

PRISONERS OF THE TERA

Taking you on a Mystic Jaunt to a Land of Whences and Hereafters

"JUST to that clump of trees . . . we mustn't camp in the open . . . can you . . . steady, old chap, you're running . . ."

"It's that or nothing," gasped Driscoll. "If I go slowly I'll fall . . . if I fall once that's the end of me."

Both men laughed, but it was a laugh that broke hoarsely in their throats. They were nearly at the end of their tether.

"Fifty yards more!" cried Polgarthen—"forty-nine—forty-eight—that's the style—now then."

Driscoll staggered on a few steps and fell heavily. Polgarthen, himself weak and exhausted, picked up his friend and walked stolidly forward to the camping place he had marked.

Twelve months ago Polgarthen and Driscoll and four others had set out to explore the Terai, the vast No Man's Land at the base of the Himalayan Mountains. They had ridden and tramped and cut their way through great labyrinthine forests where the trees, interlacing overhead, shut out the sunlight all the year. They had crossed swamps where plague and pestilence had brooded undisturbed for centuries, perhaps since the creation of the world. They had fought for their right of passage with monstrous animals and lizards that civilization supposed to be extinct.

But they had not found the mysterious city which tradition places in some inner depth of the Terai, whose people are said to have lived apart from all other human-kind from time immemorial.

So far the only result of their search had been a series of disasters. Their route was marked by small crosses, each roughly carved with a name and a date. Polgarthen's jaw set more rigidly as he thought of those lonely graves. He turned to look at his sleeping friend.

Driscoll lay with his eyes closed, scarcely breathing. The passivity of his attitude began to play tricks with Polgarthen's nerves. He wished that Driscoll's face had not been so expressionless or his limbs so rigid. He was more than glad when the sleeping man stirred and presently opened his eyes.

"I dreamed you had gone away," said Driscoll, faintly. "It would be—it would be pretty rotten—to die alone."

Polgarthen shook his head. He was staring uneasily at something that looked like a moving light far away to the East. Driscoll raised himself on one elbow and gave a long, contemptuous look at the Terai. Then he fell back. His hand clutched that of his friend.

"I'm through. Go back now—never mind that rule we made—you've stuck it—"

"Sorry to leave you," he said, suddenly.

Polgarthen felt as though the darkness had engulfed him like a sea, and then the unconquerable spirit of him rose stubbornly. He sprang to his feet and shook his fist at the surrounding gloom. "I'm damned if I'll go back," he cried, furiously.

After that he lay down by the side of his dead friend. Sleep was impossible. He lay with his elbow fixed in a soft bed of grass and stared at the camp-fire and let his thoughts wander where they would—

A man's mind travels swift and far under those circumstances. Time and space are all annihilated for him. Polgarthen saw the farmstead in New Brunswick, where he had lived as a boy. He saw the later building with which his parents replaced it when they had the money—an exact model of the old English farmhouse where his family had lived for three centuries. He saw himself prospecting for tin in Africa, trading copra and rubber in the Pacific, joining in the rush to the Yukon, hunting concessions

By FRANK WALL

on all the frontiers of civilization. And finally, having made a little money, and with the wanderlust still unexorcised, he had taken up this Terai expedition through his friend, Hugh Driscoll.

From time to time he thought he saw lights moving around, but he supposed they must be some kind of fireflies. At any rate, to extinguish his camp-fire would have merely invited danger from wild beasts. He flung on another log and another, until the blaze danced in the gloom.

And so the night drowsed slowly by, and the moon rose and peopled the Terai with all manner of fantastic shapes and shadows. Sometimes the



shadows moved. They were like men creeping. One of them sprang to life just behind Polgarthen. It rose and stooped swiftly. Polgarthen was conscious of a faint sickly smell, reminiscent of an operation he had once undergone in Johannesburg. He struggled wildly for a moment and then lay still. The shadowy figure sprang upright and flashed a signal that was answered by lights appearing from all directions, all converging towards the spot where Polgarthen lay.

"I DON'T know what it is," said the little brown-faced man; "it's everything. The lawn is so velvety and the old house is so quaint. When a fellow has spent thirty years in India, with its barbaric splendour and squalor, it teaches him to appreciate a place like this."

"Canadian sunshine plus Atlantic breezes. That's the best of this side of Canada," chuckled Colonel Colverton. "But you ought to see Polgarthen's."

"It can't beat this," said the little man, stubbornly. It did beat it, though, as he admitted later. Perhaps Joan Polgarthen influenced his decision.

"By the bye," said the Colonel, "Mr. Blundell knows more about the Indian hinterlands than any other man in this country."

"Do you know the Northern part?" said Joan, slowly. "The Terai?"

"To some extent. It has never been really explored."

"My brother went there with some friends to explore it a year ago. Nobody has had news of them."

"And you fear he's stranded?"

"I know he is. Jack and I are twins and we have a kind of mental sympathy with each other. I'm always dreaming of him. Last night I saw him by a camp fire. There was one man lying beside him, but I could not see any of the others."

"No news is good news," suggested the little man, but Joan shook her head.

"I think he was alone. He had covered the face of the other man and he lay there thinking. And all the time there was some danger approaching him. I couldn't warn him."

"This was in the Terai?"

"Yes. He began to struggle as though someone had seized him from behind, and then he fell back. He isn't dead. They've imprisoned him in some way I can't understand. They've done something to him, something horrible."

Vague rumours he had heard about the people of the Terai recurred to Blundell with disquieting insistence. He stammered out some optimism or other, scarcely conscious of what he was saying. But the girl shook her head again.

"You don't believe that yourself," she said, wistfully. "Tell me what you really think."

"I don't know what has happened," he said, quietly, "but I'll go to the Terai, Miss Polgarthen, and try to find him for you."

"I propose an amendment," urged Colonel Colverton. "Everybody is talking of this wonderful airship your cousin has built. He thinks of taking it on a long trial trip. We could ship it from Vancouver to Yokohama and then send it by rail to India."

"That was the idea I had," admitted Blundell. "In fact, he offered to take me across the Pacific with it when I told him I had to return to duty."

"That's all right," said the Colonel. "I'll pack up to-day."

"And I also," said Joan.

JACK POLGARTHEN came back to consciousness in the Temple of the Sacred City, whither his captors had carried him. It was a huge building, painted with a splendour of colouring he had never seen, even in India. The roof was of burnished

copper, rising to a dome in the centre. The walls were covered with allegorical pictures whose meaning he could not understand. All of them seemed to vary the same idea, but the only part he could understand was that spirits seemed to be rising from the bodies of living men. "Which is impossible," he thought, grimly.

But it was the lower walls of the Temple, below the allegorical pictures, that fascinated him. All round the building there were niches, a few feet from the ground. They were occupied by an extraordinary assortment of figures, soldiers, sailors and adventurers of all kinds, covering every nationality and century.

There was a British infantryman of the Indian Mutiny period and next to him two sailors of Nelson's time with their hair plaited in pigtail fashion. Then came the flat-crowned hat and short jacket of the Calcutta Militia of a hundred years ago and beyond this an officer in a cocked hat and a gorgeously embroidered coat and knee breeches. There were French and Dutch and Portuguese soldiers and sailors, flanked by half a dozen English soldiers of fortune of Shakespeare's time. The furthest niche was occupied by a figure of a twelfth-century Crusader in complete armour, carrying a huge two-handed sword. The visor was open and the eyes stared intently at Polgarthen as though they were watching him.

He turned away nervously and found the priests were gathering in a half-circle at the back of him. One of them began a long address entirely in