

The Peradventures of Private Pagett

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you'd call me a bloomin' liar. All the same," he snorted defiantly, "it's a scientific fac'."

"There are doubtless more things in heaven and earth—— By the bye, Mr. Pagett, I believe you yourself have served in the East Indies?"

"Another fac'—an 'istorical one this time," he mused. "It was as far back as the early 'eighties that I was detailed for the gunboat *Mongoose*, and it was while I was servin' aboard her in the 'Ooghly river that I heard them distant guns what so much 'as been wrote and argued about. The old East India-man's timbers and our talk o' the Flying Dutchman 'minded me of them. You've read of the mysterious Signal Guns of Gungapore, Mister?"

I had, in common with every one else familiar with Calcutta and the Ganges delta. But I deemed it politic to profess ignorance of that weird and baffling phenomenon, and Mr. Pagett was obviously pleased.

"Ah!" he observed, as he filled his church-warden pipe, "then I s'pose I shall 'ave to enlighten you. It was this way, look.

"We were lyin' in Diamond 'Arbour,

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thirteen or fourteen miles below Calcutta, and some of the orficers made up a party to go shooting in the Sunderbunds. Now, when the river Ganges is within fifty or sixty miles of the sea, it spreads in a network o' channels over a great waste of swamp and jungle two 'undred an' forty miles wide, for all the world like a trickle o' rain water crossin' a greasy patch upon the pavement. These channels, which cut up the jungle into thousands of dismal islands, are perpetooally shiftin' their course and changin' the landmarks of the distric', so that a village which may be 'ere to-morrow, in a manner o' speakin', is gone to-day. Some of the islands are ten miles across, some only a few yards, and most o' them swarm with rhinosc'roses, muggers (or what *you'd* call halligators), pythons, and all other deadly sins—snakes, I *should* say. Such are the Sunderbunds of our story, Mister, and you may take it from me that they are as full of painful surprises as the Missus's work-basket when you're fumbling for the bloomin' scissors."

In illustration of the latter portion of his statement, he pointed to three or four pin-

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pricks on the horny fingers of his right hand. I nodded in silent sympathy.

“The party consisted of three—the First Lieutenant, the Doctor an’ the Sub; and as, in addition to the boat’s crew, an extra hand was wanted as beater, volunteers were called for from the lower deck. On the stren’th of an entry in my defaulter sheet of a most onjust (but very handy) conviction by the civil power for poachin’, I was the man selected.

“We left the ship one evenin’ at ten o’clock in the steam cutter and in the highest spirits, towin’ the skiff astern. The great copper-coloured moon of the tropics was ’alf-way above the ’orizon, and as I looked at its stamped face and smooth, sharp rim, it ’minded me, I recollect’, of a bright noo penny jammed in a slot machine. For some time our course lay straight down the broad track o’ the moon ray, and from my station in the skiff’s stern-sheets the cutter, with her funnel and the coxswain’s head showin’ above the canopy, seemed to be cut out of black paper and stuck on a gold mount.

“Whether Number One (who was 'ot-tempered even for a First Lieutenant) meant to haul the skiff alongside for the purpose of man'andling me, or whether he merely intended to make the painter more secure, is a thing what I (not bein' the First Lieutenant) can't tell you. But what I can swear to is this. The skiff bein' weighted with two bags o' coal for the cutter (to say nothin' o' me), and the current runnin' very strong, the line had tautened out like a bowstring; so that when the gallant orficer, with his foot jammed for purchase against the rudder 'ead, gripped the rope with both 'ands, he just put the extra strain upon it that a painter bloomin' well won't stand. Before I could ask him what he was playin' at, it parted, and me an' the skiff, with the coal bags in the bows, were spinnin' down the stream like a soldier ant adrift on a loocifer match in the gutter.

“It was 'ard on the British taxpayer, Mister, as you'll admit. Through the 'asty temper and lubberliness of a so-called bloomin' sooperior, a costly and 'ighly-trained unit o' the regular forces was being 'urried to his

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doom in the heart o' the lonely Sunderbunds. The frail boat bein' lumbered up with coal, I was onable to get the sculls out, and with her anchor down and fires drawn the cutter was equally helpless. All I could do, therefore, was to sit tight in the stern-sheets o' my derelic' collier, and keep repeatin', 'A man may not marry his grandmother'—the only bit o' the Prayer-book which the 'orror of the sitooation would allow me to recall."

Mr. Pagett paused to toy abstractedly with the gold pencil-case I had laid for a moment upon the table.

"Thank you," I presently hinted.

"Beg pardon—my mistake," he explained, returning it from his waistcoat pocket; "I was back in that there boat, endeavourin' to fix the kinks and tangles of her 'eadlong course in my mem'ry. In three minutes the cutter was out o' sight round a sharp bend of the river, and the jungle had swallowed me up. So 'opeless was my condition without chart, compass or rations, that for the first time in my gallant life I felt the ondescribable sensation which is the masculine equivalent

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of wantin' to set down and 'ave a good cry.

“ With extr'ordinary luck I might have got the bags o' coal overboard without capsizing the skiff: but a mugger's snout above the water drove that idea out of my head quicker than what it came in. There was always the ghost of a chance, too, that I might find the cutter again, and without all that coal she would never fetch back to the ship. Even if by a miracle she did, I should certainly get fourteen days' cells and be put under stoppages of pay till I'd made good my ' wilful destruction of Gover'ment property, namely, bags o' coal two in number.' And I think the last reflection 'ad more weight with me even than the mugger's nose.

“ 'Ow long I was twistin' and spinnin' about in that gawd-forsaken water-maze I'd no means of calc'lating. Once, when I tried to steer in towards the right bank, a rhinosc'ros waded out to meet me; and when I edged over to the left, a python snake, all shiny in the moonlight, tried to grab me from an over-'anging tree. Then suddenly the current

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swirled me round a corner into a shallow creek, and in an instant all thought o' snakes, and rhinosc'roses, and the collec' about not marryin' grandmothers, vanished from my head. Not fifty yards away, in the very heart o' the jungle, lay a great ship!

“If it 'ad been St. Paul's Cathederel I could 'ardly 'ave been more took aback. To see a vessel of her size so many miles from the 'Ooghly fairly made me gasp. In spite of her exceedin'ly rotten an' weed-grown condition, I classed her at once as one o' the obsolete steam line-o'-battleships of Crimean War time and the 'sixties: for a moth-eaten funnel, 'eld in position by one stay only, toppled over her upper deck, and a propeller, that was minus two of its blades, drooped between her counter and her rudder a dozen feet above the surface of the creek.

“She was aground on the bed of a channel, which at one time must 'ave been deep enough to float her, but which now contained no more than two or three foot o' water; and, although she'd evidently been shored up with timber as the stream fell, most of the baulks 'ad rotted