

SADDLE AND SABRE.

(Continued).

The stream running in front of the rocks was easily fordable, and, having crossed it, they turned between two of the smaller boulders and ascended to the rocky path which led up to the king-stone of this singular group. Devereux noticed that the smaller rocks were honeycombed with caves, partly natural, but many of them had evidently been enlarged by the hand of man. At last they turned through a fissure in the side of the chief rock, which to Devereux's great astonishment, instead of being solid, was in the centre hollow, after the manner of a tooth. Around this curious platform in the middle were the entrance to several caverns, all of which, though natural to begin with, had evidently been considerably enlarged artificially; in short, the place had been in years long gone by a species of Buddhist monastery; now it was the home of the dacoit, and before then, perchance, of the tiger; whence his priest had formally invoked Buddah, now the victims of Shere Ali shrieked their lives out under the tortures this miscreant inflicted under pretext of extorting confessions of hidden hordes which they did not possess.

This natural fortress had evidently been the retreat of the robbers for some time; many of the caves had been turned into store houses, and some of the larger ones into stables, and it was quite evident to Devereux that, if they only had command of the water, a small body of men might hold out for a considerable time against much superior numbers. Still that would avail Shere Ali little, let his stronghold be only once discovered; and then Charlie reflected sadly how well its secret had been kept, and how long the dacoit chief had baffled his pursuers. He was thrust into a small cell, with a stern intimation from Hassam that if he crossed its threshold without permission he did so at his peril. As far as he could make out, the place at present was occupied only by Hassam's party, and what had become of Shere Ali he was unable to conjecture, but he felt pretty certain that he was not within the citadel. He could see that the robbers maintained, in their way, a severe discipline—the Rohilla's word was obeyed without question by his strange medley of followers. The ruffianly crew seemed to have been gathered from men of all races common to the Peninsula. There were some whose soldierly bearing gave good grounds for supposing they were among those who, like their leader, had been false to their salt during the past Mutiny, but many of them had taken to the road from their youth upwards. Food and water were furnished him with a liberal hand, and, though he was apparently but slightly guarded, Devereux knew that he was jealously watched; moreover, so far as he knew, the only way out of this singular amphitheatre was the narrow path by which they had entered, and two or three of the dacoits armed to the teeth lingered night and day about that. Still Charlie thought that if any feasible chance of escape presented itself, he was bound to attempt it. He could but be killed, and that that would be his fate a little later he had no reason to doubt; in fact, it puzzled Charlie why it was that his life was spared so long.

On their first day in the rocks the dacoits seemed determined to compensate themselves for the fatigues of their late rapid march. They gave themselves up, after the manner of their kind, to eating and drinking, sleep and tobacco—usually the sole pleasure left to those who elect to live by preying on their fellows; the second day they were more on the alert, and Hassam more than once ascended a rough staircase which led to the top of the great honey-combed rock which formed their shelter. Devereux had gathered, partly from the few words he caught, and partly from their gestures, that they were expecting the arrival of their leader; and when the afternoon sun had sunk low in the heavens the tramp of horses on the narrow path became plainly audible; a few minutes more and Shere Ali, with about a dozen followers, made their appearance on the rocky platform. Devereux was struck with what a very small number of the dacoits had gained their stronghold; he felt sure they were in much greater force when he and his comrades came up with them. It was, of course difficult to estimate their numbers in the jungle, but Charlie had believed that there was quite three hundred of them when the first attack was made, which had terminated so disastrously for himself. He did not believe that Hobson's incessant attacks had occasioned such loss as the disproportion between their present and then numbers might have been supposed to indicate. Then he began to speculate upon how Shere Ali's return would affect himself—little doubt, he thought, but what his fate would be speedily determined now; then he wondered whether his comrades were still upon the track of the marauders. He reckoned that Hobson could only have about fifty men with him now, for several he knew fell in that first skirmish, and it was not likely that others had not shared the same fate in succeeding ones. Shere Ali had between thirty and forty with him, and the natural defence of the place were such that, even if tracked to his lair, the struggle between him and his assailants would be both bloody and protracted.

Devereux was kept but little in suspense; half an hour after the dacoit chief's arrival in the citadel his cave was entered by some half-dozen of the robbers, and he was roughly escorted into the presence of Shere Ali. The bandit's face wore its most savage expression. Hobson's stubborn pursuit had irritated him not a little, and his fury had been thorough roused by finding it hopeless to induce his followers to face the hated Feringhees. He had led them on himself twice in the most resolute fashion; for, merciless though he was, he possessed the attribute of animal courage. But as it had been in the Mutiny, so it was now, and, in spite of preponderance of numbers, the Asiatic could rarely be induced to face the Englishman hand to hand.

He was sitting at the door of his cave which he retained as his own private residence, surrounded by Hassam and four or five more of his principal lieutenants. A gleam of ferocious exultation flashed over his face,

and the savage dark eyes lit up with devilish cruelty as he fixed his gaze upon Devereux.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, at last; "so this is the dog of a Feringhee you persuaded me to spare, Hassam. Your arm grows feeble, old friend; your sword was wont to do its work cleaner. Answer me this, Englishman; not as you hope to live, but as you hope to escape agonies that will make you welcome death as a boon and a blessing. How many parties of your hated race are there out in pursuit of me?"

Devereux made no reply.

"Dog, do you hear what I say?"

"A soldier answers no question put to him by the enemy; and an Englishman knows how to die."

"And an Asiatic knows how to kill. Fool! before to-morrow's sun has set you shall pray to your gods for death. Away with him, and let him be given to the flies."

Charley Devereux was in merciful ignorance of the horrible death to which Shere Ali's ruthless word consigned him; in a trice he was seized, conducted down the narrow pathway, carried some two hundred yards out into the little oasis, on the edge of which the rocky citadel stood. There he was stripped, and then, his captors having driven some short stakes into the ground, they proceeded to bind him hand and foot to the said stakes, the result of their labors being that Devereux was left stretched flat on his back on the ground, with his arms extended after the manner of a man crucified, unable to move hand or foot, and with only the power of slightly turning his head. That done, with a brutal laugh, the robbers retreated into their own stronghold.

Devereux speedily began to realize the horrible death to which the dacoits had consigned him; the sun was almost down, so for the present he was spared the tortures of the fierce glare that must to-morrow shine down upon his upturned face; but Charley quickly became aware that the jungle was alive with creeping things, for which his defenceless form soon became a playground. The stings, the bites, and the irritation caused by this army of bees, mosquitoes, centipedes, etc., gradually became maddening, and as the night wore on the fever occasioned by it natural excited a terrible thirst, a frightful craving for water, than which there is no infliction more hard to bear.

With the hours of darkness came the bark of the jackal; and soon Devereux became conscious that several of the creatures were not only at hand, but were stealing cautiously up to him as a subject well worthy of investigation. He could have cried aloud almost in his agony, but he grimly swore the dacoits should not have that satisfaction; and then he realised Shere Ali's threat. He felt that he was strong yet, and that he could look forward to hours of thirst and this frightful irritation before death released him. Every bone in his body seemed to be one prolonged ache, from the enormous inability to shift his position. He felt that the jackals were coming nearer and nearer; they were smelling at his feet; every moment he expected their sharp teeth would meet in his flesh. Suddenly came a sharp yap from one of their number, who was still a little way off. Another second, and they were scuttling away in all direction.

What had alarmed them he could not guess, but at all events he was relieved for the present from one of the horrors of his position.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE ROCKS OF RUGGERHUND.

At the expiration of the hour bugle and trumpet rang out "boot and saddle;" the mounted infantry and dragoons at once, under Hobson's orders, turning upon the former's previous tracks, once more plunged into the jungle, carrying with them the unhappy Bunnea as a captive.

"I am going back," said Hobson, "to the spot where I was beat and lost all trace of Shere Ali. The road there splits into three paths, the one of those three paths that we followed brought us on to the main road; I am convinced that Shere Ali was not with that party. That band, I should imagine, dispersed as soon as it touched the highway. It is little likely that they would have dared travel in the force they were along the main road to Nagpore. Had they turned the Secunderbad way you must have met them."

"Quite true," said Slade, "and I am perfectly sure no such body as that a score has passed us on the road."

Hobson smiled; he had not passed years in hunting Pandies, Rohillas, dacoits, and all such riff-raff for nothing. He had not much faith in these newly arrived English dragoons, when their wits came to be pitted against the subtlety of the Asiatic.

"This leaves us," he continued, "a choice of two roads; which of these two I am to follow depends upon that Bunno's decision. Charlie Devereux's life hangs upon a thread, and, by the living God, if I arrive too late I'll keep my word with that miserable huxster."

"You surely don't mean you'll put in force what you threatened?" said Gilbert.

"You are new to these people, Slade. You can't quite understand what we went through during the Mutiny times. And your eyes are hardly opened yet to what may be poor Devereux's fate unless our help comes speedily. You don't know, perhaps, so much of this Shere Ali and his doings as we who have been hunting him for months. If I was sure that wretched huxster was withholding from me the information I require, I would slay him after. As it is, if he tampers with me in any way he shall never leave that jungle alive, for I'll shoot him with my own hand."

Gilbert said nothing, but he was tortured with the idea of what poor Charlie's fate might be, and recognized at once that his leader was one of those stern, determined natures that thoroughly understood his savage foe, and was perfectly competent to cope with him.