldom did, the other men would then despatch the victims with their swords and knives. Ah! here comes Ibrahim."

"I caught him just outside the trees, Sahib. He will strangle no more travellers."

"Well, what had we better do?" asked Surajah.

"I should say we had better make off as fast as we can. Of course if we were really traders, able to prove who we are, we should go back to the town and report the affair, but as we can't do that we had better be moving on at once, before any other party of travellers comes up. That was why, when we had killed several of them, I was anxious that none should get away, for they might have gone and accused us of slaughtering their companions."

"That would be too unlikely a story to be believed. No one would credit that three men would attack twelve."

"But there would be no one to prove that there were only three. The fellows would naturally swear that there were a score of us, and that after murdering their companions the rest had made off with the booty."

"Ibrahim, load the pack-animals at once. We will saddle the horses. I think, Surajah, we had better leave everything just as it is. It is now getting on for the afternoon. It is likely enough that no other travellers will enter the grove to-day. By to-morrow at the latest some one will come in, and will of course go and report at once in Bangalore what he has found, and they will send out here to examine into it."

When they find that the men have all fallen sword in hand, that two of them are evidently Stranglers, and that their girdles have not been searched nor the packs on their horses opened, it will be seen that it was not the work of robbers. I don't suppose they will know what to make of it, but I should think they would most likely conclude that these men have been attacked by some other party, and that it is a matter of some feud or private revenge—though, even then, the fact that the bodies have not been searched for valuables, or the baggage or animals carried off, will beat them altogether."

By this this time the horses were ready for the start, and after looking up and down the long, straight road, to see that no one was in sight, they issued from the wood and continued their journey. Being anxious now to get away as far as possible from the scene of the struggle, instead of going on to Magree as they had intended, they turned off by the first country road on the left-hand side and made for Savandroog, which they could see towering up above the plain. When within three miles of it they halted in a large wood. Here, as soon as the horses had been unsaddled and the fire lighted, their talk naturally turned to the fight they had gone through.

"I cannot make out how you came to suspect them, Dick."

"I can hardly account for it myself, but, as I told you, I did not like the look of that man, and I had an uneasy sort of feeling, which I could not explain even to myself, that there was danger in the air."

"But what made you think of these Stranglers? I had heard some talk about them, but never anything for certain."

"The Rajah told me, when he was warning me against joining parties of travellers, that although very little was known about the organization, it was certain that there was a sect who strangled and robbed travellers in great numbers. He said that he was aware that complaints had been made to princes all over India of numbers of persons being missing, and that it was certain that these murders were not the work

of ordinary dacoits, but of some secret association, and that even powerful princes were afraid to take any steps against it, as one or two, who had made efforts to investigate the affair, had been found strangled in their beds. Therefore, no one cared to take any steps to search into the matter. It was not known whether these Stranglers, scattered as they were very widely, obeyed one common chief, or whether they acted separately; but all were glad to leave this mysterious organisation alone, especially as they preyed only on travellers, and in no case meddled in any way with rajahs, or officials, who did not interfere with them. Consequently, the idea occurred to me directly that these men who seemed like traders might be a party of these Stranglers; and when the others came up while the leader was sitting talking to us, I felt as if cold water was running down my back, and that some one was whispering to me, 'Be on your guard, be on your guard!' Therefore, the moment something passed before my face I threw myself back and fired at the man behind me without a moment's thought as to what it was."

"Well, certainly you saved our lives by doing so, Dick; for I suppose if that man behind me had once got his silk scarf round my neck, he would have choked me before I had time to so much as lift my hand."

"I have not the least doubt that he would, and I feel thankful indeed that I had such a strange feeling that these men were dangerous. Do you know, Surajah, it seems to me that it was just the same sort of feeling that my mother tells me she has, whenever my father is in danger, and I shall be curious to know when we get back whether she had the same feeling about me. Anyhow, I shall in future have even more faith than I had before in her confidence that she would have certainly known if any evil had happened to my father."