

P
L
E
W

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
7/11

THE

WIDE WORLD

14

MAGAZINE

AN ILLUSTRATED
MONTHLY
OF
TRUE NARRATIVE

ADVENTURE
TRAVEL
CUSTOMS
AND
SPORT

“TRUTH IS
STRANGER
THAN
FICTION”

VOL. VIII.

—
NOVEMBER

1901,
TO
APRIL
1902

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
7/11

LONDON:
GEORGE NEWNES, LTD.
SOUTHAMPTON ST.
STRAND.

A Disastrous Trip.

BY COLONEL F. T. POLLOK.

An account of one of the most unlucky shooting expeditions on record. At the very outset the party were attacked by a mad elephant. Then they had to flee for their lives before a jungle fire, and finally their raft was upset by a rhinoceros and one member of the party killed by a man-eating crocodile.



THE regiment I was posted to was stationed at Moulmein, in Burma, one of the prettiest and most picturesque towns in the East.

Our Colonel had been a noted shikaree in his day, but long service in a tropical climate, many wounds, malarious fevers, and, more lately, gout, had somewhat incapacitated him from following his favourite pastime. His spirit, however, was as keen as ever, and his reminiscences and anecdotes of sport kept alive a tone of adventure amongst us. The Colonel had been especially kind to me; so when I applied to him for two months' leave he readily promised to grant it, but advised me not to attempt to go alone, for the chances of getting sport in such a country as Burma would be little, indeed, unless I were accompanied by an experienced shikaree.

"But you know Taynton, the acting brigademajor, don't you?" said Colonel S——. "Well, I hear he intends to go too, and I am sure he will allow you to accompany him if you ask him. You could not be in better hands."

I went over to Taynton at once, and he very kindly consented to my going with him. "But don't be too sanguine," said he, "for I hear most conflicting accounts of game in this country. Some say there is none; others assert that it is plentiful, but can't be got at. One thing is certain—that all the bags I have heard of have been very poor. However, I'll see Berdmore, of the Artillery, and O'Riley, the planter, and then let you know."

Berdmore, of the Artillery, though but a young man in those days, had already made a name for himself as a naturalist of no mean order. He was in the Commission, and had been in civil charge of Tavoy and Margui. O'Riley was an Irishman who had tried his hand at most things in the Province with but indifferent success. He was, at the date of my narrative, working some teak forests in the South, and he had travelled a good deal over the country.

To my delight, the next time I saw Taynton he told me to get my leave put in "orders," for

both O'Riley and Thornton were coming with us. "I find there is little chance of our getting sport without elephants," he said. "The Commissariat officer won't lend us any, but O'Riley has a couple which he thinks can be trusted, and he believes he can hire some from the foresters. It is our only chance, so we'll risk it; and if we don't get sport that way we'll follow Mason's advice and take to the rivers on rafts.

Thornton was to undertake the culinary department, camp, and mess arrangements, and also to be treasurer. O'Riley saw to the engaging of shikarees and elephants, and promised to have *têhs*, or huts, built in suitable localities. He was also to act generally as interpreter.

Finding a Chinese junk bound down the coast, we procured a passage in her for ourselves and followers. We had five Madras servants and four Burmese lugalas, or lads, with us. Our battery was a formidable one for those days. Taynton and I each had two double rifles and a smooth-bore. O'Riley came with a double rifle and shot-gun. Thornton contented himself with a shot-gun only, saying he would borrow one of our spare rifles if ever he felt inclined to go after big game. We left on the 2nd of April, reached Mergui on the 7th, and put up in a house belonging to O'Riley. At last we got off, Taynton and I on one elephant, and Thornton and O'Riley on the other. Our course lay through an almost uninhabited country, alternately forest and long grass. We saw nothing for the first two days, but after this the shikarees took us through long grass, and there we found game plentiful.

Our progress after this was very slow, as the elephants had to break their way through reeds several inches in circumference. There was no game to be expected in such a jungle; but suddenly our elephants showed unaccountable signs of fear. We could not see an inch in front. The seeds and fluff of the grass nearly blinded us, and we were all but suffocated by the heat and dust. We were plodding along in single file, Taynton leading, when, without the least warning, there was a shrill scream, a tremendous rush, and my friend's elephant was

knocked over sideways, sending his riders and mahout flying in all directions. My elephant turned tail so suddenly that Thornton and the shikaree were thrown off, and I only saved myself by clinging to the mahout. We were carried nearly a quarter of a mile before the mahout could stop his elephant; and, even

was nearly crying with vexation and pent-up agony.

All this time a terrific combat was going on between Taynton's elephant and some monster unseen. Looking up suddenly I saw his elephant being driven backwards towards me. The situation was really alarming considering

that I was in a veritable *cul-de-sac*, the lane made by the elephant terminating abruptly in a wall of impenetrable jungle. To avoid being crushed to death seemed impossible.

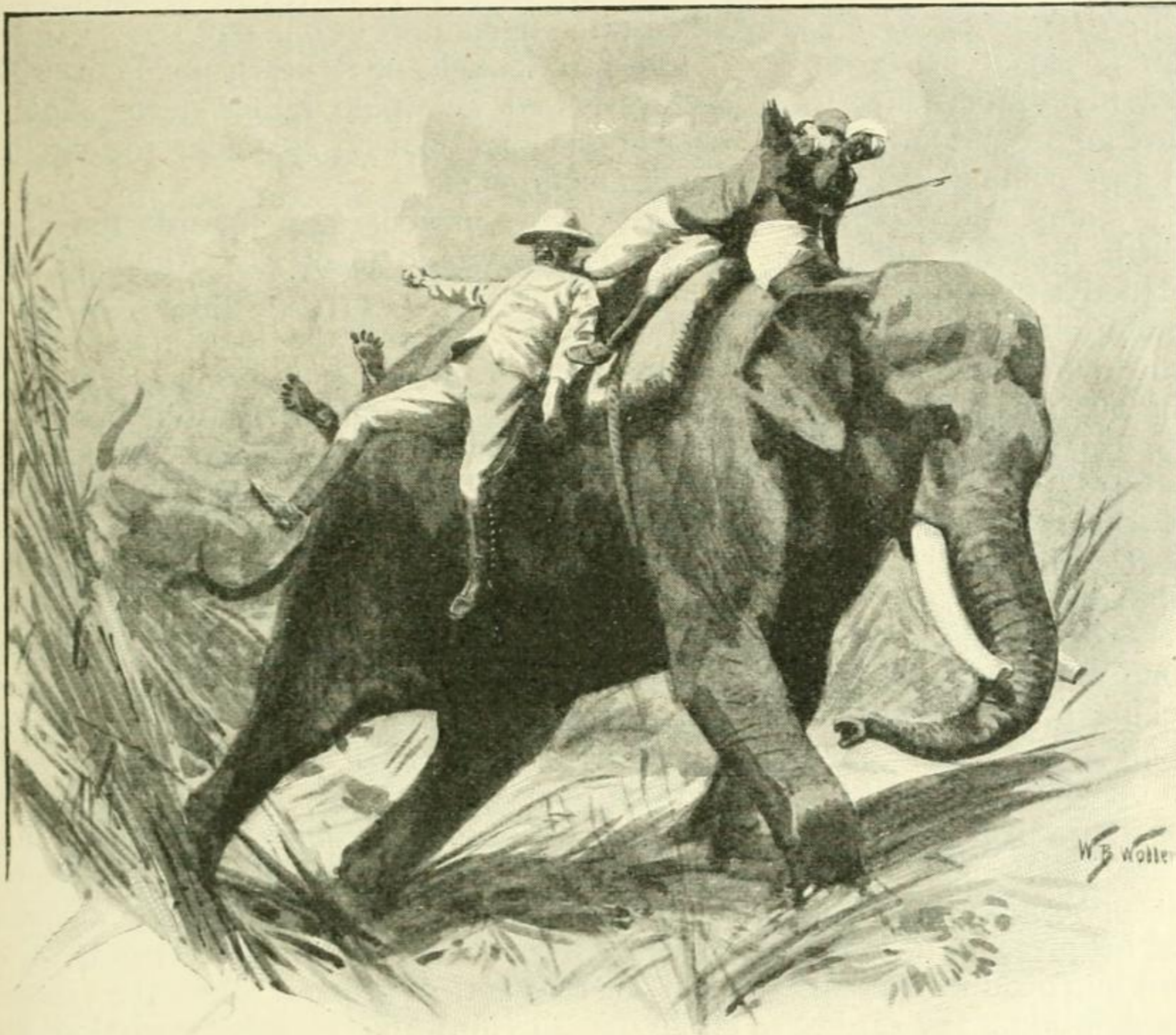
To fire at the hind-quarters of the huge brute I knew would do no good; and I fully anticipated that within a few minutes I should be added to

the victims of an unseen but terrible foe. Our own elephant, a fine tusker, of the largest size, ought to have been able to

overpower any beast alive; but he seemed helpless before his foe, and was driven down further and further towards me. I attempted to go back,

but soon gave it up in despair, seeing that, for one step I took, the elephant came back a dozen. There were now but a few paces between us, when a shot was suddenly fired, and some huge monster fell with a loud crash. Our elephant, still greatly excited, no longer retreated, but assumed the offensive, and with many a fiendish shriek and clumsy war-dance kept prodding his fallen adversary. I knew it would not be safe for me, a stranger, to approach him in his then excited state, so I begged my mahout to come up. The terrified fellow, however, would not budge an inch. Thinking it was my intrepid friend who had fired the shot, I called out: "Is that you, Taynton? For Heaven's sake, answer me."

It was Thornton who replied: "I fear Taynton is killed, as I have neither seen nor heard him. But pray make your mahout secure this elephant, or we shall never get out of this horrible place."



"MY ELEPHANT TURNED TAIL SO SUDDENLY THAT THORNTON AND THE SHIKAREE WERE THROWN OFF."

then, neither persuasion nor force could induce the animal to return. I did not know what to do. I feared that my comrades were killed, for the noise of a savage fight evidently between two monsters could even then be heard. My heart was in my mouth, and in my anxiety to render help I jumped off the elephant and attempted to retrace my footsteps, rifle in hand. The nature of the jungle, however, was such that I could not get along at all. The reeds, even along the path made by the elephant, were, though broken, interlaced in a formidable way. The innumerable stumps were sharp and close together, and were covered, moreover, with a fluffy dust resembling "cowitch," an irritant that got up my legs and nearly drove me mad. But by dint of great exertion and much suffering I made perhaps a furlong in a quarter of an hour. The perspiration was pouring down my face and blinding me, and I

My mahout hearing our voices, and being reassured by the cessation of the din, now brought his elephant up. I scrambled up on to its back and we pushed forward. No sooner did Taynton's elephant see mine than he became quiet, and allowed himself to be led to where Thornton and the shikaree were standing. They got up, the shikaree acting as mahout, and then we found the cause of all this disaster—a huge, tuskless elephant, in a state of *must* or periodical madness. We rejoiced at his death, but wasted no time over him, proceeding to search for Taynton and his guide and mahout. We found the first-named just coming to. He had been thrown against a stump and stunned. The mahout had his thigh broken; but the shikaree was more frightened than hurt. We made the mahout as comfortable as we could on one elephant, whilst the four of us mounted the other and set out for our camp, which we knew was a long way off. We did not arrive until darkness had set in.

En route we had time to talk matters over. The savage monster that had attacked us was probably a foot higher than our elephant, and nearly twice as massive. Fortunately, having no tusks, he had not done much injury to our own tusker, beyond knocking him over at the first rush and bruising him a good deal about the shoulders. Although our own had made a magnificent fight of it, he never had the least chance, as the superior size and weight of his adversary bore down all opposition; and if Thornton had not retained his presence of mind and my spare rifle, and shot him dead with a ball behind the ear as he passed within a few yards, I should certainly have been trampled to death.

We sent messengers to call O'Riley back, but I don't believe they ever went in search of him. We also did the best we could for the poor mahout, whose leg we bandaged up with splints and strips of our sheets. We wished to send him down the river on a raft, but the Karens refused to take him that way, declaring there were too many rapids, and that they feared an upset. So we got a litter made and sent a Madrasi and a Burmese lad with the injured man, passing him on from village to village, until he reached a navigable part of the river. He was then put into a dug-out, and ultimately reached Moulmein (as only a native would have done) in a far better state than anyone could have expected.

All this occupied us a whole day, so it was not until the second day that we could go back to the scene of action, in the hope of recovering some trophy from the monster we had slain. When we got within a quarter of a mile of him, however, we were forced to beat a precipitate

retreat; for our men told us he was swollen to an enormous size and covered with filthy birds of prey.

Thornton told us that an elephant four or five days defunct was a sure find for tigers; for every carnivorous brute for miles around was attracted by the smell and by the flight of innumerable vultures towards the carcass. "That's the time to sit up," said he; "a friend of mine once killed three tigers thus in one day."

The very thought of it nearly made us sick, and we vowed we would rather never shoot a tiger in our lives than do so under the circumstances mentioned.

Next day we moved camp towards the place where O'Riley was to meet us. Although, as a rule, the rains set in early in May, scarcely any had fallen as yet, and the long grass was as inflammable as tinder; but this not being the "fire" season we anticipated no danger—especially as the inhabitants were few and far between. Therefore, taking our elephants with us, we cut off a curve of the river, and marched across an uninterrupted plain, covered with long grass, which extended fully twenty miles in every direction. We had gone fully two-thirds of the way across and had seen no game when to our alarm and disgust we suddenly descried some smoke to our right, which soon blazed up into flames. As we were well to the windward, however, we thought nothing more of it just then. Presently, however, the flames circled to our rear and spread with truly amazing rapidity. Soon on two sides of us the vast plain was a perfect sea of fire, the flames curling high into the already scorching air, whilst darting hither and thither we could see kites, crows, and many other birds—though how they existed in such an atmosphere was a mystery. As yet our left and front were clear, and the flames in our rear appeared to be retreating rather than advancing. Therefore we thought but little of the conflagration, beyond regarding it as a grand spectacle. We steadily pushed on, until the elephants were beginning to show signs of fear. Now and then the startled brutes would spin round and face the flames, especially when the blazing reeds were bursting with reports like pistol-shots. Those acquainted with fires of this kind must have noticed that often during an immense conflagration the wind gets up suddenly and is most eccentric in its movements. At one moment there was not sufficient air to lift a feather. Gradually, however, a puff would come from our front, then a stronger one from the east, until in a few seconds there was a perfect tornado raging all round us, never consistent in its course for a single second.

"Let us get on, for Heaven's sake!" said Thornton, now thoroughly alarmed. "This is getting dangerous."

If our elephants were restive before, they became almost unmanageable now; but the mahouts drove them on with the utmost speed towards the point we were making for. We knew we still had two or three miles to go. Presently, without any warning, the flames broke out fiercely on our left, and spread with the speed of lightning, as it seemed to us, not only towards us sideways, but also on our front. We were now apparently hemmed in on every side, the fiery tide closing in with awful swiftness on our little island.

The elephants seemed to know their danger, and swung along at their best pace. Thornton

as fire. The situation was indeed critical. We were racing against death! We goaded on the already frantic elephants. The hot wind and smoke obscured our vision and almost choked us. Our eyes were bloodshot, our lips parched; and as the flames came nearer and nearer the heat was awful, withering, intolerable.

The flames licked the very footsteps of our animals, who raced along screaming with agony. A forked tongue of flame, driven farther than the main body by a sudden gust of wind, singed the hindermost elephant's back and set the trappings on fire. Our faces and hands were skinned, our hair singed, our clothes scorched; but not a word was uttered in our agony. It was the silence of death. Escape seemed impossible. The flames curled round our heads.

We stooped forward to meet our doom, and pass headlong into the fiery furnace. Suddenly our leading elephant tumbled head-long against a wall of brambles and creepers, and the others almost fell on the top of him. Their combined weight broke down the obstruction, however, and next moment, to our amazement, we found ourselves in comparative safety in the marshy brake.

"Dismount, and lie down," shouts Thornton, hoarsely.

We all do so to the best of our ability. We are sore from many a burn, but thank Heaven for the mercy vouchsafed to us. As heated air ascends, that near the ground is, comparatively

speaking, cool. We feel instantaneous relief on measuring our length on the damp earth. The elephants force their way farther into the brake. We remain prostrate and helpless on the ground, and long in vain for water. No one is able to speak. Our tongues are swollen and glued to the roofs of our mouths; our lips are parched and sore. We can scarcely see, our eyes are so inflamed with the heat and smoke. At last, after an eternity of suspense, the atmosphere clears up a little, and the shikaree whispers that there used to be water in the middle of the brake. Under his guidance we



"THE ELEPHANTS SEEMED TO KNOW THEIR DANGER, AND SWUNG ALONG AT THEIR BEST PACE."

spoke to one of the shikarees, who was as pale as death, and whose teeth chattered in his head. He replied that there was a brake about a quarter of a mile ahead, which in the rainy season was a vast swamp, and if we could get there before the flames reached us we should be safe—that is, if we escaped being suffocated.

The fire now seemed to have surrounded us completely, and bore down upon us from all quarters. Whichever way the wind now blew it was equally deadly. The poor elephants screamed aloud and became almost unmanageable; for there is nothing they dread so much



"WE RUSHED INTO IT FRANTICALLY."

got up and staggered along in search of it, and oh, joy inexpressible! we soon found a dirty pool, some 10ft. in diameter and perhaps a foot deep, in which a herd of buffaloes had recently been wallowing. We rushed into it frantically, and swallowed the muddy fluid like nectar. We next looked at each other for the first time since our escape. We are bereft of all hirsute appendages; eyebrows and eyelashes we have none; our hair is frizzled ridiculously.

Our elephants, too, were in a pitiable state. The soles of their feet and their bodies were terribly scorched, and their eyes sore. Allowing a few hours to elapse (to cool the heated earth) we hit off a pathway and made for the village we were bound for, and which we assumed was now only a *dhine* (two miles) away. We crawled rather than walked there, only to find it a smoking mass of ruins; for the fire in which we so nearly perished had spread with such alarming rapidity that the poor people had been unable to arrest it by the usual means, or save a thing beyond the clothes they stood in. They had thus lost all they possessed. Their houses with their granaries had been burned to ashes, and they stood weeping and bewailing their fate. Happily no lives had been lost, as is but too frequently the case in these fires.

As if one element had not caused enough misery, the first storm of the season was now let loose upon us. Before we could adopt any measures to protect ourselves we and everything belonging to us were wet through. As for the poor villagers, they huddled together in groups like drowned rats, vainly seeking shelter and warmth from one another. As is so often the case in Burma, after a night's continuous downpour the sun arose next morning in all its glory and power. We distributed the few rupees we possessed amongst the people, and gave the most feeble a tot of brandy apiece, afterwards sending to a large Karen village for rice and other necessaries.

Intent upon having some sport on the river, we remained at this place two days.

O'Riley only arrived as we were ready to start. He had been detained longer than he expected, and had heard nothing of our troubles. In due time we rigged up a shelter over our heads and made our raft very comfortable. We probably did from fifteen to twenty miles a day. On the 24th of May we had reached an open part of the river, and anchored at a very pretty spot. The bank on one side was steep—perhaps 10ft. high—and fringed with the pretty bamboo-like grass. The water was deep and slightly muddy. The opposite shore was shelving and pebbly, and it was said that occasionally animals came down to drink there. The part of the Ghine where we were bore a bad reputation for man-eating crocodiles (called in the East *muggers*), but we had seen none, and, therefore, thought nothing about them. We sat talking till about eleven p.m., when one by one we went to sleep. Taynton and I occupied the stern of the raft; O'Riley and Thornton the forepart. But this night O'Riley had his bed and mosquito-curtains rigged upon the shelving beach, begging us, laughingly, not to allow him to be eaten up by tigers. The mosquitoes were both numerous and attentive, and probably about three in the morning I awoke, and sat outside the shelter in an easy-chair smoking a cheroot to keep off these wearisome pests.

Taynton was lying down half dressed on a small camp-cot. I did not see Thornton. Presently I heard a slight noise on the bank on our side, and on looking up I was amazed to see first the huge ears, and then the ugly muzzle, of what I knew at once to be a two-horned rhinoceros. His chest was fully exposed as he looked down upon us; and without thinking, but chuckling at the chance, I quietly seized my rifle, which was lying beside me, and rapidly fired both barrels into him. Simultaneously with the report the huge body of the rhinoceros toppled over on to

our raft, and we and all belonging to us were engulfed in the muddy water of the deep river. The whole disaster happened with stunning swiftness. I was carried down among the débris of the raft for a considerable distance before I could extricate myself; but at length, being a good and powerful swimmer, I struck out for the bank. I was thinking of the series of extraordinary disasters that had marked our unfortunate trip, when some monster seized me by the thigh and dragged me under water.

I knew at once I was in the clutches, or rather the jaws, of a loathsome mugger or alligator.

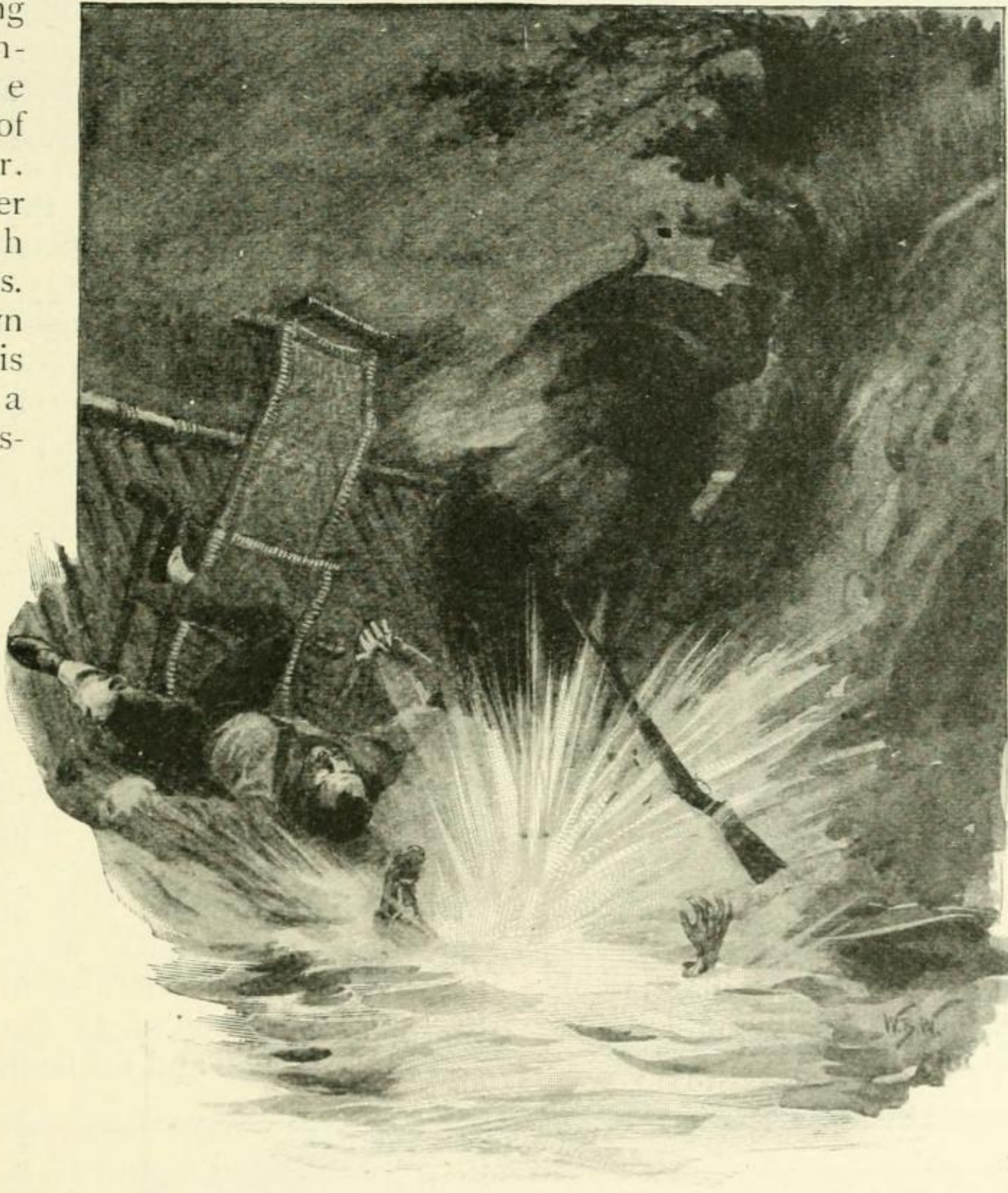
The horrid brute kept dragging me down into the slimy depths, and I soon gave up all hope. A greater monster than he, however, must have made a rush at my captor, for he opened his jaws, apparently to defend himself, and so set me free. I then rose quickly to the surface and gave one despairing cry for help. I had barely taken a full breath when I was again seized, this time by the ankle, and I was being dragged under water again when I felt a blow dealt at the reptile

and a strong arm thrown about my body. I remember no more. They told me afterwards that I was lifted to the surface and borne unconscious to the bank. When I came to Taynton and O'Riley were by my side bandaging my thigh and leg, from which the flesh had been stripped off in a very terrible manner.

But while my injuries were severe enough the shock to my system was far greater. I was taken to Moulmein in a dug-out. Brain-fever set in there, and I lingered for months between life and death. For some time it was doubtful

whether my leg should or should not be amputated, but youth and a naturally robust constitution carried me through, and I recovered sufficiently to be sent home for three years on medical certificate.

I found I owed my life to Taynton's courage and determination. When our raft was sunk by the falling rhinoceros Taynton, as I said before, was lying down partially dressed, and wearing his belt, in which he always carried a favourite *Arnachellum shikar* knife. He sank with the raft, but coming to the surface, was swimming for a place where he could land, when I rose,



"THE HUGE BODY OF THE RHINOCEROS TOPPLED OVER ON TO OUR RAFT."

and he just caught a glimpse of my despairing face as I was dragged down again. He realized at once what had happened, dived after me knife in hand, and after stabbing the alligator he brought me out more dead than alive.

What became of poor Thornton was never ascertained. Every search was made for him, and large rewards offered by Taynton and O'Riley, but without result. He was probably seized in his sleep by some prowling mugger and dragged under water. One can only hope that the end came swiftly.