

to the wall. Of course I shall have the ladders tied up into bundles, and shall take care not to leave them behind me."

"All right, father; we will be ready to-morrow evening. We shall wait quietly for you until you come, unless we hear a sudden alarm. If we do, we will go round behind the governor's house and wait there for your coming."

"That is it, my lad. Now I will be going. I am glad that no one has come in while I have been here."

## CHAPTER XX

### THE ESCAPE

SOON after eight o'clock customers began to drop in, and throughout the day a brisk trade was carried on. Surajah was sent for in the course of the morning by the governor, who bought several silver bracelets, brooches, and ear-rings, for his wife. Most of the other officers came in during the day, and made similar purchases, and many trinkets were also sold to the soldiers, who considered them a good investment for their money; indeed, no small portion of the earnings of the natives of India are spent upon silver ornaments for their women, as they can at any time be converted into cash. The commoner cloths, knives, beads, and trinkets, were almost all disposed of by the end of the day, for as no traders had come up for six months, and as a long time might elapse before others did so, the garrison were glad to lay in a store of useful articles for themselves and families, especially as the prices of all the goods were at least as low as they could have been bought in a town.

"We sha'n't leave much behind us," Dick said, as he looked round after the last customer had left, and they had sat down to their evening meal. "Almost all the silver work and the better class of goods have gone, and I should say three-

quarters of the rest; I daresay we shall get rid of the remainder to-morrow. I don't suppose many of the soldiers stationed down by the gate have come up yet; but when they hear that we sell cheaply, some of them will be here to-morrow. We have made no money by the transaction, but at any rate we shall have got back the outlay. Of course, I should not have cared if we had got nothing back; still, it is satisfactory to have cleared oneself. I wonder how Ibrahim is getting on down in the wood."

"He won't be expecting us to-day," Surajah replied, "but I have no doubt he will begin to feel anxious by to-morrow night. I wish we could have seen some way of getting the horses down; it will be awkward doing without them."

"Yes. I hope we shall get a good start. Of course, we must put on our peasant's dresses again. I am glad enough to be rid of that rope, though I have had to put on two or three additional things to fill me out to the same size as before. Still, I don't feel so bound in as I did, though it is horribly hot."

"I am sure I shall be glad to get rid of all this stuffing," Surajah said. "I felt ready to faint to-day when the room was full."

"Well, we have only one more day of it," Dick said. "I do hope father will be able to get out by ten o'clock; then, before eleven we shall be at the edge of the rock. Say we are two hours in getting down and walking round to join Ibrahim. That will take us till one, and we shall have a good five hours before father's escape will be discovered. They will know that he can't have gone down the road, and it will take them fully two hours to search the fort, and all over the rock. It will be eight o'clock before they set out in pursuit, and by that time we ought to be well on the road between Cenopatam and Anicull. If we can manage to buy horses at Cenopatam, of course we will do so. We shall be there by five o'clock, and ought to be able to get them in a couple of hours. Once



on horseback, we are safe. I don't think they will pursue very far—perhaps not even so far as Cenopatam; for the governor will see that he had better not make any fuss about a white captive having escaped, when it was not known that he had one there at all. I think it more likely that when he finds father has got fairly away, he will take no steps at all. They have no cavalry here, and he will know well enough that there will be no chance of our being tracked and overtaken by footmen if we had but a couple of hours' start."

"I think that is so, Dick. He has done his duty in keeping your father a prisoner, but I don't think he will be, at heart, at all sorry that he has made his escape."

"I think, Surajah, I will write a letter to him, and leave it here, to be found after we have got away, thanking him in father's name for the kindness that he has always shown him, saying who I am, why I came here, and asking his pardon for the deception that I have been obliged to play upon him. He is a good old fellow, and I should think it would please him."

"I should think it would," Surajah agreed.

"I will do up my brace of pistols in a packet and put them with the note," Dick went on, "and will say in it that I hope he will accept them as a token of our esteem and gratitude. They are well-finished English pistols, and I have no doubt he will prize them. I will mention, too, that we shall have made our escape at eleven o'clock, and therefore, by the time he receives my letter, we shall be far beyond the reach of pursuit. I daresay that will decide him upon letting the matter pass quietly, and he will see himself that, by making no fuss over it, no one outside the fortress will ever know that a prisoner has escaped."

The next day passed comparatively quietly. A good many soldiers and women came up from below, and before sunset their goods were completely cleared out. The governor came over in the afternoon and had a talk with them; they expressed

their satisfaction at the result of their trading, and said that they should be off before sunrise.

"I hope you will come again," he said; "but not for another six months, for assuredly you will take away with you pretty nearly every rupee in the fortress. My wife and the other ladies are all well content with their purchases, and agree that they would not have got them cheaper at Seringapatam or Bangalore."

"We try to buy cheaply and sell cheaply," Surajah said modestly. "In that way we turn over our money quickly. But it is seldom indeed that we find so good a market as we have done here. When we left Bangalore we thought that it might be a month before we should have to go back there to replenish our packs from our magazine; but we shall only have been away five or six days."

"I am glad that you are content, for you are honest traders, and not like some of the rascals that have come up to the forts I have commanded, and fleeced the soldiers right and left."

Although not given to blushing, Dick felt that he coloured under his dye at the praise; for although they had certainly sold cheaply, he doubted whether the term honest could be fairly applied to the whole transaction.

As ten o'clock approached, the two friends sat with open door listening intently for every sound. Conversation was still going on in the houses, and occasionally they could make out a dark figure crossing the yard. It was not yet ten when a light footfall was heard, and a moment later Captain Holland appeared at the door.

"It is all right so far," he said, "but wait five minutes, to give me time to get the ladder fixed. You had better come one by one and stroll quietly across the yard. It is too dark for any one to recognise you, unless they run right against you; and even if they do so, they will not think it strange you should be out, after having been cooped up all the day."

In another moment he was gone. They had each during the



day gone out for a time, and had walked round through the narrow lane behind the governor's house to see that there were no obstructions that they might fall over in the dark. They agreed, on comparing notes, that Captain Holland had chosen the best possible place for scaling the wall, for the lane was evidently quite unused, and the house, which was higher than the wall, would completely screen them from observation. In five minutes Dick followed his father, leaving Surajah to come on in a minute or two. They had secured about them the gold and silver they had received for their purchases, but they left behind a large heap of copper coins, on the top of which Dick had placed his letter to the governor, and the parcel containing the brace of pistols. He met no one on his way to the rendezvous, but almost ran against his father in the dark.

"Steady, Dick, or you will run me down," Captain Holland said. "I have got the ladder fixed, so you had better go up at once. Take these three spears with you. I will bring the long ladder."

"We sha'n't want the spears, father; we have a brace of double-barrelled pistols and two brace of single-barrels."

"Never mind that, Dick; you will see that they will come in useful."

Dick took the spears, and mounted the ladder without further question. His father then came up and placed the long rope, which, with the pieces of wood, was a bulky bundle, on the wall and then descended again. It was another five minutes before Surajah came up.

"I was stopped on the way," he said, "and had to talk with one of the officers."

He and the captain were soon by Dick's side. The ladder was then pulled up and lowered on the other side of the wall; they were soon standing at its foot.

"Shall I jerk the ladder down, father?"

"I think not, Dick; it would only make a clatter, and it is no matter to us whether they find it in the morning or not.

You had better follow me; I know every foot of the ground, and there are some nasty places, I can tell you."

They had to make several *détours*, to avoid ravines running deep into the plateau, and for a time Captain Holland walked very cautiously. When he had passed these he stepped out briskly, and in less than an hour from starting they were near the edge of the precipice. Their eyes had by this time become accustomed to the darkness.

"We are just there now," Captain Holland said; "but we must go very cautiously, for the rock falls sheer away, without warning. Ah! there is the edge a few yards ahead of me. Now, do you stay where you are, while I feel about for that spear-head I put in to mark the place. It had about three feet of the staff on it. If it were not for that, there would be small chance of finding it. I know it is somewhere close here."

In a few minutes he returned to them. "I have found it," he said. "Keep close behind me." After walking for fifty yards he stopped. "Here it is, lads. Now give me those spears, Dick." He thrust them firmly into the ground, a few inches apart, "Throw your weight on them too," he said. "That is right. Now they will stand many times the strain we shall put on them. I have chosen this place, Dick, for two reasons. In the first place, because it is the most perpendicular, and in the second, because the soil and grass project slightly over the edge of the rock. There is a cushion in that bundle, and four spear-heads. I will peg it down close to the edge, and the rope will run easily over it. Now, Surajah, we had better let you down first; you will be tied quite securely, and there will be no risk whatever, as you know, of the rope giving way. I should advise you to keep your eyes shut till you get to the bottom, for the rope will certainly twist round and round; but keep your arms well in front of you, and whenever you feel the rock, open your eyes, and send yourself off with your arms and legs. I don't think you will touch, for at this point it seemed to me, as I looked down, that the rock projects farther out than any-



where else on the face of the precipice, and that a stone dropped straight down would fall some fourteen or fifteen feet from its foot. Would you like me to bandage your eyes?"

"No, thank you; I will keep my eyes closed."

"That is the best thing you can do," Captain Holland said, "though it is so dark that you would not be able to see if you did. When you get to the bottom, untie the rope, pull it gently down, and call out to me whether the lowest piece of stick touches the ground. If it does not, I will pull it up again and fasten on some more. I have got a dozen spare ones with me."

Captain Holland then told Surajah and Dick to take off their upper garments. These he wound round and round the lower four feet of the rope, increasing its diameter to over two inches.

"There," he said, as he fastened this round Surajah's body, under the arms; "it won't hurt you now. That silk rope would have cut in an inch deep before you got to the bottom, if it had not been covered." Then he took off his own garment, made it up into a roll, lashed one end to the rope in the centre of Surajah's back, passed it between his legs and fastened it to the knot at his chest.

"There," he said; "that will prevent any possibility of the thing slipping up over your shoulders, and will take a lot of the strain off your chest." Then he lay down and crawled forward to the edge, pegged the cushion down, and then, turning to Surajah, said, "All is ready now."

Surajah had felt rather ashamed that all these precautions should be taken for him, while the others would have to rely solely upon their hands and feet, and, sternly repressing any sign of nervousness, he stepped forward to the side of Captain Holland.

"That is right," the captain said approvingly. "Now lie down by my side and work yourself backwards. Go over on one side of the cushion, for you might otherwise displace it.



DICK AND HIS FRIENDS ESCAPE FROM THE HILL-FORTRESS.



I will hold your wrists and let you over. Dick will hold the rope; I will put it fairly on the cushion. Then I shall take it and stand close to the edge, and pay it out gradually as you go down. If you should find any projecting piece of rock, call out 'Stop!' I will hold on at once. We can then talk over how we can best avoid the difficulty. When you are down, and I tell you Dick is coming, take hold of one of the steps, and hold the ladder as firmly as you can, so as to prevent it from swaying about. Now, are you ready?"

"Quite ready," Surajah said, in a firm voice.

Dick, who was standing five or six yards back, tightened the rope. Gradually he saw Surajah's figure disappear over the edge.

"Slack out a little bit," his father said. "That is right; I have got it over the cushion. Now hold it firmly until I am on my feet. That is right. Now pay it out gradually."

It seemed an endless time to Dick before his father exclaimed,—

"The strain is off! Thank God he has got down all right!"

A minute later there was a slight pull on the rope, and the captain paid it out until he heard a call from below.

"Have you got to the lowest stick?" he asked, leaning over.

"Yes; it is just touching the ground."

"Not such a bad guess," the captain said, as he turned to Dick. "There are about twenty feet left."

He now fastened the rope round the spears in the ground.

"I will lower you down, if you like, Dick. You are half as heavy again as that young native, but I have no doubt that I can manage it."

"Not at all, father; I am not a bit nervous about it. If it was light, I should not feel so sure of myself, for I might turn giddy; but there is no fear of my doing so now."

"Well, lad, it is as well to be on the safe side, and I manufactured this yesterday."



He put a loop, composed of a rope some four feet long, over Dick's shoulders and under his arms. To each end was attached a strong double hook, like two fingers.

"There, lad! Now, if you feel at all tired or shaky, all you have got to do is to hook this on to one of the steps. Do you see?—one hook on each side of the cord. That way you can rest as long as you like, and then go on again. You say you can go down a rope with your hands only; I should advise you to do that, if you can, and not to use your legs unless you want to sit down on one of the long steps, for, as you know, if you use your feet the rope will go in till they are almost level with your head, while, if you use your arms only, it will hang straight down."

"I know, father. And I don't suppose I shall have to rest at all, for these cross-sticks make it ten times as easy as having to grip the rope only."

Dick laid himself down as Surajah had done, and crawled backwards until he was lying half over the edge; then he seized the rope and began to descend, hand over hand. He counted the rungs as he went down, and half way he sat down on one of the long pieces, hitched the hooks on to the one above, and rested his arms. After a short pause he continued until he reached the bottom.

The captain, who was stooping with his hand on the rope, felt the vibration cease, and as he leaned over he heard Dick call out,—

"I am all right, father. Those bits of wood make easy work of it."

Then the captain at once began to descend, and was soon standing beside his son and Surajah.

"Thank God that job is finished! How do you both feel?"

"My arms feel as if they had done some work, father. I have been four or five months without practice, or I should hardly have felt it."

"And how are you, Surajah?"

"I feel ashamed at having been let down like a baby, Captain Holland, and at being so nervous."

"There is nothing to be ashamed of," Captain Holland said. "Rope-climbing is a thing that only comes with practice; and as to nervousness, most landsmen are afraid to trust themselves to a rope at all. Did you open your eyes?"

"Not once, Sahib. I kept my arms out, as you told me, but I did not touch anything. I could feel that I was spinning round and round, and was horribly frightened just at first. But I went down so smoothly and quietly that the feeling did not last long; for I knew that the rope was very strong, and as I did not touch anything, it seemed to me that there could be no fear of it being cut against the rock."

The clothes were soon unwound from the rope, and put on again. Captain Holland cut off all the slack of the rope and made it into a coil.

"The slope is all right, as far as I could see from the top," he said; "but we may come across nasty bits again, and this will stand in useful if we do."

They went down cautiously, but at a fair rate of speed, until, without meeting with any serious difficulty, they arrived on the plain. Four miles' brisk walking brought them to the grove where Ibrahim had been left, and they had scarce entered among the trees when he asked,—

"Who is it that is coming?"

"It is us, Ibrahim. We have got my father!"

Ibrahim gave an exclamation of joy, and a minute later they joined him.

"You were not asleep, then, Ibrahim?" Dick said.

"No, my lord. I have slept during the day, and watched at night; but I did not sleep yesterday, for I was growing sorely anxious, and had begun to fear that harm had befallen you."

"Well, let us be off at once. Of course we have had to leave the horses behind us, and I want to be at Cenopatam by daybreak; we will buy horses there."