

SADDLE AND SABRE.

(Continued).

"Well, never mind now. I asked Major Braddock about them as we came down, and he says they will be arranged before very long. Father will have to pay a good bit of money for him; but it's a great thing that he hadn't to leave the army."

"Yes," replied Gilbert.

But here the conversation was interrupted by Major Braddock, who exclaimed, "I am sorry to say we must cut our leave-taking very short. The captain has just told me, Bertie, that, though you don't actually sail till day-break, he is going to get his ship out of the harbor at once, and anchor for the night upon the open water."

And here the warning cry of "All strangers for shore, please," smote upon their ears.

There is always a shade of sadness in saying good-bye on such occasions, and I for one hold that the "sweet agony of parting" should never be unduly prolonged.

Gilbert shook hands with Mrs. Connop and his uncle, clasped Lettie in his arms, kissed her warmly, and whispered into her ear, "Don't forget to write constantly, dearest," and then handed her over to the Major's charge.

She stole her hand once more into his as she murmured, "God for ever bless you, dearest," and, leaving a small parcel in his palm, tripped hurriedly across the gangway.

When Gilbert unfolded his prize a little later, it contained a gold locket, with the monogram of "L. D." upon one side, while within was coiled a lock of Lettie's chestnut tresses.

CHAPTER XLIV.

HOBSON RECOVERS THE TRAIL.

When Charlie Devereux came to himself, he found himself being borne along in a rude palanquin, the property of the grim old Rohilla who had cut him down. He was dizzy, confused, and his head still swam a good deal from the sabre-stroke, the force of which, luckily for him, had been considerably broken by his helmet. He had lost a good deal of blood; but his head had been bound up for him roughly in a damp cloth. As soon as he could collect his faculties sufficiently, he began to wonder what he had been spared for, and, with the remembrance of that scene by the roadside, he could not but fear that it would have been better for him had he been slain outright. Soon he perceived that there was an animated discussion going on between two men, who were mounted on very good horses, and evidently men of note amongst the robbers. One he recognized at once; it was the dacoit chief to whom he had been opposed, against whom he had stood foot to foot and sabre to sabre, with what dire results we have seen. The other was a little wiry man of middle height, and a countenance somewhat striking. You were puzzled at first to know what it was repelled you in it. The man was well favored enough, but his fellows seldom saw him for the first time without his producing an uneasy feeling in their minds; but at last it dawned upon you—it was the cruel, restless eyes. That his companion paid him considerable deference was apparent, but that it was Shere Ali himself Charlie was not aware until somewhat later. Could he but have overheard the tenor of their conversation it would not have done much to comfort him as regarded his present position.

"You were wrong, Hassam, to spare this dog of a Feringhee. Do you suppose this one life would save our necks if we fell into their hands? No; depend upon it, our lives are forfeited if ever they trap us."

"But I don't counsel that his life should be spared altogether. For the present, yes, because we want some information from him. The pursuit of us has thickened, and there are now many more parties of the Feringhees scouring the country than there used to be."

"True, and this lot behind us, in spite of the warm reception we gave them, are by no means done with. We ought to have eaten them up this morning."

"True," replied the Rohilla, "but these children of Sheitan are obstinate as pigs, and, moreover, love fighting."

"You are right, Hassam, we will make the Sahib tell us all we want to know as soon as he has a little recovered himself."

"And if he refuses to speak?" said the Rohilla, interrogatively.

"It will be the worse for him," retorted Shere Ali. "We have ways to make men open their mouths he little wots of."

Hobson's determined pursuit, however, left Shere Ali small leisure for indulging his peculiar method of questioning a prisoner. If the dacoits halted for long Hobson was sure to disturb them, and though, in consequence of their great superiority of numbers, he was cautious in his attacks, still he never failed to attack, and after a sharp skirmish Shere Ali and his followers were always again rapidly retreating. It was in vain the dacoit chief endeavored to urge on his band to overwhelm their relentless foe. It was useless. The robbers, although they behaved well enough in a skirmish, could not be brought to face the Feringhees in real earnest. The pursuit had now endured something like forty-eight hours, and, as Hobson recognized, could not much longer be maintained. Both men and horses were getting utterly used up, and the one ray of hope he had of ultimately capturing Shere Ali lay in the fact that the dacoits, he knew, must be getting nearly as beat as his own people.

Suddenly he began to suspect that his prognostications were realized. They came to a place where from the main road two smaller tracks diverged through the jungle, and, as the scouts pointed out, from the footprints of the horses it was evident that the robbers here had broken into three parties.

It was just what Hobson feared. Despairing of shaking off his persistent pursuit, Shere Ali had commenced to disband his followers. The hunted dacoit was evidently afraid to divulge the secret of his lair, and had probably, after disbanding his men, sought its shelter with a few of the most trusted. Could he but come up with them now, Hobson thought, his capture would be easier, as he had little doubt his own party far outnumbered that of the robber chief; but which of these three tracks to take? They had no peculiar mark by which to recognize the footprints of his horse from that of any other; it was a sheer toss-up, and after a brief delay Hobson decided to follow on hap-hazard. Two or three hours more steady riding, the men are nodding in their saddles, the tired horses blundering in their steady jog-trot, when suddenly they emerged from the jungle on a broad highway, which was instantly recognized as the main road from Secunderabad to Nagpore, and which way the party they had followed had taken, whether they had gone up the road towards Nagpore or down the road towards Secunderabad, there was nothing to show. It was hopeless to carry on the pursuit further; a village could be descried not a mile away, and where there was a village there was sure to be water. Hobson marched his troop as far as the outskirts, and then gave the order to his worn-out men to bivouac for the night.

At daybreak the next morning Hobson was awakened with the news that there were horsemen coming up the road. He received the announcement with but little interest; it was not likely that the dacoits would move for any length of time in any numbers along that road, and he guessed at once that it was only another patrol party similar to his own. A glance through his field-glasses at once confirmed this, with the trifling exception that the new-comers were evidently regular cavalry, and not mounted infantry. When they had arrived within a very short distance the officer commanding them rode forward, and, addressing Hobson, said, "I don't know to whom I have the pleasure of speaking, but I presume you are in command of one of the patrols in pursuit of this scoundrel Shere Ali. We are only just out from England, and have been packed off to join in the hunt."

"Ah!" replied the other, wearily. "I've been hunting him for months and months; if I had but come across you twenty-four hours ago——"

"Why—did you get news of him?" inquired the new-comer with interest.

"News of him!" replied Hobson. "I've been at his heels and fighting with him these two days. Four times I've brought him to bay, but his numbers just saved him from destruction, and after a short skirmish he always bolted again."

"Both your men and cattle look as if they had had a gruelling," said the new-comer, as he compared the travel-stained, way-worn appearance of Hobson's band with his own trim-looking troopers.

"Yes," rejoined Hobson. "I drove both my horses and men pretty well to a standstill yesterday. The worst is that that crafty devil Shere Ali played his old trick on us to finish up with. He broke up his band into three divisions, each of which followed a different route, and it has ended by our losing all trace of him."

"By Jove, what bad luck!" exclaimed the Dragoon. "I wish to heavens I had come across you a bit sooner. By the way, do you know anything of a great friend of mine, who, like yourself, has been at this game for some months, one Charlie Devereux?"

"Devereux—my God! Yes; he is my subaltern," and Hobson's face became very grave and stern.

"Then I fancy you and I know each other perfectly well by name. I am Gilbert Slade, and, if I mistake not, you are John Hobson?"

"Yes, I've heard plenty about you; poor Charlie never tired of talking—"

"Why do you say *poor* Charlie?" interrupted Slade, anxiously; "he has not been killed, has he?"

"No; worse than that has happened to him. I believe him to be a prisoner of Shere Ali's; and you've probably heard enough of that monster's brutalities to know what that means."

Gilbert's face fell. All that side of the country was alive with stories of Shere Ali's sanguinary doings.

"I am of course under your orders," he said at length. "I was told to patrol towards Nagpore, on my own account, until I fell in with some other patrol, and then to take my instructions from the officer commanding."

"Well, you can't do better than halt your men here, and breakfast. I must try and get some information out of these villagers before I move on. The worst of it is this scoundrel has created such a reign of terror that it's difficult to induce the villagers to disclose what they know. Generally, a lavish offer of rupees would suffice to make them betray any dacoit chief, but this Shere Ali has taken such ferocious vengeance on those whom he has detected giving any information about his proceedings, that they tremble at the very sound of his name; however, I have sent a sergeant to bring out the khotwal and any other of the leading villagers he thinks might possibly have information, and I must try if threats and bribery will do anything with them."

Gilbert Slade looked very grave when he heard that Charlie was in the hands of Shere Ali. It would have been a terrible thing to have to write to Lettie and tell her that her brother had fallen in a skirmish with a gang of dacoits, but it would be too terrible if his death should be preceded by the infernal cruelties practiced by Asiatic robbers. No, he thought, if the worst anticipations were realized, his family should be at all events spared such knowledge.

It was not long before Sergeant Rivers returned, bringing with him some half-dozen of the leading men of the village, including its khotwal or head man.

"They all swear they know nothing, sir," said the sergeant; "but," he continued, dropping his voice, so that only Hobson and Slade, who were