

AIR CASTLES.

Fragile and weak are the castles of air
That form in a dreamer's brain;
They're built upon nothing, yet treasures they
Bear.
The pearls of the ocean so rich and so rare,
The founts of the mine find a dwelling place there,
Mid trophies from mountain and plain.
I built me a castle like this one day,
When meadows lay silent and still;
And up from the fields came the scent of the hay,
As I tinkered and tinkered and tinkered away,
My castle walls grew till the moon shed its ray
O'er the brow of the sloping hill.
And I placed 'neath its portals a being so fair
That the birds, as they flew up above,
Dropped short in the midst of their flight through
The air.
To gaze on this being so fresh and so fair,
With the dew of the morning asleep in her hair,
And her eyes beaming over with love.
But now I am weary, I'll build me no more,
My castle has faded away;
My heart feels so weary, so sick and so sore,
As I think of the castles I build of yore,
When joy lay behind me and joy lay before,
And life seemed so happy and gay.
For the being who dwelt in this castle of air
Lies under the sod—oh, so deep,
'Neath the buds and the blossoms, so fresh and so
Fair.
With the dew of the morning asleep in her hair,
And my heart slugs a dirge to the theme of de-
cease,
O'er the grave where she lies fast asleep.
—Philadelphia Ledger.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

For the first few weeks after we went into
camp at Talo, away up in Upper Burma, on
the head waters of the Irrawaddy river, we
had a pretty stiff time of it, and what with
fighting dacoits and locating sub-military
stations about the country our hands were
full. Then, just about the time things began
to settle down, a new difficulty arose, for
a little cultivated land there had been
robbed and plundered by the dacoits,
and so the poor Burmese found themselves in
danger of starving, and the worst of it was
that as though we might have to starve
with them. The Madras Pioneers, whom I
commanded, were a brave and sturdy lot of
fellows, but I saw only too plainly that their
main ration was having a serious effect.
For while native traders had been coming
down the Irrawaddy in boats on their way
to Mandalay, carrying gold leaf and indigo,
scented oil and pickled tea, and what was
far more valuable to us, coconuts and bananas,
eggs and rice; but the dacoits along the
wooded banks of the river waylaid and
robbed them so often that they were begin-
ning to find it more profitable to stay at
home, and a trader's boat was now a rare
and curious thing.

"Well, Capt. Charlton," said a cheerful
voice as I sat smoking a cigar, before my
dinner one evening, "pondering over the food
problem, are you? Don't worry, I have
found a sure solution for that."
The speaker was Lieut. Redvers, and he
looked very happy and contented as he pulled
out a camp stool and sat down at my side.
"I have a splendid idea," he went on. "If I
don't mind of those cowardly traders who were
in camp this morning during your absence, leg-
ging us to give them some protection. It
seems the dacoits have robbed two boats in
the past week. There is a whole host of the
wretches about ten miles above here. These
traders circled round to avoid them, and
they report a boat load of stuff lying at a
village twenty miles up the river which they
are afraid to bring down. Now my idea is
this: Suppose we take a picked dozen of men
and go back with these fellows. Then we
hide ourselves in the boat, start down the
river and when the dacoits come out to
board us we pop up and give them a leaden
reception. I assure you they will trouble no
more traders' boats, and in future we will feel
as royally as the Rajah of Manipur him-
self. Now, what do you think of that, cap-
tain?"

I expressed my opinion with a hearty clasp
of Redvers' back.
The next morning I picked out half a dozen
good men and, taking Redvers along, of
course, we put ourselves under the guidance
of the Burmese traders and started for the
village, twenty miles distant.

That it was twenty miles by the water,
but it was at least thirty by the way our
guides led us, for we circled away back from
the river, crossing over a couple of mountain
ranges and wading through bamboo swamps
and thorny jungles.

It was a perilous trip for such a handful of
men and we were weary when we arrived
at the village about midnight.
It was a mere trifle of a place, but it was
encircled with a strong stockade of teak logs,
and the natives had made such a heroic de-
fence on the several occasions when it had
been attacked by dacoits that the robbers
had ceased to molest it. We found the boat
moored along the bank. It was a typical
Burmese barge, the very counterpart of
you know, with a thatched roof and sides
constructed of movable shutters that opened
downward on hinges toward the water. It
was propelled by a big steer on paddle and the
steersman occupied a little covered platform
that was built up over the rear of the boat.
We delayed our departure until
after midnight so as to reach the decoy position
about dawn.

The grateful natives piled us with food and
drink, and just before we started an aged
pouffed-off man offered us a cup of rice
in a small bowl. We accepted it with a
stewed ourselves away in the interior of the
boat, among the bananas and coconuts, and
cutting loose from the bank we glided out on
the sluggish stream.

It was very dark and very quiet. Redvers
and I sat out on the deck with the boatmen,
for it was necessary to keep a sharp lookout.
The profile of the shore could be seen but
dimly, and the steersman found it difficult to
keep the center of the stream. It was a long
and tedious ride, but at last the owner of the
boat, whose name was Sang, pointed out a
faint glimmer in the east, and told us it was
time to get ready. It grew gradually lighter,
until from my knot hole in the shutter I
could make out the trees on the shore quite
plainly. We continued to float on very
gently with the current, the suspense grow-
ing all the while more painful.

"What is possible that our ruse was sus-
pected?" I began to wonder.
Suddenly a shadow darkened the doorway
and Sang whispered in softly: "We are near
the place now, sahibs."

Every man took a final look at his rifle
and made ready to cast loose the gun when
I should give the signal. We dropped
down stream for a hundred yards or more in
dead silence. I was falling into utter despair
when suddenly a dark figure stepped out from
the bank and hailed us loudly in Burmese,
bidding our boatmen come peacefully to shore
at once. Sang made reply. "We are poor
beggars from Mying," he cried, in well-sim-
ulated tones of fear. "We are taking a cargo
of rice to Tamo, and we pray that you will
let us go unharmed."
The only answer to this appeal was a de-
fiant laugh and a sterner command to fur-
ther the bank at once. Sang made no further
reply, and as soon as the robber saw we
were going to float on regardless of his com-
mands he gave a loud shout, and the
dacoits from the shadow of the bank three

long pointed, canoes shot out filled with sav-
age-looking fellows, who paddled directly for
our boat.

"They are coming," I cried, excitedly.
"Make ready now, men."

Redvers was down at the other end of the
line with rifle in readiness, and I saw that
every man had one trembling hand on the
bolts of the shutter. The dacoits were so
close now that I could see their faces plainly.
They were armed with both guns and spears,
and as they drew a little nearer they let fly
a volley at our boatmen, which drove them
inside, happily without injury. It was time
to act, for the long canoes were close to the
boat and I saw by the triumphant look of
satisfaction on their swarthy faces that they
anticipated an easy victory.

"How close are they?" demanded Redvers,
in a hoarse whisper.

"Get ready," I answered. "Now, then,
drop the shutters together, men, and let them
have it."

The word of command had hardly left my
lips when the shutters fell in unison, letting
in a blinding glare of light, and so astound-
ing the robbers that they actually ceased
padding for one second in stupefied amaze-
ment. Then our rifle fire raked through the
canoes with deadly effect, and in an instant
they had plunged overboard, some never to
rise again, others striking wildly for the
shore, while the abandoned canoes floated off
with the current.

One big savage, who seemed to be the
leader, got confused and drove straight to-
ward the boat. He came to the surface so
close that I reached out and caught him by
his long black hair, and with Redvers' assist-
ance, hauled him struggling and kicking on
board. By this time many of the dacoits had
reached the shore, and their loud outcry
showed plainly that it was their chief who
had fallen into my hands. I was just about
to order the men to give another vol-
ley, when a loud cry from the steersman
overhead attracted my attention, and look-
ing down the river I saw a sight that nearly
froze my blood. Less than a quarter of a
mile distant a perfect fleet of canoes were
moving out into the stream from both
shores, and I saw that we were hopelessly
cut off.

Two of our boatmen at once plunged over-
board and gaining the right bank disap-
peared in the jungle. I confess I was badly
scared. My first sensation was surprise at
seeing such a large force of dacoits. Then I
realized our peril. In this clumsy old craft
we would be overwhelmed by sheer force of
numbers, with no chance of escape. It was
useless to attempt to reach the shore. The
men with faces slightly blanched were wait-
ing my orders.

A desperate struggle and a soldier's death
were all that were left to us, and I was just
about to tell them so when a sudden
sullen countenance of our captive inspired
me with a brilliant idea.

I knew these dacoits were cowards at heart
and, turning to a chief, I mustered up my
scanty knowledge of Burmese and de-
clared: "You dog of a robber, if your men come
a yard nearer I will shoot you on the spot,"

"Listen," I said. "An Englishman never
lies, and you know it. Bid your men go back
to shore and let our boats go by unmolested.
When we are five miles below here you shall
be set free."

The robber shook his head sullenly, and I
saw with alarm that we were fast drifting
down into the horde of canoes. I sprang for-
ward and seized him by the throat, pressing
the cold muzzle of the revolver against his
naked breast.

"Stop, stop, sahibs," he cried, falling on
his knees. "I will do your bidding; only
spare my life."

"Make haste," I cried, "or you die on the
spot."

He advanced trembling to the front of the
boat firmly held by Redvers and the other
men, and in a loud voice addressed his
friends, motioning them backwards as he
spoke.

My knowledge of Burmese was scant, but
I could readily make out that he was assur-
ing them that his life depended on their go-
ing to shore and letting the English sahibs
go by unharmed.

It was a moment of dreadful suspense and
for a time the issue was uncertain. Then to
my unspeakable joy the dacoits with every
evidence of baffled rage paddled sullenly to
shore, some to the right bank, some to the
left. Amid silence that was intense we
drifted right down into that horde's nest,
Redvers clutching the dacoit chief, watching
the dusky face for the least sign of treachery
in the steersman guiding the big paddle with hair-
breadth accuracy.

It was a period of horrible uncertainty,
and when at last the clumsy craft floated
right between the double rows of canoes the
suspense was almost unbearable. From both
sides scores of dark savage faces watched us
sharply, keenly, so close, indeed, that one
could see plainly their greasy locks, their or-
naments glittering on their half naked bodies
and the weapons firmly clutched in their
quivering hands. We seemed to move by
inches and could scarce register a shunt of
impatience. Every eye was fixed on the
chief, but in the face of Redvers' revolver
that dusky individual, who held all our lives
in his hand, dared make no sign, and so we
drifted on in sullen silence.

I knew how fervently the savages longed
to let fly their deadly spears. Even the
chief, doubting his own influence, was visibly
disturbed, and I think he was as much re-
lieved as any person present when the boat
floated past the last bunch of canoes and the
open river lay ahead of us. I wheeled round,
rifle in hand, but not a shaft was stirred, and
in this position I remained until a curve in the
river hid the enemy from view.

We held on to our prisoner until we
reached a point five miles below where the
river narrowed and grew swifter. Here, true
to my promise, I embarked him in shallow
water, and, wading to shore, he plunged into
the forest without a backward glance. We
had little fear of pursuit now, for the coun-
try was more open and the current was
strong, and before noon we safely arrived at
Talo and anchored our precious boat load of
provisions along the bank.

It turned out to have been a very fortunate
expedition after all. The presence of such a
force of dacoits in the neighborhood was a
very timely discovery, and when they crept
down on us after dark that same night they
met with such a defeat as assured a quieter
condition of affairs for some time to come.

From one of the prisoners who fell into our
hands I learned to my chagrin and dismay
that the dacoit chief whom I had held in such
brief captivity was a notorious robber, on
whose head more than one price had been set.
I readily understood then how groundless had
been our fears when we floated through the
ganlet of the robbers, and I shuddered to
think how close I had stood to that sangui-
nary monster. Still, even had his identity
been known, honor would have compelled me
to keep my promise and release him.
In a very short time Redvers' prediction
came true. For, though small bodies of dacoits
still lurked in the inaccessible spots along the
river, they maintained a very frigid and dis-
tant demeanor towards the traders, and
before long we were living every whit
as royally as his royal highness, the Rajah of
Manipur.—Philadelphia Times.



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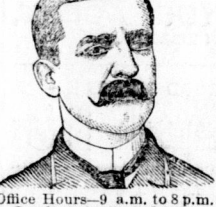
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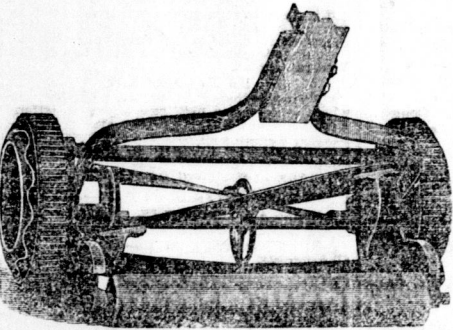
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