



"They crouched together in the dense shelter of the jungle."

THE AYRES OF STUDLEIGH.

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CHAPTER IX.—THE FLIGHT FROM DELHI.

"What is to become of us now?" asked Lady Vane in her cool, abrupt fashion. "Perhaps, after all, it was a mistake to leave the city."

"Death would only have come to us more swiftly there," murmured Mrs. Elton faintly, and sitting down on a stone by the wayside drooped her pale face on her hands.

"Don't let us lose hope," said Rachel cheerily, as she hushed her baby to her breast. "I have great faith in Azim. Here he comes. We will follow his directions. Perhaps we may yet be saved."

Azim came back with his head dejectedly bent, his face wearing a look of distress and keen anxiety.

"What to be done now, Mem Sahib?" he asked, very humbly.

"We are waiting for you to direct us," Rachel replied, quickly.

"They say certain death to the Feringhee is to be found all the way to Kurnaul," he said rapidly, in Hindustanee. "They are vile, but they speak truth. What is to be done?"

"Will you go on, Rachel, with the child and risk it?" asked Lady Vane, pointedly.

"No—we had better go back so far, and then join the road to Meerut," said Rachel, decidedly. "Dear Mrs. Elton, are you equal to any exertion? We must go on somehow. It is impossible to stay here."

"Oh, yes, I can go on, but have you forgotten we have the Jumna to cross before we can touch the road to Meerut?"

"There may be a boat. Had we not better risk it, Azim?"

Azim nodded his approval, and held out his arms for baba, who, feeling cold and hungry, was beginning to fret.

"There may be boat. If not, we must cross. It will be best. I thought so at first, though Mem Sahibs said Kurnaul."

"Let us go on, then," said Lady Vane, and giving an arm to Mrs. Elton, she signified to Azim to lead the way. Their progress was necessarily slow. The ladies were already worn out with excitement and fatigue, and more than once they had to seek friendly shelter of the dense trees on either side of the rough road to escape the observation of persons they met. In the darkness it was, of course, impossible to distinguish friend from foe. At these times, when crouching behind trees holding their breath in terror, it was strange how still the poor child kept, never uttering a sound. It, indeed, appeared as if he were in some degree conscious of their imminent peril. Shortly the moon shone out with a vivid and steady light, and revealed to them the glittering windings of the Jumna, which lay between them and the road they had decided to take. Azim, addressing himself to Lady Vane, because she perfectly understood his own tongue, explained that further up there was a shallower and narrower part of the river which it might be possible for them to ford. So they kept on again in silence, following the faithful servant, who was their only hope. If he proved treacherous, nothing but death could be in store. Even had Rachel distrusted him, she believed that the clinging of the child's soft arms about his neck would appeal to his best feelings, and she was right. Love for his charge, deep anxiety for his safety and that of his mother, were the only feelings in the breast of the Hindoo. Nothing but death itself would release him from the obligations with which love had bound them.

After a time they came to a place where the river took a wider sweep, and which, to the practised eye of the natives, indicated that the water must be shallower. Here he paused, and giving the child into the arms of his mistress, signified his intention of trying to ford first himself. The poor ladies crouching in the thicket—for even in that lonely spot they could hear occasionally the sounds of voices and the crack of rifles—watched with

agonising suspense the passage across the river. At one part nothing was visible but the turbaned head; but as he was not a very tall man they were hopeful they would be able to follow in safety. Directly he found the water growing shallower towards the other side, he turned and came rapidly back to the bank, and holding out his hands for the child, advised the ladies to follow as quickly as possible, as there were certainly some persons approaching, and the chances were that they might be part of the mutineers skirmishing about the by-roads in search of fugitives. Without a moment's hesitation the ladies stepped into the water, although, at the cold touch of the stream, they could scarcely repress their exclamations. It was a desperate alternative, yet not one of them shrank from it. Before they were fifty yards out, there was a great noise on the road they had just left, and a company of Sepoys, led by one on horseback, swarmed down to the bank, shouting on the fugitives to stop. They never looked back, but held bravely on, though the force of the current in mid-stream was like to sweep them off their feet. A new danger assailed them when some bullets came whizzing past them, fortunately aimed too high to injure, and they escaped in safety to the other side, and immediately plunged into the jungle. As they proceeded, Rachel noticed the Hindoo staggered once or twice as he walked, and as she stepped up to inquire what ailed him, she was horrified to see his clothes stained with blood.

"Are you hurt, Azim?" she inquired, anxiously. "See, give me baba. Oh, my poor faithful friend!" She caught the child just in time, for with a groan the Hindoo staggered again and fell to the ground.

"He has been shot," said Lady Vane, kneeling down beside him and endeavouring to staunch the wound with her handkerchief, "and we can do nothing for him. God help us, Rachel, what is to become of us all?"

They grouped themselves disconsolately about the prostrate body of their guide and protector, and looked at each other in blank despair. It was the dead of night, and they were alone in the jungle, dripping wet, cold and hungry, with no prospect before them but a lingering death. The glazing eye of the Hindoo warned them that he had received a mortal hurt, and that he could not