

Jungles and Traitors

OR

The Wild Animal Trappers of India

BY

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CHAPTER IX.

IN THE JAWS OF DEATH.

The scene of the fight was quickly reached. Half-a-dozen of Garcia's party, who had crept back to recover the cages, were taken by surprise. Two surrendered and the other four escaped by a daring rush.

It was a dearly-bought victory, and Matlock was saddened by the scene of destruction that everywhere met the eye. His forces were badly thinned out, and the enemy had suffered even more severely. It was a matter of regret that the traitorous Ram was among the missing.

As rapidly as possible the narrow path was cleared of dead and injured. The latter were placed on heaps of boughs and tenderly cared for. Their companions bandaged their wounds and made tedious journeys to the ravine for water.

Matlock directed the dead foemen to be stretched along the base of the cliff.

"No doubt their friends will return and bury them," he said. "Our dead must be taken back to the village."

"How about Garcia's cages of animals?" asked Marco. "I suppose we can regard them as the spoils of war?"

"Not exactly," replied Matlock, "but the wisest

course will be to take them along. We will turn them over to the authorities in case a rumpus is kicked up about the affair."

"A rumpus?" queried Marco, uneasily.

"Yes, lad. You know we have taken the law into our own hands. We may be called to account for it."

"But there was no other way," said Marco. "Where would our tiger be now if we had appealed to the nearest magistrate instead of pursuing Garcia?"

"Very true," assented Matlock; "and that is why I acted as I did. I admit that I did not anticipate such a loss of life. However, we must make the best of it now. Don't worry, lad, we shall come out all right. And now let's have a look at the cause of war."

Marco followed him to the cage that contained the tiger. The captive was a magnificent fellow, huge of limb and superbly striped. He glared at his visitors through the stout slats and snarled ferociously.

"Such a prize is well worth all we have gone through," said Matlock. "I don't wonder Garcia wanted him. And it was you who trapped the beast, lad? You are getting on famously."

Marco thrilled with pride. Then his face clouded.

"I wish poor Dan was alive," he reflected, sadly. "It would please him to know it."

In all, five cages remained intact. The tiger occupied one, and another was half-filled with camping paraphernalia. The other three contained respectively a black panther, a leopard and a pair of hyenas.

So much time was required for the wounded natives

that darkness came on before the preparations to start could be completed. Matlock reluctantly gave orders to camp until morning. He feared that Garcia might collect a force of the savage hill men who lived in the vicinity and make an overwhelming night attack.

Every precaution was taken. Guards were set above and below the camp, and huge fires were built.

But the dreaded hours of darkness passed without alarm. There was little sleep for any one. The groans of the suffering natives mingled with the restless cries of the caged beasts. The bullocks, deprived of food and water, bellowed incessantly.

The first flush of dawn saw the somber procession winding down the gorge. Matlock marched at the head, though he was weak and feverish from his wound. On the truck that had belonged to the broken buffalo cage were the dead and injured of the party.

At the mouth of the pass happened the one exciting incident of the return journey. The two prisoners broke loose and made good their escape in spite of a hot pursuit.

An hour after sunrise the plain, scorched and scarred by yesterday's fire, was left behind. The village was reached before noon. A pitiful scene ensued on the arrival of the party. Men, women and children loudly mourned the dead.

But the people were reasonable. They accepted Matlock's rupees, the head man getting the lion's share.

Their wrath was directed against Garcia and his allies,

and the perfidious Ram. The latter would have fared badly had he chanced along at that time.

Matlock paid off his hired fighting men, and pressed on with the handful of companions that remained. The sorely-taxed bullocks made slow progress through the tangle of miry paths, and another night camp in the jungle was imperative.

When the following day was half spent, the exhausted travelers filed into camp. They found Hofstein quite well, and with only good news to report.

He rejoiced at the capture of the tiger, but he looked grave when he heard the complete story of the expedition. He and Matlock entered the tent, and held a secret consultation that lasted until nearly supper time.

Meanwhile Marco and Gooloo Singh superintended the arranging of the new cages, and the feeding and watering of the bullocks and wild animals.

Twenty-four hours later every one was rested, and the camp was once more in its normal condition.

Four days slipped by. Nearly all of the cages had occupants. It would soon be time to return to Calcutta. There the animals would be shipped to New York by way of Hamburg. After that, fresh instructions would be received from the animal dealer—the tenor of which could only be surmised.

This question was being discussed on a burning, scorching afternoon. Matlock and Hofstein were stretched full length beneath a shaded tent, gasping and prespiring. Marco sat at their feet, looking rather more comfortable.

Just outside squatted Gooloo Singh, calm and stolid as a bronze idol.

"Ach, Richter, the animal dealer, knows not his own mind," Hofstein was saying. "He may order us to the Rocky Mountains, or to the Himalayas, or to the forests of the Congo, or to the desert beyond Suakim——"

"It is far more likely that we shall accompany the convoy of animals to New York," interrupted Matlock. "I am glad, at all events, that we are soon going to Calcutta."

"You still worry about Garcia, then?" asked the German.

"Yes, a little. He may trump up a damaging case, and lay it before the authorities. We have his animals in our possession. It would have been better had we abandoned them in the mountains. I don't know how to get rid of them now."

"They are valuable, too," said Marco, "especially the black panther."

"They really belong to the Madras house that Garcia represents," suggested Hofstein. "It must be Sonburg & Company. They have an agent in Calcutta. We will turn the animals over to him."

"Good!" exclaimed Matlock. "That cuts the knot. A few days more will finish our work here, and then——"

The rest of the sentence was inaudible. His voice was drowned by a commotion and shouting from outside the tent. Plainly something had happened.

Hofstein rolled through the doorway and collided with Gooloo Singh. They sprang to their feet, and dashed

toward the outskirts of the camp, followed by Matlock and Marco.

The cause of the excitement was quickly explained. Surrounded by the camp employees were two of Matlock's native shikarees, whose business it was to search the jungles.

They had just arrived from different directions, and each had a thrilling piece of news.

"A tiger is my find, sahib," exclaimed Chundra. "The beast is sleeping in a bed of reeds about two miles to the south. I have men watching the spot. It is a great chance to use the nets."

"Sahibs, hark to me," cried Dalo, the second shikaree. "I have been to the pits that we dug to the eastward three days ago. In one of them is a rhinoceros—a plump, full-grown fellow."

"Ach, good for both of you!" shouted Hofstein.

"Just the animals that we need to complete the order," added Matlock. "We must start at once in spite of the heat. Conrad, you and I will go with Chundra, and try to bag this sleeping tiger."

"Very well," assented Hofstein. "Marco, we trust the rhinoceros to you and Dalo. Take Gooloo Singh along."

"It will be an easier task than yours," replied the lad. "But all the same I wish I was going after the tiger."

Preparations were hurriedly made, and just as the heat of the afternoon began to lose its intensity, the two parties started in different directions.

In the rear of each a cage followed slowly, drawn by lagging bullocks.

With his rifle strapped to his back, and a sola topee, or sun helmet, on his head, Marco pushed eastward with his two companions. He knew the location of the pits, which were about three miles from the camp.

Dalo and Gooloo Singh carried spades and coils of rope. The task before them was one of labor and skill rather than of peril. They expected to dig a narrow, sloping passage to the pit, and drag or drive the rhinoceros into the cage.

The way led through a dense jungle, and Marco traveled at an easy pace. He knew that the cage would be tardy in overtaking him.

Finally the first of the pits was reached. Its covering of grass and bamboo was undisturbed.

Now a dull, pounding noise was heard, mingled with occasional angry snorts.

"Yonder is the spot," whispered Dalo. "The beast appears to be in an ugly mood."

"Let me go first," said Gooloo Singh. "There may be danger. Keep back, sahib."

"There can be danger only from one source," replied Marco, "and I don't see much chance of that. The pits were well dug."

He pressed on at the heels of the two Hindoos. The intervening strip of jungle was quickly crossed. The sounds grew louder and nearer.

Here was the pit at last. What Gooloo Singh had feared was an actual reality. The rhinoceros was almost free. With his pointed snout and horn he had undermined one wall of his prison and caused a cave-in.

Now he was beating and trampling the earth, and the slope thus formed already reached almost to the top of the pit.

The captive was a huge and savage fellow. He paused long enough to snort angrily, and to glare at his three visitors out of his wicked little eyes. Then he went on with his fight for freedom.

"All this has been done since I was here," declared Dalo. "It was an unfortunate place to dig a pit. Look, the soil is loose and rotten."

"We can't let such a splendid animal escape," cried Marco. "Quick! throw a noosed rope over his head and drag him to the other end of the pit. That will give me a chance to straighten this wall."

"A good plan, sahib," approved Gooloo. "The cage will doubtless soon be here."

The two Hindoos deftly adjusted the rope, and at the first throw they noosed the rhinoceros. Running to the rear end of the pit they hauled with all their might.

The brute lunged frantically to right and left for a moment; then he sullenly allowed himself to be drawn several feet backward.

Marco unstrapped his rifle and threw it to the ground. Then he seized one of the spades and lustily attacked the sloping wall.

"Be careful, sahib," warned Gooloo Singh, from the opposite side.

At that very moment the treacherous earth crumbled and let Marco several feet into the pit. There he stuck fast, buried to the knees in the soft ground.

Before the lad could extricate himself, the rhinoceros made a mad lunge forward. Gooloo Singh let go of the rope in time, but Dalo pitched headfirst into the pit.

With a snort of passion, the wicked brute charged up the sloping wall, straight at Marco.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNPLEASANT DISCOVERY.

The shrill cries of the two Hindoos rang for a brief instant in Marco's ears. Then, from behind, he was struck like a catapult by the tough snout of the rhinoceros. Luckily, the sharp horn did not touch him.

He rose dizzily from the clogging earth, described a semicircle, and landed on hands and knees a few feet clear of the pit's edge.

He was stunned and bruised, but otherwise uninjured. He staggered to his feet, and looked back. Just then the rhinoceros, by a tremendous effort, surmounted the crumbling side of the pit.

Marco did not have his full wits about him. He was still too dazed to take advantage of the slim chance of escape that now offered.

Instead of doubling to right or left, he dashed straight forward, with the vicious brute in hot pursuit. He felt its warm, steaming breath; he heard its puffing snorts, and the clumsy trample of its hoofs.

Like a flash he saw the limb of a tree drooping over the path just ahead. This was his last chance, and in desperation he leaped high and grabbed at it. He made a slight miscalculation, and secured a weak hold with his finger tips.

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For a fraction of a second he swung in air. Then he was suddenly lifted upward, and wrenched by an irresistible force from his frail support.

At first he was dazed and half-blinded. The heated atmosphere flew by him. There was a warm, hard substance under him, and when he threw his hands out in fright at the swaying motion, they clutched something rough and wrinkled. He heard, vaguely, a husky shout far in the rear.

All at once he realized the truth. The rhinoceros had swept him off the limb, and now, perched on the animal's back, he was whirling through the jungle. It was, indeed, a unique situation, and one that contained a grave element of peril. Still, it was better than being at the mercy of the brute's hoofs, and sharp horn, as Marco reflected.

His first act was to straddle the broad back of the rhinoceros as flatly as possible, and take a firm hold of the tough folds of skin on the neck. Then he closed his eyes, and tried to think.

The rhinoceros was by far the more frightened of the two. It had not counted on being turned into a beast of burden. It was panic-stricken by the living, breathing weight that clung to its back.

So the terrified quadruped sought relief in furious flight. It quickly left Gooloo Singh and Dalo far behind.

Marco clung to his perch, though buffeted and scratched by the over-hanging foliage. He was afraid to roll off, lest the rhinoceros should turn and tear him to pieces. He wondered how long the mad ride would last.

All around him were the dense, gloomy fastnesses of the jungle.

Suddenly the brake and jungle melted away, and all around was a light that seemed dazzling in contrast to the recent shadows.

Crunch! crunch! splash! splash! Now cool water spurted over the lad's fevered face and hands. He lifted his head slightly and looked.

The rhinoceros was fording a swift and narrow river, some two hundred yards broad. The dusky glow that precedes the twilight was just fading from the opposite bank.

Still goaded by fear, the quadruped scarcely slackened its speed. It splashed and crunched across the stream, now belly deep, now submerged so far that Marco's hands and feet were under water!

In mid-channel was a bit of an island—a mere mud bank—that gave existence to an eddy off its lower end. Here the opposing currents had scooped out the bottom.

Just as the rhinoceros came to the verge of this hole a huge crocodile poked its scaly snout from the murky depths. The quadruped snorted with fear, and swung around so suddenly that Marco lost his grip and went headfirst into the water.

When he reached the surface he was in the grasp of the swift current. He splashed and kicked vigorously as it whirled him clear of the eddy and on down stream.

Glancing back, he saw the rhinoceros beating its way

straight up stream, like a small side-wheel steamer. The crocodile had vanished.

"I ought to be thankful to that scaly reptile," reflected Marco. "But, come to think of it, I don't know as I'm much better off. Crocodiles don't grow singly, and there may be a score of them watching me at this minute."

Terrified by the notion of such a possibility, the lad splashed more noisily than ever. He tried to gain the west bank of the river, but he was far nearer the opposite shore, and, moreover, a strong current set in that direction.

So, against his inclination, Marco finally crawled out on the bank that was farthest from camp and friends. He was exhausted by the hard swim. He crouched, panting and dripping wet, on the narrow strip of sand.

Vaguely he heard confused sounds in the distance—in what direction he could not tell. Did some new and terrible danger threaten him?

Patter! patter! Jingle! jingle!

From the black jungle into the dusk of twilight, cantered, by twos and threes, a squad of English cavalry.

The thud of hoofs and jingle of accoutrements was all around Marco before he knew what it meant.

Then he sprang to his feet with a shrill cry and went down as quickly under the hoofs of the foremost horse.

"Halt!" rang out Captain Clemson's voice. "Back, men, back."

The officer dropped quickly from the saddle and took