

## CHAPTER X.

IN Isaacs' tent I was pulling off my turban, all shapeless and crumpled by the long day, while Isaacs stood disconsolately looking at the clean guns and unbroken rows of cartridges which Narain deposited on the table. The sun was very low, and shone horizontally through the raised door of the tent on my friend's rather gloomy face. At that moment something intercepted the sunshine, and a dark shadow fell across the floor. I looked, and saw a native standing on the threshold, salaaming and waiting to be spoken to. He was not one of our men, but a common ryot, clad simply in a *dhoti* or waist-cloth, and a rather dirty turban.

"Kya chahte ho?" — "What do you want?" asked Isaacs impatiently. He was not in a good humour by any means. "Wilt thou deprive thy betters of the sunlight thou enjoyest thyself?"

"The sahib's face is like the sun and the moon," replied the man deprecatingly. "But if the great lord will listen I will tell him what shall rejoice his heart."

"Speak, unbeliever," said Isaacs.

"Protector of the poor! you are my father and my

mother! but I know where there lieth a great tiger, an eater of men, hard-hearted, that delighteth in blood."

"Dog," answered Isaacs, calmly removing his coat, "the tiger you speak of was seen by you many moons since; what do you come to me with idle tales for?" Isaacs was familiar with the native trick of palming off old tigers on the unwary stranger, in the hope of a reward.

"Sahib, I am no liar. I saw the tiger, who is the king of the forest, this morning." Isaacs' manner relaxed a little, and he sat down and lighted the eternal cigarette. "Slave," he said meditatively, "if it is as you say, I will kill the tiger, but if it is not as you say, I will kill you, and cause your body to be buried with the carcass of an ox, and your soul shall not live." The man did not seem much moved by the threat. He moved nearer, and salaamed again.

"It is near to the dwelling of the sahib, who is my father," said the man, speaking low. "The day before yesterday he destroyed a man from the village. He has eaten five men in the last moon. I have seen him enter his lair, and he will surely return before the dawn; and the sahib shall strike him by his lightning; and the sahib will not refuse me the ears of the man-eater, that I may make a *jādu*, a charm against sudden death?"

"Hound! if thou speakest the truth, and I kill the tiger, the monarch of game, I will make thee a rich man; but thou shalt not have his ears. I desire the *jādu* for myself. I have spoken; wait thou here my

pleasure." The ryot bent low to the earth, and then squatted by the tent-door to wait, in the patient way that a Hindoo can, for Isaacs to go and eat his dinner. As the latter came out ten minutes later, he paused and addressed the man once more. "Speak not to any man of thy tiger while I am gone, or I will cut off thine ears with a pork knife." And we passed on.

The sun was now set and hovering in the after-glow, the new moon was following lazily down. I stopped a moment to look at her, and was surprised by Miss Westonhaugh's voice close behind me.

"Are you wishing by the new moon, Mr. Griggs?" she asked.

"Yes," said I, "I was. And what were you wishing, Miss Westonhaugh, if I may ask?" Isaacs came up, and paused beside us. The beautiful girl stood quite still, looking to westward, a red glow on the white-gold masses of her hair.

"Did you say you were wishing for something, Miss Westonhaugh?" he asked. "Perhaps I can get it for you. More flowers, perhaps? They are very easily got."

"No—that is, not especially. I was wishing—well, that a tiger-hunt might last for ever; and I want a pair of tiger's ears. My old *ayah* says they keep off evil spirits and sickness; and all sorts of things."

"I know; it is a curious idea. I suppose both those beasts there have lost theirs already. These fellows cut them off in no time."

"Yes. I have looked. So I suppose I must wait till to-morrow. But promise me, Mr. Isaacs, if you shoot one to-morrow, let me have the ears!"

"I will promise that readily enough. I would promise anything you——" The last part of the sentence was lost to me, as I moved away and left them.

At dinner, of course, every one talked of the day's sport, and compliments of all kinds were showered on Lord Steepleton, who looked very much pleased, and drank a good deal of wine. Ghyrkins and the little magistrate expressed their opinion that he would make a famous tiger-killer one of these days, when he had learned to wait. Every one was hungry and rather tired, and after a somewhat silent cigar, we parted for the night, Miss Westonhaugh rising first. Isaacs went to his quarters, and I remained alone in a long chair, by the deserted dining-tent. Kiramat Ali brought me a fresh hookah, and I lay quietly smoking and thinking of all kinds of things—things of all kinds, tigers, golden hair, more tigers, Isaacs, Shere Ali, Baithop——, what was his name—Baithop—p——. I fell asleep.

Some one touched my hand, waking me suddenly. I sprang to my feet and seized the man by the throat, before I recognised in the starlight that it was Isaacs.

"You are not a nice person to rouse," remarked he in a low voice, as I relaxed my grasp. "You will have fever if you sleep out-of-doors at this time of year. Now look here; it is past midnight, and I am going

out a little way." I noticed that he had a *kookrie* knife at his waist, and that his cartridge-belt was on his chest.

"I will go with you," said I, guessing his intention. "I will be ready in a moment," and I began to move towards the tent.

"No. I must go alone, and do this thing single-handed. I have a particular reason. I only wanted to warn you I was gone, in case you missed me. I shall take that ryot fellow with me to show me the way."

"Give him a gun," I suggested.

"He could not use one if I did. He has your *kookrie* in case of accidents."

"Oh, very well! do not let me interfere with any innocent and childlike pastime you may propose for your evening hours. I will attend to your funeral in the morning. Good-night."

"Good-night; I shall be back before you are up." And he walked quickly off to where the ryot was waiting and holding his guns. He had the sense to take two. I was angry at the perverse temerity of the man. Why could he not have an elephant out and go like a sensible thinking being, instead of sneaking out with one miserable peasant to lie all night among the reeds, in as great danger from cobras as from the beast he meant to kill? And all for a girl — an English girl — a creature all fair hair and eyes, with no more intelligence than a sheep! Was it not she who sent him out to his death in the jungle, that

her miserable caprice for a pair of tiger's ears might be immediately satisfied? If a woman ever loved me, Paul Griggs, — thank heaven no woman ever did, — would I go out into bogs and desert places and risk my precious skin to find her a pair of cat's ears? Not I; — wait a moment, though. If I were in his place, if Miss Westonhaugh loved *me* — I laughed at the conceit. But supposing she did. Just for the sake of argument, I would allow it. I think that I would risk something after all. What a glorious thing it would be to be loved by a woman, once, wholly and for ever. To meet the creature I described to him the other night, waiting for me to come into her life, and to be to her all I could be to the woman I should love. But she has never come; never will, now; still, there is a sort of rest to me in thinking of rest. Hearth, home, wife, children; the worn old staff resting in the corner, never to wander again. What a strange thing it is that men should have all these, and more, and yet never see that they have the simple elements of earthly happiness, if they would but use them. And we, outcasts and wanderers, children of sin and darkness, in whose hands one commandment seems hardly less fragile than another, would give anything — had we anything to give — for the happiness of a home, to call our own. How strange it is that what I said to Isaacs should be true. "Do not marry unless you must depend on each other for daily bread, or unless you are rich enough to live apart." Yes, it is true, in ninety-

nine cases out of a hundred. But then, I should add a saving clause, "and unless you are quite sure that you love each other." Ay, there is the *pons asinorum*, the bridge whereon young asses and old fools come to such terrible grief. They are perfectly sure they love eternally; they will indignantly scorn the suggestions of prudence; love any other woman? never, while I live, answers the happy and unsophisticated youth. Be sorry I did it? Do you think I am a schoolboy in my first passion? demands the aged bridegroom. And so they marry, and in a year or two the enthusiastic young man runs away with some other enthusiastic man's wife, and the octogenarian spouse finds himself constituted into a pot of honey for his wife's swarming relations to settle on, like flies. But a man in strong middle prime of age, like me, knows his own mind; and — yes, on the whole I was unjust to Isaacs and to Miss Westonhaugh. If a woman loved me, she should have all the tiger's ears she wanted. "Still, I hope he will get back safely," I added, in afterthought to my reverie, as I turned into bed and ordered Kiramat Ali to wake me half an hour before dawn.

I was restless, sleeping a little and dreaming much. At last I struck a light and looked at my watch. Four o'clock. It would not be dawn for more than an hour. I knew Isaacs had made for the place where the tiger passed his days, certain that he would return near daybreak, according to all common probability. He need not have gone so early, I

thought. However, it might be a long way off. I lay still for a while, but it seemed very hot and close under the canvas. I got up and threw a *caftán* round me, drew a chair into the *connât* and sat, or rather lay, down in the cool morning breeze. Then I dozed again until Kiramat Ali woke me by pulling at my foot. He said it would be dawn in half an hour. I had passed a bad night, and went out, as I was, to walk on the grass. There was Miss Westonhaugh's tent away off at the other end. She was sleeping calmly enough, never doubting that at that very moment the man who loved her was risking his life for her pleasure — her slightest whim. She would be wide awake if she knew it, staring out into the darkness and listening for the crack of his rifle. A faint light appeared behind the dining-tent, over the distant trees, like the light of London seen from twenty or thirty miles' distance in the country, a faint, suggestive, murky grayness in the sky, making the stars look dimmer.

The sound of a shot rang true and clear through the chill air; not far off I thought. I held my breath, listening for a second report, but none came. So it was over. Either he had killed the tiger with his first bullet, or the tiger had killed him before he could fire a second. I was intensely excited. If he were safe I wished him to have the glory of coming home quite alone. There was nothing for it but to wait, so I went into my tent and took a bath — a very simple operation where the bathing consists in

pouring a huge jar of water over one's head. Tents in India have always a small side tent with a ditch dug to drain off the water from the copious ablutions of the inmate. I emerged into the room feeling better. It was now quite light, and I proceeded to dress leisurely to spin out the time. As I was drawing on my boots, Isaacs sauntered in quietly and laid his gun on the table. He was pale, and his Karkee clothes were covered with mud and leaves and bits of creeper, but his movements showed he was not hurt in any way; he hardly seemed tired.

"Well?" I said anxiously.

"Very well, thank you. Here they are," and he produced from the pocket of his coat the *spolia opima* in the shape of a pair of ears, that looked very large to me. There was a little blood on them and on his hands as he handed the precious trophies to me for inspection. We stood by the open door, and while I was turning over the ears curiously in my hands, he looked down at his clothes.

"I think I will take a bath," he said; "I must have been in a dirty place."

"My dear fellow," I said, taking his hand, "this is absurd. I mean all this affected calmness. I was angry at your going in that way, to risk your head in a tiger's mouth; but I am sincerely glad to see you back alive. I congratulate you most heartily."

"Thank you, old man," he said, his pale face brightening a little. "I am very glad myself. Do you know I have a superstition that I must fulfil

every wish of—like that—even half expressed, to the very letter?"

"The 'superstition,' as you call it, is worthy of the bravest knight that ever laid lance in rest. Don't part with superstitions like that. They are noble and generous things."

"Perhaps," he answered, "but I really am very superstitious," he added, as he turned into the bathing *connât*. Soon I heard him splashing among the water jars.

"By-the-bye, Griggs," he called out through the canvas, "I forgot to tell you. They are bringing that beast home on an elephant. It was much nearer than we supposed. They will be here in twenty minutes." A tremendous splashing interrupted him. "You can go and attend to that funeral you were talking about last night," he added, and his voice was again drowned in the swish and souse of the water. "He was rather large—over ten feet—I should say. Measure him as soon as he——" another cascade completed the sentence. I went out, taking the measuring tape from the table.

In a few minutes the procession appeared. Two or three matutinal shikarries had gone out and come back, followed by the elephant, for which Isaacs had sent the ryot at full speed the moment he was sure the beast was dead. And so they came up the little hill behind the dining-tent. The great tusker moved evenly along, bearing on the pad an enormous yellow carcass, at which the little *mahout* glanced occasion-

ally over his shoulder. Astride of the dead king sat the ryot, who had directed Isaacs, crooning a strange psalm of victory in his outlandish northern dialect, and occasionally clapping his hands over his head with an expression of the most intense satisfaction I have ever seen on a human face. The little band came to the middle of the camp where the other tigers, now cut up and skinned elsewhere, had been deposited the night before, and as the elephant knelt down, the shikarries pulled the whole load over, pad, tiger, ryot and all, the latter skipping nimbly aside. There he lay, the great beast that had taken so many lives. We stretched him out and measured him—eleven feet from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail, all but an inch—as a little more straightening fills the measure, eleven feet exactly.

Meanwhile, the servant and shikarries collected, and the noise of the exploit went abroad. The sun was just rising when Mr. Ghyrkens put his head out of his tent and wanted to know “what the deuce all this *tamāsha* was about.”

“Oh, nothing especial,” I called out. “Isaacs has killed an eleven foot man-eater in the night. That is all.”

“Well I’m damned,” said Mr. Ghyrkens briefly, and to the point, as he stared from his tent at the great carcass, which lay stretched out for all to see, the elephant having departed.

“Clear off those fellows and let me have a look at him, can’t you?” he called out, gathering the tent

curtains round his neck; and there he stood, his jolly red face and dishevelled gray hair looking as if they had no body attached at all.

I went back to our quarters. Isaacs was putting the ears, which he had carefully cleansed from blood, into a silver box of beautiful workmanship, which Narain had extracted from his master’s numerous traps.

“Take that box to Miss Westonhaugh’s tent,” he said, giving it to the servant, “with a greeting from me—with ‘much peace.’” The man went out.

“She will send the box back,” said I. “Such is the Englishwoman. She will take a pair of tiger’s ears that nearly cost you your life, and she would rather die than accept the bit of silver in which you enclose them, without the ‘permission of her uncle.’”

“I do not care,” he said, “so long as she keeps the ears. But unless I am much mistaken, she will keep the box too. She is not like other Englishwomen in the least.”

I was not sure of that. We had some tea in the door of our tent, and Isaacs seemed hungry and thirsty, as well he might be. Now that he was refreshed by bathing and the offices of the camp barber, he looked much as usual, save that the extreme paleness I had noticed when he came in had given place to a faint flush beneath the olive, probably due to his excitement, the danger being past. As we sat there, the rest of the party, who had slept rather later than usual after their fatigues of the previous