

FREDERICK BRERETON

JONES OF THE 64TH: A
TALE OF THE BATTLES
OF ASSAYE AND
LASWAREE

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Battles of Assaye and Laswaree**

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F. S. (Frederick Sadleir) Brereton

Jones of the 64th A Tale of the Battles of Assaye and Laswaree

CHAPTER I

Mr. Benjamin Halbut Interferes

It was late in the afternoon of a lovely summer's day in the year of grace 1798, and all the world and his wife were abroad, taking advantage of the brilliant weather, for it had rained heavily for a week past, and the countryside had been flooded. But another cause had brought the people from their homes to the town of Winchester, for it was market day, the weekly day for sales, when farmers gathered at the square, having driven in their sheep or cattle from miles around, while the horse-breeders had come in with their droves of animals, many of them having spent the previous night on the road. And in consequence the pleasant town of Winchester wore a gay appearance. The market square was thronged to overflowing, while within the space of a few yards one could see such a medley of beings that the sight caused any stranger to pause and wonder. Standing there perhaps in some retired corner watching the crowd, he could tell at a glance that the rough fellow who had just passed, with tattered coat and breeches, odd-coloured hose and shock head of hair, was a cattle-drover, who had more than likely slept last night in some wayside ditch within hearing of his beasts. Then would come a burly farmer, stout and strong, a patron of good English beef and ale, red of face and round of limb, jolly and hearty as a sand-boy. And if his face failed to tell of his calling, his clothing was a sure criterion, for your farmer has had his own particular dress for many a century, and in the year of which we speak, providing prosperity had come to him, the man who rented or owned his farm, and employed his hands, turned out on market days in a manner which was distinctive. And very well and prosperous did they look in their grey beaver hats, their tailed jackets of broadcloth, with a cravat of ample dimensions about their necks. And down below perhaps a pair of silken hose, as this was market day, or, if they had ridden in, boots and spurs, the former well blacked and polished.

But all were not farmers and drovers. Women sat huddled in the corners, some with baskets of sweets and cakes, others selling combs, handkerchiefs, and fancy articles likely to attract the maids who patronised the spot. Horsy-looking men tramped the pavements, or stood opposite the Black Bull, chewing the inevitable piece of straw, discussing the prices of the day and the business which they had done. Boys, for the most part barefooted and in tatters, rushed here and there, seeking to earn an odd copper by carrying a bag or holding a horse. And lurking in the crowd one caught sight of furtive-looking individuals, whose slouch hats were pulled well over their eyes, and who stood, with hands deep in their pockets, surveying the scene idly, waiting for the night to come. For then it would be their turn to hustle the tired marketers, to pick the pockets of the women as they looked on at some outdoor fair, and to lure the revellers to some dark corner where they might easily rob them of the results of their marketing.

It was all very interesting and very entertaining to one of thoughtful mind, and Mr. Benjamin Halbut, of the celebrated East India Company, found ample food for thought as he wandered amidst the booths and cattle-pens. He was a gentleman of more than middle age, moderately tall, and practically clean shaven, as was the custom of the day. He was elegantly dressed in the height of the fashion, and wore a high stock. But there was nothing frivolous about his appearance, for his features told a tale of study, of a peaceful and thoughtful mind, and of a nature which was the reverse of unfriendly. And there was something distinguished about him too, something which his refined features enhanced, and which caused many a farmer to glance at him with approval. Some, in fact,

raised their beavers to him and smiled, a salutation which he instantly responded to, tucking his malacca under his arm in military style, and lifting his hat with a grace which was captivating. And at such times he showed a splendid head of hair, continuous with short and bushy whiskers which were then commonly worn by those who belonged to the quality.

"A proper gentleman, and one as it's a pleasure to rent from," said young Farmer Smiles, as Mr. Benjamin passed before the Black Bull. "I reckon as he's the best landlord this side o' London Town."

"And for many a mile round, lad," added a rotund individual, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow with a brilliant bandana handkerchief, and replaced his beaver with great care, giving it that rakish list to one side which many a farmer practised. "And to think as he's a bachelor, and at his time o' life," he went on. "They say as there's many a lass from the fine houses as would willingly look over his age and take him as a husband. But, bless yer, he don't see it. He's too busy a man for marriage. What with sailin' to India every other year, and posting backwards and forwards between this and town, he ain't got the time. Well, Simon, it's main hot to-day, and so we'll have another tankard to drink his health in. Hi, lass! another full to the brim, and as cold as you can draw it from the cellar."

It seemed, indeed, as if all in the market square were cheerful and contented on this day, and as Mr. Benjamin sauntered along his thoughtful face wore a smile of pleased approval. He stopped at this booth and at that, lifting his hat to the farmers' wives and daughters, nodding to the drovers whom he knew by sight, and acknowledging the salutations of the smaller fry, unknown to him personally, but who knew well who this fine gentleman was. And presently, as he gained the farther side of the market, a gathering crowd attracted his attention, and, being curious, he allowed himself to be carried by the people in that direction. It was the portion of the square given over to the carts and teams of the marketers. Here all who drove in from the surrounding country brought their conveyances, and taking the horses out tied them to the wheel. Some brought large tarpaulins with them, and rigged up a shelter for the use of their women folk, and a peep beneath some of these improvised tents disclosed chairs and a box or two upon which the occupants ate their meals. This was, in fact, the quarter where the smaller farmers came, those who could not afford to take their conveyances to the ample yard of the Black Bull.

In the far corner of this portion the crowd had collected round a rough square, in the centre of which stood a farmer's cart, with the horse harnessed to the shafts, and a woman seated in the vehicle, holding a child in her arms. At the horse's head stood a burly fellow, a small farmer of rough and brutal appearance, who was engaged in examining the broken knees of the animal, and mopping the blood which poured from them.

"Thirty guineas lost! Not a penny less," he shouted with an oath, as he looked at the wounds. "Here have I been tending the beast as if he were a child, and then this rascal lets him down. I tell you he did it on purpose!"

He flung the last words at his wife, who sat in the vehicle, and glared at her maliciously as if he dared her to deny the fact. Then his eyes sought one corner of the square about which stood the crowd of marketers, composed of the rougher element, and for the most part consisting of touts and drovers, though there was a small sprinkling of farmers, and in one part a tall sergeant from the regiment stationed in the town. His gaze fixed itself upon a lad some fourteen years of age, down at heel and shabbily dressed. In fact, his clothes hung grotesquely about him, for they were the cast-off garments of the farmer, and had had but little alteration. He was bareheaded, his cap lying at the farmer's feet, showing that the latter had struck him already. The little fellow stood there looking fearfully at his master, waiting for the thrashing which he knew would be given him as soon as the horse's injuries had been seen to. But if he feared his master's blows there was an air of desperation about the lad now, and his clenched fists seemed to argue that he would not suffer without offering some opposition.

"Broken the knees of the best horse in the stable and lost me thirty guineas," growled the man. "Come here and take your whipping!"

"Leave the lad alone, George," cried his wife, looking fearfully at her husband. "He couldn't help it. The horse slipped on the cobbles. Ask any one who stood near at hand."

"And all because you'd save his skin from a hiding. Hold your tongue, woman," retorted the farmer, snapping the words at her.

He was a nasty-tempered fellow, as any one could see, and the opposition offered by his wife hardly helped to smooth his anger. He wrapped a piece of linen about the animal's knees, and then calmly unstrapped the leather belt which was about his waist. And all the while the crowd looked on expectantly, while the lad cowered in his corner, trembling with apprehension. A moment or two later the ruffianly farmer stepped towards him, and as he stretched out a hand to take him by the shoulder struck the boy a cruel blow across the face with his strap. Next second a tiny fist flew out, and the knuckles struck the brute full in the mouth. At once there was intense silence in the crowd. All held their breath while they awaited the result of such audacity, craning their heads to obtain a better view. As for the farmer he staggered back, spitting blood from his mouth, and growling out curses at the boy. Then his anger got the better of his discretion, and he threw himself furiously at the boy, his eyes blazing with rage, and his strap held well aloft, prepared to deal a stinging blow. But it was never delivered, for just as Mr. Benjamin Halbut pressed his way to the front, and stepped into the square with the intention of putting a stop to the contest, the sergeant who had been a spectator of the scene ran from his corner and faced the man.

"Fair play!" he cried. "The lad's too small. Strike one of your own size and weight."

If there had been five sergeants there it would have made no difference, for George Ransom, the farmer, was blind with anger. Always a self-willed man he was noted for his brutality, and many a time had the lad whom he now attacked suffered a severe thrashing at his hands. He knew his strength and weight, and with a shout of fury he flung himself upon the sergeant, bringing his belt down with a thud on his shoulder. Then a strange thing happened. The sergeant, a man of some forty years of age, leapt to one side, and in a trice George Ransom was met with a terrific blow beneath the jaw, which sent him flying back on to the ground.

"Straight from the shoulder! A fine blow! A very fine knock-out indeed!"

It was Mr. Benjamin who spoke, and at the sound of his voice the interest of the spectators was for the moment distracted from the combatants. A moment later George Ransom had all their attention, for he rose slowly to his feet, his face scarlet with rage and his fists clenched tightly. Then he slowly divested himself of his coat and rolled his sleeves to the elbow. And as he did so the news that a fight was about to take place spread with the rapidity of a fire, bringing the people crowding to that end of the market square.

"A fight! A fight! Stand back and give 'em room," they shouted.

"You've taken it into your thick head to stick up for the shaver," growled George Ransom, as he made the final preparations. "Well, you've got to fight for him, and you've got to take punishment for that blow. Best get that red jacket off, unless you'll keep it on to hold up your courage."

"Nay, I'll take it off to keep it clear of your fingers. Think I'd have it soiled by the hands of a man like you, a big hulking brute who strikes children! That coat, my friend, has been on the shoulders of a better man than you, as I'll try to show you. Who'll take charge of it for me?"

Very quietly and coolly the sergeant had begun to do as George Ransom was doing. He had already unbuttoned his tailed tunic, and slung his belt and sabre or side-arm from his shoulders. And now, as he turned to the mob he called for some one to take his part. Then his eye fell on the lad standing beside him, his cheeks flushed with excitement and his eyes shining.

"You're the man," he said. "Here, my lad, take charge, and stand in the corner out of harm's way."

"Silence for a moment, my friends," suddenly rang out another voice, as Mr. Benjamin Halbut moved to the centre of the circle. "Ah, Mr. Joseph Romwell and Mr. Tasker, you have come in good time. This gentleman, who wears his Majesty's uniform, has been challenged to fight by this – er –

this fellow here, whom I witnessed myself striking the lad. We will see fair play. I am an old hand at the game, and with your pleasure will keep the rounds. Let us have a couple of chairs, and with a few more of these friends of ours we will keep a circle. One moment, sir" – he turned upon the farmer who was now fully prepared and was moving towards his opponent – "one moment till all is ready. Ah, here are others, and we shall soon be prepared for you. Gentlemen, I wager fifty guineas on the sergeant, and if he loses I will give this fellow here the same and twenty for the boy. If the sergeant wins I will pay twenty guineas for the boy, and so take him off his hands. Is that a bargain?"

"I'd give him away," answered George Ransom. "But if you're fool enough to bet on a match like this, all the better. Fifty guineas to me if I win, and twenty also for the boy. I'm ready."

He spat on his hands and doubled his fists, bringing both in front of his massive chest. And to look at him there seemed every prospect of his proving the victor; for he was at least two stones heavier than the sergeant, while his arms, now that they were bared, proved to be of as massive proportions as were his thighs and calves. But Mr. Benjamin Halbut seemed to have no uneasiness as to the results of the conflict, and it was very clear to all that he at least was well able to judge. The manner in which he held his watch, his authoritative tones, and the precision with which he placed the opponents and the judges, showed that he was not unused to pugilistic encounters. And in fact, like large numbers of gentlemen of that day, he was keenly in favour of the art of fighting. True, as viewed nowadays, prize-fighting is and was a barbarous sport, but it had many adherents in the old days, and was not always conducted on barbarous lines. And Mr. Halbut had done his utmost to foster the art, feeling that it helped to make men of his countrymen. He had attended many a bout, and was considered as good a judge of pugilists as any in the country. At the very first he had noticed the wiry, active proportions of the sergeant, his keen eye, and the cool manner in which he made his preparations. And now that he saw him stripped, the hardness of his muscles, his pose as he stepped into the ring, and the poise of his head, told that here was a man who had practised the game.

"A champion, if I am not mistaken," thought Mr. Halbut. "Game to fight to a finish, and has science. Well, he will want it, for this big bully will strike with the power of a giant. All the better; if he is beaten it will mean that my friend the sergeant will have obtained a finer victory."

By now the news had filtered to every portion of the square, and a big concourse of people was gathered in the corner; in fact, all who could possibly leave their stalls or their animals had come across, while the hall of the Black Bull was emptied. And thanks to this fact, there were now numbers of better-class farmers and breeders close at hand, and these, at a sign from Mr. Halbut, took up a position within the circle so as to keep the crowd back.

"We are ready, I think," said Mr. Halbut. "Corners, please. Break away when time is called. Now, time!"

The two opponents at once approached one another, the farmer burning to beat down the sergeant, and confident that his strength and superior weight would help him to do so; while the latter came up with a quiet and intent little smile, wary and watchful, knowing that for a time at least he would have his hands very full. Nor was it long before his enemy showed the tactics he was prepared to follow. For a moment or two he stood to the utmost of his height, his fists moving to and fro like a couple of enormous sledge-hammers. Then, dropping his head suddenly he rushed at the sergeant, swinging both arms about his head. And in this manner he reached the opposite corner, only to find that his opponent had slipped past him and was waiting for him to turn and renew the combat. There was a shout of applause from the crowd, and then a cheer as George Ransom again rushed to the attack. When time was called the farmer was breathing heavily, while he had so far failed to touch his opponent. His anger now had risen, if that were possible, and when Mr. Halbut again called the combatants into the circle the farmer came forward without a pause, and with a shout rushed at his enemy. He was met this time with a terrific blow beneath the guard, and staggered back, spitting teeth from his mouth. But the blow was nothing to a man of his size and strength, and in a little while he had closed with the sergeant and the two were striking at one another, the farmer with blind fury, and

the sergeant with skill and coolness. Once, in the third round, the latter failed to check a rush, and a blow from George Ransom laid him on the ground, where he lay for a time half stunned, while Mr. Halbut slowly counted out the seconds. Was he to be beaten after all? for by the rules of the science of pugilism, if he failed to come up when time was called he was defeated. But a little later he rose on his elbow, looked about him as if bewildered, and then sprang to his feet. And the blow seemed to have increased his activity. For in the three rounds which followed he struck the farmer many a blow, while the latter expended his powers on the air, and rapidly became more and more exhausted as his more active opponent escaped his rushes. Finally, in the eighth round the climax came. The sergeant, seeing that his man was at the end of his tether and no longer so dangerous, struck him unmercifully, driving him round the circle and then into one corner, where he retained him till the man was ready to drop. He escaped, however, and the two faced one another. But it was only for a moment. As George Ransom advanced again he was met with a blow on the point of the chin which threw him from his feet, and in an instant he lay unconscious on the ground.

"One, two, three, four," Mr. Halbut began to count. "Stand away there. Keep the circle, my friends. He has a quarter of a minute yet. Time!"

A shout went up from all who were present as the sergeant went back to his corner and took his coat from the lad. Mr. Halbut and the others went to the farmer and ascertained that he was merely stunned. Indeed, in a few minutes he was conscious again and being supported on his feet, where he remained looking sourly at the group about him. Then he stumbled blindly towards his cart, and with the aid of his wife managed to scramble into his coat.

"One moment," said Mr. Halbut, as he was about to climb into the cart. "The wager was that if you lost I should pay twenty guineas for the boy. Give me your name and address and I will bring the money and have the lad legally handed over. Wait, though, here is half the sum down. I will look after the boy, and the rest shall be paid through an attorney."

He pulled a long purse from his pocket and told out the guineas. Then with a sympathetic nod to the farmer's wife he turned on his heel and went to the sergeant.

"You are a fine fellow, and I thank you," he said. "You are a little shaken, as is natural, and a glass and something to eat at the inn will do you no harm. Bring the lad with you and follow."

Ten minutes later they were gathered in the hall of the famous Black Bull, waiting while the victuals were put before them.

CHAPTER II

A Protégé

Mine host of the Black Bull was a man who prided himself upon the welcome his house provided, and on such an occasion, when Mr. Benjamin Halbut was the guest, there was extra need for haste. And so it happened that within a very few minutes a meal was announced as being ready.

"In the parlour, your honour," said the maid. "The best parlour, sir, along the passage to the left. My!" she went on, as she passed the lad for whom the sergeant had just fought so handsomely, "but you've found friends to-day! Never mind, laddie; you look a nice little fellow."

"This way, sergeant. Come, my lad," said Mr. Benjamin. "We'll eat and talk. We've much to arrange. Now, seat yourselves, and may this meal not be the last that we may share for many a day to come."

He was so quiet and affable, so friendly, that even the lad who had so strangely come into his company was far from abashed. Not that he felt at his ease, for all this was so strange to him. In the first place, he had never even stepped within the doors of the Black Bull, though many a time, on market days, he had looked within, bashfully and wondering, at the warmth and comfort, and the massive old dressers and chairs, and at the stags' heads hung round the walls. It had never occurred to him that one day he might have the right to enter. And here he was now, seated at a board which groaned beneath the weight of a massive joint of beef, while other dainties to which he was an entire stranger stood on the table! And how he admired the fine gentleman opposite, and envied the coolness of the sergeant!

"If I were only he," he thought. "He is as used to this as to fighting, while I am so strange. My feet hit against every chair I get near, and – oh dear!"

"Come, lad, sit down beside me and let us commence," said Mr. Benjamin, taking him by the hand and drawing him towards a chair. "A fine lad, sergeant, and growing, or he would not be so thin."

"He struck a plucky blow, sir. But he is thin, and no doubt the feeding provided by the farmer was not of the best."

"Where does this farmer come from?" asked Mr. Benjamin, as he carved a slice of beef and placed it before the lad. "Tell me who he is and something about him. And first of all, who are you? What is your name, lad?"

He was so nice and courteous, so thoughtful, that in a little while the lad had forgotten his rags, his dirty hands and smudged face, and was seated chatting easily, and eating the good things provided with a gusto which there was no mistaking.

"Now, your name?" asked Mr. Benjamin, when he saw that the lad was well engaged and feeling more at home.

"Jones, sir – at least that is what they call me," answered the little fellow bravely.

"That is what they call you? How is that? Had you another name?"

"I think so, sir. I was found when I was smaller and taken to the poorhouse, as I was an orphan with no one to claim me."

"Found! That is strange. And the lad speaks well, too."

Mr. Benjamin exchanged glances with the sergeant and became silent and thoughtful. For he had noticed something strange about this protégé of his from the moment when the lad opened his lips. He spoke with a slight Hampshire accent, which had evidently been recently acquired. But there was something refined about the little fellow's voice, so much so that it was difficult to imagine that he was merely a farmer's boy.

"You were found," he said. "Where? Tell us all about it, and how you came to be working for this hulking bully. The fellow looked as if he had thrashed you many a time."

"He has, sir. He said he would kill me some day. None dared to live with him, except his wife and I, and I would have gone long ago had I not been his apprentice. Yes, sir, I was found, they tell me, when I was about five years of age, and a cottager and his wife, of the name of Jones, took me in and cared for me till they died. Then I went to the poorhouse in this town, and from there to the farmer. That is all I know, sir, but perhaps Mrs. Towers, at the poorhouse, could tell you more."

"A foundling, with a mysterious tale behind him, and of late a little slave!"

Mr. Benjamin looked at the lad closely, noting his fair curly hair, now all in disorder, his fine eyes, and the cast of his features.

"A fine little fellow," he thought aloud, "and I'll warrant he has had few friends so far. The farmer's wife, perhaps, for she looked as if she cared for him; and this Mrs. Towers."

"Yes, indeed, sir, they were very good to me," burst in the boy eagerly, loyally supporting the two who had been mentioned. "Mrs. Towers says that she was a mother to me, while Mrs. Ransom was very kind and good when her husband could not see us. Am I to go back to him, sir?"

"Never! I have made a bargain with him, and your articles of apprenticeship are to be cancelled. An attorney will get it done in a couple of weeks. You will have to be taken before a magistrate, and the facts sworn to. Then as soon as the money is paid you will be free from that ruffian. Yes, ruffian, serjeant, and I fear that there are many others like him, who obtain the services of lads such as this and make drudges of them. But your other name, lad?"

"Owen M., sir."

"Owen M.! M.? What does that refer to, and where did you get the name of Owen?"

"It is my right name, sir," answered the boy proudly, as he looked his questioner in the eyes. "When I was left near the cottage of the Joneses I was wrapped in a rug, and was fully dressed in old clothes. They thought that my own had been removed, so as to make it impossible to trace who I was, or where I came from, and had it not been for a jersey I was wearing next to my body nothing would have been known. Owen M. was worked on the jersey, and that is why I have the name of Owen."

"And the M. may be your Christian name or surname. These Joneses are dead?"

With his usual interest in life Mr. Benjamin asked the question sharply and waited impatiently for the answer, giving an exclamation of satisfaction when the lad replied that the clothing was now in the hands of Mrs. Towers at the poorhouse, and that the Joneses were dead.

"Then we will go there. Come, serjeant, what do you say to helping me in the matter?" he said eagerly. "You took up the cudgels on behalf of this lad Owen, and will like to see the matter through. We will give him a fresh start and make a man of him. What do you say?"

"Ready and willing, sir. He has pluck, by the way in which he struck the bully, and he'll do with a proper training and discipline. In the army, sir, we'd make a fine soldier of him."

The serjeant sat up to his full height; while it was clear from the open admiration with which Owen regarded his defender that service in the army would not be unpleasant to him.

"And you like the idea?" smiled Mr. Benjamin, turning to him. "We will see. He shall have the best. But, first, we will get him some fitting clothing. Come, another cut of beef and a tankard to wash it down, serjeant. You have had a struggle and need some refreshment."

He rose and went to the bell, giving it a lusty tug. When the maid arrived he requested mine host to be sent to him.

"Do me the favour of sending across to the nearest tailor's," he said when the good man appeared, "and tell him to come here at once with clothing suited to this lad."

Half an hour later a hackney coach drew up at the door of the Black Bull, and the three who had refreshed themselves in the famous hostelry stepped into it and were driven away, Mr. Benjamin giving the poorhouse as the address to which they were to be taken. And if Owen Jones had felt strange before when he had been bidden to accompany this fine gentleman, he felt even more so now, while his whole frame was filled with a sense of elation. For he was transformed. The kind lady at the Black Bull had helped to polish him with hot water and a plentiful supply of soap, while the tailor

and a haberdasher, who had also been called in to help, had rigged him out in a suit of simple stuff which fitted him well, and in which he looked a little gentleman.

"My, who would have thought as he wasn't a little gentleman!" exclaimed the maid at the Black Bull, as she saw him descend to the hall, hat in hand, his hair well brushed, and his eager little face shining with the application of good Windsor soap. "Don't you look fine!"

Owen greeted her with a bashful smile, and then walked quietly into the room where Mr. Benjamin and the sergeant awaited him. And there his appearance caused more pleasure.

"He will do us credit, never fear," exclaimed the kindly gentleman. "But the coach is here and we will leave."

Paying the bill, and adding something to it for the welcome and help given, he pushed Owen into the coach before him and they drove off. Owen could hardly believe that it was really he. Who could have guessed that he would have ever ridden in a coach! And behind postillion-ridden horses! And was it true that he was not to return to Farmer Ransom? There were to be no more beatings and no more scoldings! No need to creep to bed amidst the sacks in a cold barn, and lie there shivering of a cold night, and awake perhaps stiff with the cold, and hungry because supper had been denied him on the previous night out of pure spite! It was too much to believe. He sat forward in the coach, now looking up at Mr. Benjamin and then out of the windows at the houses and streets, at the boys playing there and at the pedestrians. Why, there was Johnny Banks, a lad who had been at the poorhouse with him, and was now apprenticed to the local baker. He at any rate had had plenty to eat, and Owen had been in the habit of envying him. Now! "I can't believe it!" he said to himself. "And if only they would make me a soldier!"

"Here we are. Tumble out and let us see this good lady. Ring the bell, sergeant. And, postillion, wait here for us."

A few moments later an individual appeared within the ample gate of the poorhouse, dressed in the official uniform of the place, and showing a portly figure and a face indicative of good temper. To the inquiry for Mrs. Towers he responded that she was within, and at once bustled off, impressed by the coach and by the unusually fine appearance of Mr. Benjamin. And in a little while the trio found themselves closeted with the matron, a stout old lady, who hugged Owen with affection, and lifted her fat hands in amazement at finding him in such fine company.

"Lor'!" she said, "to think that you should have such friends! Little Owen, as came to the house without a single one, and well-nigh starved!"

"Let us have the tale, my good woman," said Mr. Benjamin, as he bowed to the old dame's curtsy, and sat on a chair. "This lad here has made friends with the sergeant and myself, and we are desirous of finding out a little about him. He tells us that his name is Owen M. Jones."

"As near as we know, sir," was the answer. "But, bless yer, begging your pardon for so doing, sir, he's better than a Jones. That's the name of the poor folk who first found him. It was a dark night – let me see, yes, it will be nine years ago – when they heard a coach passing along the road, which runs some yards from their cottage. That wasn't anything out of the common, for fifty and more pass by perhaps in the day. But it stopped for a while and then went on again at a gallop. Mrs. Jones told me that herself. It drove on as if there were soldiers or some one of that sort behind, and it was soon gone out of hearing. Then there came the cry of a child who is frightened at being left all alone, and when they ran out to see who it was, there was young Owen, a tiny little fellow then, seated on the roadside, with his knuckles in his eyes."

"And like the kind-hearted folks they were they brought him in and fed him, I suppose?" said Mr. Benjamin.

"That they did, sir. They weren't that well off, neither. But they had none of their own, and they took the boy in and cared for him. Then Mr. Jones walked in here as soon as it was day, and came to the house. The guardians heard his tale and saw the boy, but they never learned anything about the

coach that had brought him, nor where he came from. And as the Joneses said they were willing to adopt him, why Owen stayed with them till the old couple died, and that would be six years ago."

"And nothing was learned about his coming?"

"Nothing, sir. Foundlings are common enough, and I don't suppose as the guardians would spend much in making inquiries. Besides, the boy seemed to be the child of common parents, for his clothes were rough. But Mrs. Jones knew better, and so do I. I'll show you, sir."

She went off into another room, where they heard her pulling open the doors of a cupboard; and finally she returned, bringing a tiny little undervest which she handed to Mr. Benjamin.

"Made in India," he said at once, "and of the finest material. This garment was in all probability made for the boy, and if so, then he was born out there. Yes, I am sure of it, for look at this, sergeant. Those letters, Owen M., were stitched by a native woman. The work is characteristic. I am perfectly sure of what I say."

All stared at the tiny garment, which was redolent of lavender, while Owen, who had never regarded it with any importance before now, looked at the letters stitched in one corner with great interest.

"Perhaps the lad can help us," suggested the sergeant. "Tell us, boy, whether you remember the coach."

"Of course he does!" exclaimed Mrs. Towers. "Why, I asked him many a time. Tell the gentlemen, Owen."

"I remember the coach well, and being left beside the road," said Owen promptly; "and I recollect the journey. I am sure that I was strange to the country, and I can see now the ship in which I came. How long we were at sea I do not know, but it was for a long while. And all that time I was tended by a black woman, who was very kind. I seem to remember places so different from these here. A bright sun, many trees, and very big houses. There were soldiers, too, and one big soldier who often threw me on his shoulder. But it may be a dream. I may have imagined it all."

"One minute, Owen," interrupted Mrs. Towers, whose interest was fully aroused. "Mrs. Jones said that when you came you could speak well, but that whenever you cried you called out in a tongue which was strange to her. You did it here too, that I remember, though bless me if I know what the words meant. Have you forgotten?"

"Tell me," said Mr. Benjamin encouragingly, shifting a little farther on to his chair and looking closely at Owen. "What were the words?"

Owen repeated them as well as he was able, and though they were but childish expressions, which he had learned when beginning to speak, they were pronounced as undoubtedly hailing from India.

"Which proves that he actually came from India," said the sergeant.

"Exactly so. He probably landed and was kidnapped, for some purpose of which we are ignorant. There is something very interesting about this, sergeant. I know the country well, and I say without hesitation that no child but those belonging to Englishmen in high places would have been dressed in such a garment. Probably our little friend is the son of an Englishman employed in India, and was sent home because of the death of his mother, or more likely because of the climate. Beyond that one cannot go. There is some dark secret attached to his capture. But the fact remains that he was kidnapped, and brought away from his guardians. Then his identity was hidden. I should say that he may very well have come from Bristol or some other port, and it is not to be wondered at that his loss did not occasion very much disturbance. If his parents were abroad, considering how slowly news travels, it is not at all wonderful that no rumour of his having been found in this locality failed to reach his guardians. Perhaps he was sent home to relatives, who may themselves have had something to do with the kidnapping. There have been cases quite as disgraceful before. But the important thing is that one little garment is left as a clue, and that the lad can speak a few words of the Indian tongue,

and remembers places which may without a great stretch of imagination be allowed to correspond with some Indian city – Bombay or Calcutta, for instance."

"Lor'! To think that he may be a gentleman!" exclaimed Mrs. Towers, lifting her hands. "Well, I always said as much. He speaks different from other lads, and he's better behaved. There's always been something queer about little Owen. And I've tried to keep it up too, sir. I've encouraged him to speak well, to address his betters as he should, and to be gentle in his play."

"And you've succeeded well, ma'am," exclaimed the sergeant with enthusiasm.

"Very well indeed, madam," agreed Mr. Benjamin. "Is there nothing more to tell us?"

"Nothing, sir. He stayed here till a year ago, when the guardians apprenticed him to Mr. George Ransom, a farmer that's not the best-loved of all living about Winchester."

"A thorough ruffian," exclaimed Mr. Benjamin indignantly. "Well, madam, our friend the sergeant here very pluckily interfered when this farmer was about to ill-use the boy to-day, and beat him handsomely in the fight which followed. Now I propose to have the boy's apprenticeship cancelled, and shall look to his future. But we must do more than that. I will send here for you to-morrow, and will have you taken in a coach to my attorney's, where I will ask you to make a plain statement of all the facts you have already mentioned. If you can remember more, all the better. We will hunt up others who may have known him, and the sergeant and I will add our evidence. I can swear that he can speak some words of Hindustani, for instance, and that may, one of these days, be valuable evidence. When the statement is completed we will have it attested before a magistrate, and then carefully locked away with this garment. Then, supposing one day we happen to hear of these parents, we shall be able to help in proving that Owen is actually their missing son. And I promise you that I shall leave no stone unturned to effect that end. Now, sergeant, we will drive on to the barracks. Owen, for the time being, shall wear the uniform of a soldier."

He felt in his pocket for a guinea, which he placed in Mrs. Towers's fat hand, and then led the way to the coach. An hour later he was with the Colonel of the local detachment, and when he left that evening it had been arranged that Owen should enlist as a band boy, and should be instructed in the playing of the fife.

"And at the same time I can put him up to the use of his fists, as well as side-arms and a pike," said the sergeant heartily. "And remember this, youngster, there's many a lad who has stepped it at first behind the drum-major, and who afterwards has shouldered a sergeant's pike and done fine service. Never fear, sir, I'll keep an eye on the lad."

"Turn him out a man, that is what I want," said Mr. Benjamin. "I might have put him on a stool in an office in London, or have found some other work for him; but the lad interests me, and I want to see how he gets on. There is nothing like the rough life of the army for that. He will rub shoulders with every sort, and you will be able to keep an eye upon him. Don't interfere, sergeant. Let him fight his own battles till he shows that he is unable to do so, and don't help him at all. Let him rise by his own exertions. When the time comes I shall have a fit post for him."

And so, when a week had passed, Owen Jones was a full-fledged soldier, Jones of the 64th, and his name had been borne on the regimental strength. By then his apprenticeship with the farmer had been cancelled, while twenty guineas had been paid to his late master. Then a full statement of his history had been made before a magistrate and had been signed, the document having afterwards been deposited with the attorney.

Owen looked a fine little fellow in his red-tailed tunic, his red waistcoat and pantaloons, and felt a proud lad when he first donned them. There is no need to tell how he became introduced to his comrades of the regiment; how he met with and accepted with good temper all their good-natured chaff; and how, when a few days had passed, he endeavoured to take a leaf from the sergeant's book, and attacked a lad of greater proportions who had attempted to bully him, and how, despite the greatest perseverance, he had been ultimately worsted, and had retired to his quarters with swollen eyes. He showed his grit and pluck, even if he were defeated, and thereafter was respected. And as

the days and weeks passed, and the latter grew into months, Owen filled out wonderfully. A heavy sack which was suspended from the beams of the quarters given to his friend the sergeant kept his muscles in good play, for every day he spent an hour hammering at it with his fists, while the sergeant afterwards gave him instruction in boxing. And so, what with playing the fife, skylarking, and becoming an expert in the use of every kind of fire-arm and weapon of defence, Owen passed three years with the detachment, at first at Winchester and afterwards in other places. When he was seventeen years of age, as near as could be guessed, Mr. Benjamin Halbut again put in an appearance, and our hero found that a new life was about to be opened for him.

CHAPTER III

Facing a Difficulty

"Here you are, my lad," said the sergeant, when he brought the news of the impending change to Owen. "A good friend we have both got, that I can tell you, for ever since the fight, when I stuck up for you and beat that ruffian, this Mr. Benjamin has never forgotten us. What's he done for me?"

He put the question to the youthful corporal, who stood at attention before him, as if he expected the lad to be able to answer. Then he struck the calf of his leg a sounding thwack with his cane and gave the information which he had asked for.

"Of course you wouldn't know," he said, "because I was told not to say. But I can speak now, and you had best listen. It's this. Mr. Benjamin has no children of his own, as you know, and ever since he heard the tale of your being found, he has looked after your education as if you were his son. 'Let him rough it,' is what he said to me. 'Let him fight his own battles and find his own place. He's well able to do that.' And that, lad, is why I have never interfered. That is why you fought young Jackson with never a word from me, and took your licking handsomely. Yes, yes, I know," he went on, as Owen was about to interrupt, "he was a bully, and I knew that well. You had to knuckle under, and did so for a time."

"Till I was bigger and stronger, sergeant. Then – "

"You gave him the drubbing he had been asking for so long. That's what comes of not interfering. Things levelled themselves. You were beaten at first, and the fellow never allowed you to forget your hiding. If you'd been a meek kind of lad, he'd have crowed it over you for ever. But you've a little pride, my boy, and you waited till you were able to take him in hand again. That wasn't long either, though he's two stone heavier than you are, and taller by half a head. But you've had training, and that's the secret, if only you happen to have pluck as well. But I am getting away from my yarn."

"You were about to tell me what Mr. Halbut has done for you and for me, sir," said Owen.

"Ah, yes, I was. Well, he took a fancy to me and to you, and he put me in charge of you, as it were. 'I could take him in hand at once, and have him sent to a good school,' he said to me when first we talked it over, 'but I won't. The lad shall rise from a rougher school. Teach him manners, sergeant. Let him see that a lad with respect for his elders will get on, and, above all, turn him out a man. When the time comes I will take him in hand myself, and I have a place for him already decided on.' That's what he's done. Every quarter I have received a handsome sum from him for my work, and, my lad, let him see that I have earned it. He knows that you can hold your own with others here, and that there isn't another lad in the regiment who can handle the gloves as you can, or who can use a weapon with the science that you have learned. Let him see that there's more. They call you the gentleman corporal here. Let Mr. Halbut see that they have reason for that."

"I will, sergeant," answered Owen earnestly. "As you say, I have learned a lot since I came to the regiment, and thanks to your teaching I shall have no fear, but a great deal of confidence, should it ever come to my lot to take part in a hand-to-hand contest. And that I hope to have the fortune to do before very long, or else what's the good of being a soldier?"

"You're likely to meet with that in other walks of life," was the answer. "Soldiering isn't everything, and you'll learn that Mr. Halbut thinks so too."

"At any rate I have learned the use of my fists and other weapons," went on Owen, "and thanks to the opportunities which have been given me I believe my manners are a little different from those of the other fellows. I don't say that boastfully, sergeant. It is a fact, I believe."

"And you've to thank Mr. Tasker for that," was the sergeant's comment. "He took up the work willingly, and he's done well. He himself says he is more than pleased."

Mr. Tasker was a gentleman who lived in a small house in the town, and who had once been the principal of a school for the sons of gentlemen. He had, owing to ill-health, to give up his school, and had eagerly undertaken to educate Owen Jones whenever his duties would allow him to attend at his house. And so, at the direction of Mr. Halbut, Owen had spent a couple of hours with Mr. Tasker every day, and it was thanks to the teaching of this quiet and courtly gentleman that the young corporal of the 64th had a polish about him which was lacking in his comrades.

"It will all help you to take the place Mr. Halbut has selected for you," said the sergeant. "You know he's one of the powerful directors of the East India Company – John Company as it's often called. As such he is able to find a place for any protégé, and he is sending you out to India by the next boat to take a commission in the native horse or infantry. There, lad, that's the news, and you can get further particulars from him yourself. You'll be formally discharged from the regiment tomorrow, and will go to London at the end of the week. After that I fancy you'll have a day or more to prepare for the passage out."

The news came as a great surprise to Owen, for he had never even imagined that he would rise to the commissioned ranks, and the statement that he was now to prepare to sail for India, there to join a regiment as an ensign, filled him with huge excitement and delight. The prospect of going to India at all was sufficiently pleasant, for the older he got the more had he cogitated over the mystery of his birth, and the more sure had he become that his recollection of early events was correct, and that he had actually been born abroad, in India most likely, and had been sent home for some reason.

"And promptly abducted and left on the road," he had often said to himself. "Some one must have had a huge interest in getting rid of me, and he did it effectually. However, if Mr. Halbut has been unsuccessful in tracing the mystery so far, I may have better fortune and succeed in the end."

"Now, lad, we'll get to work, if you please," said the sergeant, with a pretence to be light-hearted, though the gallant fellow felt no great joy at the prospect of separation from Owen.

"He's been like a son to me," he often said to his friends. "He's as true as possible, and as game to learn as one could wish. And see what I've made of him! A pluckier youngster does not exist, and no one can call him conceited."

And now he was to part with Owen. The sergeant was an unmarried man, a rarity in the service in those days, as in these, for he was now forty years of age, and he knew well that he would miss the young fellow. However, he was a sensible man, far better educated than the majority of his rank, and he saw that the new move would be advantageous to Owen.

"We've a deal to do, Owen," he said. "There are the clothes to be got ready, for instance. Your uniform will be made in India, but you are to have some sort of undress to wear on the ship. I have instructions to take you to the best tailor in the town."

Two days later our hero said good-bye to all his old comrades and walked out of the barrack square, feeling sad at heart at the parting. There was a big lump in his throat as he passed through the gate and looked back to the sentry, and for a few moments he longed to return, and would have almost sacrificed his prospects in India for the old life. Then he threw off the feeling, and as the sergeant tucked his cane under his arm and commenced to whistle Owen fell in beside him, his head in air, and joined in the tune bravely, though it was as much as his trembling lips could do.

"A good heart is nothing to be ashamed of, lad," said the sergeant heartily, some minutes later, as they walked into the town. "You're all the better for remembering old friends, and parting with them in sorrow. The day will come, never fear, when you'll look back to these times with the old 64th as the jolliest and happiest days in your life, perhaps, and you'll think of the times we've had, of the parades, when we've fallen in together, and of the boxing bouts at the back of the barracks. But here we are. From Mr. Benjamin Halbut, sir."

The tailor showed unusual interest when he heard the name, and at once commenced to take Owen's measurements. Then he wrote down a list of clothing, including boots, hats, and under-things, which he considered necessary, till Owen was ashamed to think that his kind friend would have to

pay for them. However, Mr. Halbut had given directions, and there was an end of the matter. A week later, when Owen mounted the stagecoach and took his place for London, he appeared as an altogether different individual. He was dressed in the undress uniform of an ensign, and very smart and gentlemanly he looked, too. Nor had those who had looked to his upbringing any need to be ashamed of him. Old Mrs. Towers had wept that very morning when he went to take farewell of her.

"I always thought that you were a gentleman, Owen Jones," she said, as she mopped her eyes with her apron, "and here you are, as fine a young fellow as ever I saw. Well, well, to be sure, but the strangest things happen."

Having given vent to this ambiguous statement she hugged Owen very heartily, and then plumped down in her chair, with her apron thrown over her face to hide her tears.

Five hours after leaving Winchester the coach rattled over the cobbles of the London streets, and for the very first time in his life Owen saw the great city, with its thronging population, its huge buildings, its endless rows of houses and streets, and its vast army of coaches and flies. What would his amazement have been could he have seen the London of to-day, extending its arms like a gigantic octopus in every direction, absorbing the country around; its teeming millions, each bent on his or her own business or pleasure, going to and fro through the vast widened streets, or being carried there in swift mechanically propelled vehicles! What if he could have imagined that the horse would one of these days become almost a rarity in the streets of Mighty London!

But he had little time for thoughts. He descended from the coach at the Half Moon, in the Borough, and took a fly to Chelsea, where Mr. Halbut lived. A week later he was aboard one of the East Indiamen, bound for India, with the coast of England fast fading from sight.

"Here are letters which you will present when you arrive at Calcutta," Mr. Halbut had said to him as he was about to depart. "You will go to see the Governor, and you will be gazetted to one of the native regiments. On the way out you will apply yourself to such matters as Mr. Parkins, who sails with you, shall decide, and I need hardly urge you to work hard. Your progress in the future must depend on yourself. I will help no one who will not help himself."

Owen made up his mind to do credit to his friend, and once he had settled down on the ship, and had overcome his first attack of sea-sickness, he began the close study of Hindustani.

"You will find it invaluable," said Mr. Parkins, a gentleman of middle age, a servant of the great John Company, who was returning to India from leave. "When I first went to India I found myself constantly hampered by my ignorance, and, in fact, did not rise as quickly as I might have done. We shall take three months to reach Calcutta, and by then you should have made fine progress."

To Owen's amazement, and to the delight of Mr. Parkins, he made even more rapid advancement than could have been expected. The language came to him not so much as an entirely strange tongue, but as one which he had partially known before, and which he had forgotten.

"Which proves Mr. Halbut's assertion that you have been in India, and were born there," said Mr. Parkins. "No one else could pick up Hindustani so rapidly. We have been at our studies for barely three weeks, and here you are able to converse a little. Now I will give you a piece of advice. There are numbers of natives amongst this crew, and if I were you I would spend some time amongst them every day, chatting with them. Perhaps you will find one who is a little more intelligent than his fellows, and from him you may be able to learn some dialect which is not very different from the language you are studying, but which may be of very great advantage to you."

Owen took the advice seriously, and thereafter went every morning forward to the quarters of the crew. Nor was it long before he came upon one of the men who was of very different character from his comrades. He could speak English tolerably, and soon told his story.

"I am not like these other lascars, who are men of low caste," he said, with every sign of disdain. "I come from Bhurtpore, and am a Mahratta by birth. There I lived with my father till ten years ago, when I fled for my life. It is a little tale, which is of no great interest, sahib, but here it is. It happened that there was a girl, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, to whom I was to be married, and should

have been but for my half-brother. He acted like a cur. He stole her from me, and then killed her with his cruelty. In a fit of rage one day I slew him, and fled from the punishment which would have followed. That is why I am here now. Some day, perhaps, I shall return to my home."

"And in the meanwhile I want you to talk to me every day, Mulha," answered Owen. "One of these days I may find it useful, and if you have the time to spare I shall be glad. I will pay you a rupee a week for the service."

"I gladly accept, sahib," was the answer.

Thereafter Owen spent many hours forward in the early morning, while in the later part of the day he and Mr. Parkins tramped the narrow deck, or lay under the awnings, talking in Hindustani, till our hero was really very proficient.

"You are remembering my rules well," said his instructor, when they had been at sea for six weeks. "After the first week I said that whenever you spoke to me out of the saloon it must be in Hindustani. If you forgot, you were fined a trifle, which went to the box set aside for the help of the sailors' orphans. There is nothing like a penalty to make one sharp of memory, and the result is that you have got on even more rapidly. When you land you will be able to take up your duties at once. That will be an eye-opener to the authorities, who generally allow six months for learning the language."

Altogether Owen enjoyed his trip out immensely. He was a steady young fellow, and he had set out with keen determination to get on. His work made the hours run away, while to the numerous other young fellows going out time hung on their hands, till they became quarrelsome and discontented. And it so happened that amongst these youths, some of whom were to take up commissions like his own, while others were going out as clerks to the East India Company, was a young man, some twenty years of age, who seemed to have taken a great dislike to our hero. He had quickly asserted his position as the leader of all the young men aboard, and when he found that Owen took little notice of him, and was so busy that he had little time to spare for his company, he commenced upon an irritating course intended to humiliate our hero. Every time Owen passed him and his comrades he would make some loud remark, and finally came to openly scoffing. Owen stood it for a long while till his patience was exhausted, then he turned upon the bully.

"You spoke of me, I think," he said suddenly, swinging round and approaching the group, whom he had been about to pass on his way to the lower deck. "Repeat what you said."

"Certainly, with the greatest pleasure. I said that it was bad form for an ensign to spend his time with the deck-hands and the lascars, and that it was only to be expected from one who I happen to know was a corporal some few weeks ago, and who, in his earlier days, came from a poorhouse. That's what I said, and I know I'm right, for Dandy here happens to come from the neighbourhood of Winchester."

"And recognised you at once," burst in that worthy from the background.

"Which is all the more flattering to me," answered Owen calmly, though it was as much as he could do to curb his anger. "I freely admit the truth of what has been said. I have come from a poorhouse, and I was a corporal. But as to the bad form, well, I hardly fancy one would go to Mr. Hargreaves for a decision on that matter."

He looked the bully squarely in the face, while the latter flushed red. Perhaps there was very good reason. It may have been that his own antecedents were not of the best. He became flurried, and began to bluster.

"You wouldn't!" he exclaimed. "Why? If you're impertinent I shall have something more to say."

"You will have more to say in any case," blurted out Owen, now letting himself go. "For days you have openly scoffed at me, Mr. Hargreaves, and now you have to stop promptly. You talk of impertinence after what you have said! I reply that I am proud of what I have been in the past, and that if the truth were known it is possible that you who crow so loud, and are so ready to sit upon one who is new to the position of officer, would not have such a fine tale to tell."

Whether the shot went home it would be impossible to state, but something stung the bully to the quick. He started forward, and stepping to within a foot of Owen stared into his face and challenged him to repeat the statement. Owen complied by instantly knocking him down with a blow between the eyes. Then he calmly divested himself of his coat and neckerchief, while the bully and a few of his companions stood about him in a threatening attitude.

"Steady on there! We'll have the matter settled squarely, gentlemen. From what I have seen – and I have had my eyes and ears open – Mr. Jones here has been very studious, while you others have been hanging about doing nothing. Mr. Hargreaves has considered himself a much finer individual than our young friend Mr. Jones, and he has not been over pleasant. Oh yes, it is useless to deny that. I have seen it. We have all seen, and we have wondered how long our studious friend would put up with such treatment. Now he has brought the thing to a head he shall have fair play. Remember, we are Englishmen, and fair play is everything."

The group swung round to find that a passenger of some forty years of age, a gentleman known to be of some importance, and therefore to be duly respected, had suddenly come amongst them. The threatening looks of a few of Hargreaves' partisans at once vanished.

"Fair play, you understand," said the newcomer. "I will not interfere, but I am sure there are some here who will take Mr. Jones's part."

He was right there, for not all aboard the ship were of Hargreaves' way of thinking. There were some of the young men going out to the army or as clerks who secretly or openly admired Owen because of the efforts he was making; and now that they had heard him so candidly acknowledge his former position, and the fact that he had come from a poorhouse, they admired him the more, and came forward to support him at once.

"I'll hold your coat, Jones," said one of them, a young man of nineteen. "By Jove! it was pluckily done. I have often thought it was a shame to treat you so badly, and I think you have shown pluck. Give me your things and I'll look after you."

"Then I am ready," said Owen promptly. "Thank you, Simpson, I shall be glad if you will act as second. Now, Mr. Hargreaves, I am ready to give you satisfaction for the blow I have dealt you."

"And I shall take it to the full," was the surly answer. "If we had been in India I would have called you out with a pistol, I can tell you; but here we shall have to fight it out with fists."

"Either would please me," answered Owen calmly, knowing well that his practice already with pistols under the tuition of the sergeant would act in his favour. Still, he had a horror of bloodshed, and far preferred to have matters as they were. But in those days an insult or an injury meant inevitably a duel.

"Then we will go to the lower deck," said Simpson, leading the way.

The group made their way down the companions to the lower deck, where they found that a number of sailors had already collected. A couple of midshipmen, of the East India service, were also there, and in one corner Owen caught sight of his Mahratta friend.

"I'll bet yer a pound of bacca on the little 'un," growled one of the sailors, as he leaned against a bulkhead. "He'll fight as he works, and blest if he ain't a glutton for work. See 'im a learnin' the lingo from this darkie here, when he might be takin' it easy on deck."

"Done with yer," was the answer. "It'll be a toss up. This is a-goin' ter be a fight."

Evidently others were of the same opinion, for the news had already spread through the ship, and while those in authority purposely kept out of the way, others, whose official duties could not interfere, found their way to the lower deck to watch the encounter. For Hargreaves had given umbrage all round. His high-handedness, his want of respect for men older than himself, and his treatment of Owen Jones, had won him many enemies. They came, therefore, hoping to see him worsted, but fearing the reverse.

"I'll give you a chance to take back what you have said and apologise for the blow," said Hargreaves, as, divested of his coat and neckerchief, and with sleeves rolled to the elbow, he entered the circle formed between the supporting bulkheads.

Owen hardly deigned to reply. After his long practice with the sergeant he felt the greatest confidence in himself, and was not afraid of the superior weight or height of his antagonist. But there was more reason than that why he should fight. He was never a quarrelsome fellow, and this trouble had been forced upon him. If he were to back out now the tale of his having been a pauper would hang to him all his life, and Hargreaves and his friends would have occasion for many a sneer. No, it was essentially a time for blows. As his opponent spoke Owen walked calmly into the centre of the square and rolled his sleeves to a nicety. Then he put up his fists in a manner which showed that it was not for the first time, and faced his antagonist.

"It is your quarrel," he said quietly, "and I am the one who has suffered. We will fight, if you please."

"Bravo, bravo, young 'un!" shouted one of the sailors in the background.

"Then look to yourself," cried Hargreaves, as he swung his fists. "I'll show you whether a youngster from the poorhouse can do as he likes aboard ship."

He came at our hero warily, for there was something about the latter's attitude which spoke of good training in the art of self-defence. Then, as Owen did nothing more than keep him at a distance, he mistook his caution for fear and temerity. He rushed in with big swinging blows, only to retire with stars flashing before his eyes, and a severely cut lip. After that he lost his temper, and for a time Owen had his hands very full. Twice he was caught by a rush and knocked to the ground. But he was on his feet in a moment, facing Hargreaves. When four rounds had been fought the latter was almost exhausted, while his younger and more active antagonist was comparatively fresh.

"You have him now," said Simpson, as Owen sat at his corner waiting for the call of time. "Go in and win this time. Give him a good beating, and you will never need to fear trouble from any one again."

Our hero followed the instructions to the letter. Hitherto he had allowed his opponent to prance round him, and had only struck when he was sure of being able to reach his antagonist. But now he closed with him, and for a minute beat him round and round the circle, getting in beneath his guard and finally sending him with a crash amidst the audience.

"Time!" shouted Simpson. "Dandy, is your man beaten? Does he give in?"

There was a sulky nod from the other side, and then a roar of cheering which could be heard on the upper deck. Owen rose from his seat, wiped his face with a towel, and went across to his enemy.

"We have had a fair fight and I have won," he said in friendly tones. "You did not understand me before, and perhaps I did not like you. Let this settle our differences, and be friends."

There was another shout at that, while Hargreaves lifted his head and smiled. At heart he was a very good fellow, and he was man enough to own that he was beaten.

"I behaved badly, Jones," he said, "and you have beaten me handsomely for my treatment of you. I apologise for what I have done, and I will gladly be friends."

They shook hands, and then went off to their cabins to clean themselves and remove all traces of the combat. And that evening Owen once more took up his Hindustani, as if nothing out of the way had occurred. But he had made his place in the ship and amongst his comrades, and the tale of his prowess and of his pluck was bound to reach India and there act in his favour. More than that, an inkling of his history, of the mystery hanging about his birth, of his friend, the powerful director of the Company, leaked out, and the discussion which followed raised him vastly in the estimation of all on board. They found it a fine thing to follow his example, and that week quite a number set themselves to make the most of their opportunities and to learn the language. However, they had very little time before them, for within a few days the even tenor of the voyage was rudely upset, and the passengers and crew found themselves face to face with a difficulty and danger which none had foreseen.

CHAPTER IV

A Hunting Expedition

"Great guns!" shouted Simpson in Owen's ear, as they clung to the rail on the poop of the huge East Indiaman, and faced the gale. "And how suddenly it came on!"

"We are lucky to have an experienced captain," shouted back our hero, as he struggled to gather a breath, for the wind tore past him at hurricane speed. "We were lying practically becalmed, with a cloudless sky overhead, and, so far as I could see, no signs of a storm."

"Yes, and we were having a quiet sleep, all of us, for the heat was terrific."

"When we were suddenly disturbed. As a matter of fact, I was just awake, and as I lay in my chair I happened to see the captain coming up the companion from his cabin, which is just beneath us. He looked about him, as he always does, and then glanced at the barometer. Then his face changed, and I thought he had gone mad. He raced up here, three rungs at a time, and seized his trumpet. Then the officers appeared and the crew, while his orders sounded through the ship. My word! I never saw men work harder! They threw themselves into the rigging and fairly tore the sails off her. I saw them cut through many of the ropes so as to save time. Then down they came, and with them the gale. Didn't it howl?"

"It was terrific," agreed Simpson. "Who would have thought that with only that small piece of rag showing this big ship would have heeled right over as she did? But you are right. We are fortunate in our captain. I own I was angry at first when they disturbed us, and threw our chairs overboard without rhyme or reason. I saw why a minute later, for had we been in them we should have gone overboard, while had the chairs been left they would have slid and fallen here and there and done some mischief. Where are we heading?"

Neither could answer the question, for in the excitement of the moment, when the gale had struck the ship, they had only noticed that she had heeled over on to her beam ends, and that then had followed an interval of a few seconds, which to more than one aboard felt like an eternity. Then she had righted with a jerk which threw many from their feet, and, sheering off from her course, had gone racing away towards the east, at a pace which was furious. That was an hour ago, and ever since the passengers had clung to their positions, drenched by the spray which blew aboard, and so filled with amazement at the huge seas which so suddenly surrounded them that they had little thought for anything else. Simpson and Owen had been together, for ever since the event of the fight they had become close acquaintances, and they had clung to the same length of rail.

Two hours later the ship was a little steadier, and the passengers found their way with great difficulty to the saloon.

"You must make allowances for the gale, gentlemen, please," said the purser, as they took their seats and clung to the tables. "The galley fires have been drawn, for with this sea, and the ship tossing and rolling as she is, it would not be safe to keep them in. So there is water or wine to drink, and cold meat and bread only to eat. I should advise you all afterwards to turn in, as it is so wet on deck and generally uncomfortable."

The ship had indeed encountered a typhoon, one of those sudden upsets in the atmosphere common to eastern seas, and much to be dreaded. And as she was unable to show more than a stay-sail at the most, and could not face the gale, she had to turn her stern to it and run from her course. Indeed, for three days she continued to do so, till the faces of the captain and his officers assumed serious expressions.

"I have never known a gale to last as this one has done," the captain confided to one of the passengers. "When the hurricane struck us, you yourself will remember that it was a furious blow. I thought that, like typhoons in general, it had appeared in full strength, to test our seamanship perhaps,

and would then rapidly blow itself out. But it hasn't. It has continued to blow, and blow harder too, so that we haven't been able even to think of heading up to the wind. We're three hundred miles at least out of our course, and completely out of our reckoning. I shall be glad when the wind drops."

Some hours later there were signs that at last the gale had expended its fury, and when the passengers turned in that evening it was with the feeling that increased comfort was before them. Indeed, the ship rocked far less, and the motion was smoother altogether. And on the following morning they awoke to find the ship almost on an even keel, while overhead was a hot sun, reminding them that they were in the tropics. When they sauntered up on deck they found the officers at their posts, anxiously gazing at a dim line of blue which lay almost directly before them.

"Land, gentlemen," said the captain, coming towards the passengers, "and if I am not mistaken it is the coast of Sumatra. We have worked out the position of the ship, and checked one another's findings, so that I feel sure that we are right. We are at least five hundred miles out of our course."

The information caused the utmost excitement amongst the passengers at once, for there were some aboard who had made many trips to and from India, and not one had ever met with other than a smooth and uneventful voyage before. And on this occasion weeks had passed smoothly since they had left England. They had sailed down the coast of Africa, had rounded the Cape, and had set their course for Calcutta. When the storm broke they were well into the Indian Ocean, and heading for the Bay of Bengal. And here was the information that they were close to Sumatra, in the neighbourhood of the Malay Peninsula.

"We are looking for some quiet bay in which to anchor," said the captain after a time, when he was sure that the land was indeed Sumatra. "We have had our spars sadly knocked about, and our sails want refitting. Then the carpenter tells me that she has been strained, probably when the typhoon struck her, and is leaking somewhere well below the water-line. All things considered, I think it well to run into some bay for a time and lie up. We will careen the ship for a day or so, so as to let the carpenter and his mates get at the leak. Meanwhile some of you may care to have a run ashore, though it will be well to make sure that there are no unfriendly natives about."

All were delighted at the news, for the ship had now been at sea for a long while, and the passengers and crew were all feeling the need of fresh water and fruit and vegetables, and also for an expedition on shore. It was therefore with the greatest interest that they watched the pale blue line of coast gradually develop into wooded heights, with mountain peaks in rear, while the line of beach showed itself as a streak of golden sand, bathed in the seething white foam cast upon it by the surf which ran continuously. They steered into a narrow bay, the leadsman all the while sounding so that they should not run upon the shallows, and finally brought to and dropped their anchor within a mile of the shore, and within hearing of the surf. At once a hundred glasses were directed at the coast, and an hour later boats were dropped and the passengers prepared to land.

"I can only spare a crew of four to each boat, gentlemen," said the captain, "and perhaps some of you will not object to taking an oar yourselves. I will fire a gun an hour before dusk, when all must return. If natives appear I must ask you to return at once till they have shown that they are friendly."

"And so as to be prepared I shall take a brace of pistols," said Jack Simpson in Owen's ear. "Can you shoot, Owen?"

"A little. The sergeant of whom I have told you was a good hand at most things. He was a splendid man with the gloves, as you know, for I have told you how he fought for me when the farmer was going to give me a thrashing. He was also an adept with the pike, sword and cutlass, and he kept me at practice with the pistols till I could hit an apple perched on a rail at twenty paces."

"By Jove! An apple at twenty paces! That is a mark! How often had you to hit it?"

"Every time," answered Owen with a quiet smile. "And it came wonderfully easy before I had left the regiment. I used to place the muzzle across my left forearm and aim carefully at first. Afterwards I used to make a rapid shot, just as if I were duelling. I would be placed with my back

to the fence; then the sergeant would say, 'One, two, three, fire!' and round I would swing, lifting the pistol as I came, and fire the instant I sighted the mark. I could do it now after half an hour's practice."

"No wonder, then, that you so easily agreed to fight our friend with fists or pistols," laughed Jack. "Upon my word, Owen, you are a fellow to be avoided. You admit you could hit an apple at twenty paces, every time. And we know that you can fight. By Jove, you showed us real science! And there is the Hindustani too, and the other lingo you have been swatting at. I wish to goodness I had not been so idle. But there! fetch your pistols and let us get ashore."

They ran to their cabin, for since the fight the two had arranged an exchange, Jack leaving the cabin in which he had been with two other passengers and joining Owen. Then they appeared on deck again, and dropped into one of the boats which was just putting off. Already two had left the ship, while one had actually landed her passengers and was returning.

"It looks a little risky, one would have thought," said Owen, as they dropped into the boat. "For all we know there may be unfriendly natives ashore. But I confess I know nothing of the country."

"And need feel no alarm," said one of the passengers who sat beside him. "The people are fierce and warlike, but this is the northern end of the coast, and there are none here. Think of the fresh fruit we shall gather."

A quarter of an hour later they were ashore, and within a few minutes the whole party had separated, breaking up into couples.

"It is quite safe," said one of the passengers who had landed in the first boat. "There is not a village nor a hut to be seen anywhere, though I have been to the top of the hill yonder. But I advise that none go too far from this spot."

Meanwhile the big ship was run in a little closer and slowly careened. And as she lay, with her spars slanting at a sharp angle, the carpenter and his mates looked to the leak, while the crew set to work to refit the canvas. And in this manner, the passengers ashore for the most part, and the crew hard at work, two days passed serenely; each evening seeing the passengers return with an abundant store of fruit, while those who had guns found wild pig and a few deer to reward their efforts.

"We shall leave in two days," said the captain that night, as they sat down to the evening meal, congratulating themselves on the fact that the ship was now again on an even keel, for it had been difficult to manage to get about or even to sleep while she was careened. "In three weeks we should be at Calcutta."

"Barring storms and other little pleasantries," laughed one of the passengers. "Well, I shall be glad. I have had my run ashore and want to be moving on."

On the following day, when Jack Simpson and Owen dropped into one of the boats, only a dozen other passengers made their appearance, for it was very hot ashore, and there was little to do but ramble along the coast. Our young friends, however, had managed to borrow a gun apiece, and were intent on obtaining a little sport. Indeed, an hour later found them a couple of miles inland, threading their way through a forest of small proportions which had attracted them as being a likely place for game. Mulha accompanied them, for Owen had asked permission of the captain, much to the native's delight.

"There will be pig here, sahibs," he said, as they entered the forest. "And we shall find it cooler. If my masters will take my advice they will take their station at the end of the first open glade, and let me beat the forest on either side. Then if there is any beast within it may run to the clearing."

A little later they struck upon a long narrow clearing, where the ground was somewhat rocky, and where a tiny stream trickled through the stones.

"Plenty of beasts come here," Mulha pronounced, as he stepped along the glade. "You can see their marks between the stones. If the sahibs take post here they should have sport. I will go to the right first, and afterwards to the left. Thus you will know my position, and will not fire in my direction when the beasts bolt."

It took but a few moments to arrange their positions; then Mulha disappeared. Owen threw himself down behind a huge boulder, over which a cool shade was thrown by a tree near at hand. Jack posted himself behind another boulder, on a level with the one where his friend was stationed. Both looked up the full length of the grove, with their guns turned to that side to which the game, should there prove to be any, would be driven, and away from the forest where Mulha was beating.

Crash! They heard his stick as he beat the underwood in the distance, and waited expectantly, their hearts pulsating a trifle faster, for neither had had an opportunity of shooting before. There was another crash in the distance, a streak of brown bounded into the grove from the trees, alighted on all four feet, and leaped high again with such swiftness and with such momentum that it was across the glade before either could have thought it possible. Owen's gun went to his shoulder with the rapidity of lightning. His training with the pistol helped him to sight the disappearing mark, and long before Jack had gathered his wits, or had awakened to the fact that an antelope of large proportions was on the point of disappearing, the weapon cracked, and the animal fell huddled up at the very edge of the clearing. Owen turned to his friend with a gleam of excitement and triumph in his eye, while he hastily rammed down another charge, ran a wad upon it, and dropped in his bullet.

"One," he said quietly. "Look out for others."

"My word!" gasped Jack, "that was a lightning shot."

"Look out!" shouted Owen.

This time he held his fire as a wild pig scampered into the clearing, and coming to a sudden halt lifted its head and stared in their direction while it listened to the sound of the beater behind. It was Jack's turn, and he levelled his weapon with unsteady hands, for excitement told upon him.

"Steady," said Owen in low tones. "He's standing for you. Take him full, half-way along the body."

A shout of triumph filled the air and set the forest ringing a second after the gun had sent out its bullet, for Jack had hit his mark. At his friend's words he had waited, steadying himself, and then, when he felt that he was full on his mark, he had taken a deep breath, wedged himself closer to the rock, and had firmly pulled the trigger. And now he was dancing with delight, for the pig, as the sound of the shot crashed out, had started forward at a gallop, till Owen covered it, fearing that it had escaped the bullet. Then it suddenly toppled over, and rolling amidst the stones came to rest with its feet in the air.

"Shut up! There may be more," commanded Owen. "There!"

Another of the animals darted into the clearing, heard the sounds beyond, and raced toward the forest. But he ran only a few feet, for Owen proved to be as dead a shot with the gun as with the pistol. A minute later Mulha appeared, within a few feet of them, and advanced with smiles of pleasure.

"The sahib is a fine shot," he said. "I am no shikaree, but the first beast was hardly in the glade before it had darted out. And see where the bullet struck. It is hit through the chest, and on the very edge of the forest. In another instant it would have been gone. Now let the sahibs take their places again, and I will beat on the far side."

He plunged into the forest again and was lost to sight. But after a few minutes had passed they heard his blows again, as he beat the underwood, and gun in hand waited for another shot. On this occasion, however, they were not so fortunate. A few birds broke from the wood and went screaming aloft, while a little later a troop of monkeys, disturbed by the intruder, went chattering across the glade, running on all fours, and some swinging themselves from branch to branch.

"We will move on to another part, then, sahibs," said Mulha, as he appeared again. "There is plenty of game here, both big and small, and you may hope to make an even finer bag. Tread carefully now, and make no noise, for these beasts hear at a great distance."

Putting their weapons at half-cock, so that there might be no accidents, they followed their native shikaree through the forest, ascending as they went, for in this corner of Sumatra the land rose swiftly and steeply from the coast. And presently they emerged into another clearing, some two miles

in extent, which was almost bare of trees and undergrowth. Here and there there was a tree of huge proportions, outgrowing its fellows of the forest, for the simple reason that here it had an abundance of light which was denied to them, and in consequence had shot up with greater strength and had made far bigger growth. Then, too, there were some large patches of grass, towering some eight feet in the air, and waving gently to and fro in the breeze. Owen and his friend had never seen the like of it before, and looked with amazement at the huge green stems and the broad blades which overtopped their heads. And in amongst the sparse trees and patches of grass were rocks and scattered green patches of sweet grass, where the marks plainly told that many animals were in the habit of grazing. Now, however, the place was deserted, though they pried into every corner.

"There may be some hidden beast yet, sahibs," said Mulha, as they toiled across the space, for the heat was very great, and they were unused to much walking. "We will go quietly still, and keep a careful watch."

"Steady! I thought I saw something over there," exclaimed Owen suddenly.

All looked in the direction to which he pointed, but there was not a movement, not a sign that there existed anything but a knotted tree, which had the appearance of having been blasted by lightning, and a wide patch of waving grass.

"Still, I am sure that I saw something which looked like the tail and hind quarters of some beast. We will go carefully, and it will be as well to have our guns ready."

All three advanced on tiptoe, the native a few feet in front, and the two young sahibs side by side. They reached the tree and the edge of the grass, but without seeing anything. Then Mulha slipped upon hands and knees, and crept round the edge. Scarcely a second passed ere the tall grass which hid him from Owen's eyes parted suddenly, some few feet to the right, while a huge beast burst its way through, its head low down close to the ground, and its evil eyes fixed upon the intruders. There was not a sound but that made by the grass as it was swept aside, that and the deep gasping breaths of the animal. But though there was no warning noise, Owen and Jack guessed the unfriendly intentions of the animal in an instant, for its rolling eyes were fixed upon them while it charged in their direction.

"Jump aside, sahibs!" they heard Mulha shout. "Jump for your lives! It is a rhino!"

"Leap!" repeated Owen at the top of his voice, at the same instant hurling himself as far to one side as he was able. Then he turned for one instant to see whether Jack had done the same. But his comrade was less active, perhaps, than he, and more than that, he lacked the training which Owen had had. In a hundred little ways he had shown already that he was slower to obey an order or to follow out an idea than our hero, and now, at the most critical moment in his life, he hesitated for a second. The onrushing beast fascinated him. He paused, gave vent to a cry of dismay, and then attempted to leap aside. Owen shouted and lifted his gun, for what he saw brought his heart into his mouth. Jack's hesitation had proved his undoing. His foot slipped as he leaped, and in an instant he was flat on his face on the ground, while a dull thud told that his head had struck heavily against a small boulder lying on the grass. And within a few seconds the rhinoceros had reached him. Owen saw the beast's head drop a little lower, while a squeal of rage escaped from it. Then it galloped over the prostrate figure like a whirlwind, missing its mark by a happy chance, and failing to get its horn beneath the young fellow who lay so helpless. Carried on by the impetus of its charge it tore along some half-dozen yards, and finally was brought up with a jerk, its horns having become entangled in the root of a small tree growing at that spot. It was an opportunity, and Owen made the most of it.

"Get me the other gun, Mulha," he shouted. "Bring it as quick as you can, as I may miss him with this."

Dropping on to one knee he put his gun at full cock and levelled it at the beast, which was struggling frantically to disengage itself. Aiming just behind the shoulder, he waited for a few moments till it stood still to gather its energies, then he pressed the trigger. A fierce squeal rewarded him, and as soon as the smoke had cleared away he saw that the beast was still far from dead, and

that its rage had been increased. Worse than that, the horn was now almost freed from the root, and at any instant the charge might be repeated.

"Into the tree!" he shouted. "Quick, Mulha, up you get. I will hand up my friend. Don't argue. Up you get."

There was no time for the native to remonstrate with his young English friend, though he would have liked to have done so. Instead, therefore, he slung the gun across his shoulders in a flash and swung himself into the lower branches of the tree, which had the appearance of having been struck by lightning. Owen meanwhile ran to Jack's side, and bending over him lifted him in his arms. Then he half carried, half dragged him to the tree, and as Mulha leaned over, helped the native to haul him up.

"Take him higher," he called out, "and then get the gun ready. I must have mine."

He had left it where Jack had fallen, and turning at once he ran back to the spot. There was little time to be lost, that he could see for himself, for the horn was all but disengaged now. Still, without a weapon, where would he be? Without hesitation, therefore, he picked up the gun and ran back to the tree. Claspings the lowest bough, he was in the act of swinging himself up when Mulha gave a warning shout.

"He is free, sahib!" he called out "You will not have time. Drop to the ground, and put the tree between you."

It was excellent advice, and Owen made the most of it. He leaped to the ground, and ran to the far side of the tree. And he was just in time. Maddened with rage and pain the rhinoceros charged full at his disappearing figure, and heedless of the tree dashed headlong into it. But even such a terrific blow failed to stun the beast. It backed a few paces, snorting and squealing, while its wicked-looking eyes searched for its enemy. Then Owen did a plucky thing.

"Climb now, sahib. Drop the gun and climb. There is time. Come, I beg you!" called out Mulha.

For answer Owen raised his weapon swiftly and pushed it round the side of the tree. Then his arm and shoulder followed, till the gun was pointed at the rhinoceros. Its head went down, with a hideous squeal of rage, as it caught sight of him, and considering his youth and inexperience it was wonderful that he did not follow the native's advice promptly. But our hero had shown before that he was made of the right stuff, and was not given to panic. He moved the weapon ever so little, and was just about to pull the trigger when another shout stopped him.

"It is empty, sahib! You have fired already."

In the excitement of the moment he had forgotten that, and for the brief space of a second Owen was disconcerted.

"Drop yours down, then," he said hoarsely. "That's the way. I'll catch it as it comes."

It took very few moments to make the exchange, and during that time the beast stood its ground, for it had again lost sight of its enemy. But very soon a squeal told that it had spied him again. The head went down, and it moved forward to charge. Owen aimed for a spot at the root of the neck and pressed his trigger firmly. Then he swung the gun over his shoulders, did the same with the weapon lying at his feet, and ere the smoke had cleared away was clambering into the tree.

"Look at his heels, sahib," cried Mulha triumphantly, a minute later, as he pointed below. "He is in his death-struggle. It was a bold shot. You stood fast to your post like a tried hunter. It is true what they say on the ship, that Sahib Owen Jones will make a fine officer. Truly it was boldly done, and the young sahib has abundant courage."

"And he will want it, too," answered Owen, with a reckless laugh, "for look there, Mulha!"

He pointed to the patch of grass through which the rhinoceros had burst its way, and there, filing through the gap which he had made, came three more of the beasts, trampling and pawing the grass, shaking their heads and sniffing angrily.

"A siege, I think," said Owen quietly, "and very well for us that we have found such a castle."

CHAPTER V

The East Indiaman Attacked

"A strange position to find ourselves in, sahib! We are cut off from our friends."

"As surely as if they were a hundred miles away, Mulha," answered Owen with a laugh, as he looked down at the animals sniffing the air beneath them. "It really is too funny. I can laugh now, you know, for we have come out of it all right. But it was a ticklish business, and my friend had a very narrow shave."

"And you too, sahib. I trembled when I saw you run to pick him up; and when you dared to stand below, and the beast charged, I shut my eyes, for I thought that he would run round the tree and catch you. They are cunning beasts, I have heard. I would rather fight a tiger. The squeal of rage which these animals give upsets one's nerves."

It was, indeed, a curious position in which to find themselves, and Owen, as he stared down at the beasts, and then at his friend, laughed again, a careless, jolly laugh. For, now that the danger was lessened, a huge feeling of relief had come over him. He was sincerely attached to Jack Simpson and to Mulha, and the sight of the former exposed to the charge of the rhinoceros had filled him with terrible misgivings. And now they were safe, while he felt, as he reviewed the events of the past few minutes, that he had behaved as the sergeant would have had him do.

"Always try to keep your head, my lad," he had said over and over again, and had done all in his power to train his young charge to decide swiftly in emergencies. As Owen thought of this he remembered the many occasions when the faithful fellow had created sudden difficulties, all with this object in view.

"I wouldn't do it again, I think," said Owen aloud, as Mulha remarked on his action. "It was all so sudden, you see. There was Jack Sahib lying helpless, and the beast had got caught in the root of that tree. It was a piece of sheer, unexpected good fortune, and I made the most of it. I felt awfully inclined to bolt up here though, I admit. But I am thankful I didn't. Ah, he's coming round. Let us look at his head."

"There is a large swelling and a small wound," said Mulha, who all this while had had one arm about the unconscious figure of Jack Simpson. "He will be well within a week, and this bruise will soon disappear. If the sahib will help me I will bind up the head."

Owen happened to have a spirit-flask with him, and he dragged this out of his pocket. Then, having forced a few drops between the pallid lips of his friend, he helped the native to bandage up the wound in the head. And very soon afterwards Jack opened his eyes, shivered violently, and closed them once again. When he looked about him once more it was with the utmost amazement, while his lips framed the questions which as yet he was too weak to ask.

"It's all right, old fellow," said Owen quietly. "You're up a tree – literally up a tree, I can tell you; but there is absolutely no more to fear. The beast that charged at you is dead, and has made a fine addition to our bag."

That brought his friend into a sitting position, but as he looked down at the ground some yards beneath, and at the animals which still remained at the foot of the tree, the height perhaps, the sight of these fierce beasts and the memory of their attack, and more than all, the blow which he had received, turned him dizzy and sick, and for a time he suffered from horrible nausea. However, within a quarter of an hour he was better and taking an intelligent interest in his surroundings.

"My word, my head does ache!" he groaned. "It feels like a pumpkin and – hullo! what's this?"

"My handkerchief. You bumped your head against that stone over there and the blow knocked you silly. And a good thing too, Jack, or else I fancy you would not be here. Had you tried to rise, and

lifted yourself from the ground at all, that ugly beast would have had you. As it was you went down so suddenly and completely that he missed you, and went with a rush clear over your body."

It was news to Jack, and now that the nausea had left him, and he could look down without feeling giddy, he stared at the unwieldy carcass of the rhinoceros thoughtfully, and then at the others, now engaged in sniffing about their fallen comrade.

"A fine mess he would have made of me," he said at length. "I suppose a brute like that would kill you if he trampled over you. And look at his wicked horns! He has two, and either would be sufficient to gore one to death. How did it happen, Owen? I mean, what kept the beast from returning in time? You see, I was down there. I'm up here now, and the brute is dead. How did you manage it all?"

"I will answer, if the sahib will permit," said Mulha. "This is what occurred, for I watched all that happened. You owe your life to the sahib here."

Very quietly and accurately he described all that had occurred, showing how Owen had fired at the beast, and had then given orders to Mulha to carry his friend to safety. And afterwards how he had stood and killed the rhinoceros. Jack listened to the tale thoughtfully, and looked down at the beasts below. He was a youth possessed of fine spirit, and a most unselfish fellow, and it was clear that his gratitude was too great for words. He turned his head away and felt for Owen's hand. Then he gave it a squeeze.

"Some day, old chap," he said very solemnly, "I shall hope to do something for you, for I do most undoubtedly owe you my life. But it seems quite natural that I should do so. I don't know when it was that I first began to watch you – I expect from the first hour we came aboard – but I remember thinking that you looked like a fellow well able to take care of himself, and of others. There was such a quiet way about you. You were so jolly with the others, and yet something seemed to show that you had gone through a little more, and had had experiences which few of the subalterns or clerks could boast of. Then came your swatting at Hindustani, the remarks made about it, and the fight. Yes, it all seems quite natural. You have a knack of finding a way out of difficulties, and you've brought us through this one well."

"That's all right, then," said Owen with a smile, blushing furiously red at the compliments paid him. "Now to decide how to get clear of this place. It is early in the day yet, but we shall have to get down to the shore before very long."

"And while these gentlemen are down below, why, it is a little difficult," answered Jack with a laugh, for Owen's light-heartedness was infectious. "They won't move on, I suppose, for the mere asking?"

"Hardly. But we might speak to them in a manner which would be understood. Supposing we try a shot or two."

Owen unslung his gun and calmly loaded the weapon, perching himself securely in the tree meanwhile, for to have tumbled out would have been to have courted a speedy death. For the two-horned rhinoceros of Sumatra is not a beast to trifle with, and when his anger is aroused, as on this occasion, he is, indeed, a terrible foe to have anything to do with. More than that, a fact which surprised all three, and caused them to alter their opinions, was the unexpected agility of these ponderous animals. They had only to recollect the rapidity of the charge which the dead beast had made to know that a rhinoceros, however unwieldy he might appear, was in fact capable of extremely rapid action. And in addition, as many a hunter has learned ere now, the rhinoceros is an animal possessed of an irascible temper, which makes him an extremely difficult and dangerous enemy to attack. However, the tree in which they had found refuge, though it had been blasted by lightning, was still sufficiently strong to protect them from the beasts below, and Owen made the most of the position.

"Take him at the point of the shoulder, sahib," said Mulha, as Owen put the weapon to his shoulder and aimed at one of them. "They are so close that you should have every chance of killing them."

"And they stand conveniently quiet. I will do my best with them."

Owen had secured his position in the tree by straddling a bough and passing an arm round the trunk. It was not of great girth, so that he was still able to grasp his weapon with that hand, and by bending out a little was able to take aim. He selected the nearest beast and waited till it dropped its head to sniff at its dead comrade. Then he pressed the trigger gently. The shot was followed by a most unearthly squeal, and when the smoke blew aside there was the beast down on his side, kicking and squealing violently. The others lifted their heads, for the sudden shot had startled them. Then as Owen moved, preparatory to loading his weapon again, they took fright and galloped away into the patch of grass from which they had come.

"Watch them, sahib," shouted Mulha, starting to clamber still higher. "Watch the top of the grass, and you will be able to follow the course they are taking. It would never do to descend and meet them again in the open."

"Rather not," chimed in Jack, with unusual feeling. "We – that is to say, I, personally, have had enough of these meetings with such beasts. But it was a fine shot, Owen. A thundering good shot!"

Following the native to the very top of the tree our hero watched the course taken by the beasts. The waving grass told where they were clearly, and very soon they had galloped through it. Then they took to the open for a while, finally disappearing in some low-lying grass and undergrowth, from which, in all probability, they had first emerged that morning. It was a huge relief to see them go, and the three promptly slid to the ground, Owen with the agility of a cat, and Jack somewhat stiffly, and with unusual care, for he still felt the effects of his fall and the stunning blow on his head. However, he declared that he was perfectly fit for the march down to the shore.

"But what about our bag," he said with a laugh, as he stood over the two huge carcasses, inspecting the horns and the scaly hide which covered the animals. "Supposing we get aboard and tell our tale, who is going to believe us? A precious joke there would be at our expense. They'd say that I had dreamed it all after getting a crack over the head. No, we must do something to convince them."

"We cannot possibly manage to take the beasts with us," laughed Owen; "and I suppose if we leave them here they will have disappeared by to-morrow morning. Besides, the ship sails to-night, I believe. But I'd like very much to take something just to remind me of my first experience of big-game shooting."

"And of the narrow escape which you and I had. Let's ask Mulha."

They gathered round the two huge animals and discussed the question. For though none had ever set foot in Sumatra before, and all were very ignorant of the animals to be found there, yet they rightly guessed that there would be many carnivorous beasts sheltering in the forests whose instinct or sense of smell would bring them to the food so easily to be obtained, and which ere the morning came would tear the carcasses to pieces. Owen scratched his head, Jack placed his foot on one of the beasts and then clambered on to the massive ribs, while Mulha looked at the rhinos thoughtfully.

"If we were elsewhere, and had others to help us, sahibs, we would skin the beasts and remove the skulls. As it is, we can take the ears and tails, and the feet too if my masters wish it."

"And what about the head and horns?" asked Owen quickly. "That is what I should like. Have you a knife, Mulha?"

The native, who was wearing a rough pair of trousers, shirt and coat, felt for the sheath in his belt, and produced a heavy knife such as is carried by sailors.

"We could sever the head," he said, "and then perhaps the sahib and I could carry it. But it will be very heavy."

"Let us try it. The trophy would be a fine one, and once we get it on board, no doubt we could have it properly preserved. Give me the knife, Mulha."

However, the native would not agree to this, and at once set to work to sever the head of one of the beasts. It was not such an easy task as one might have expected, for the skin was wonderfully tough. However, he finally decapitated the animal. Then he gathered a bundle of the grass, and having found some creeper amongst the forest trees near at hand, he tied the trophy up, suspending it from a straight length of bough which he cut down from the tree in which they had taken refuge. A stroke of the blade of his knife then divested both carcasses of the tails, which he pushed into his pockets.

"Then we are ready," said Owen, who was delighted with their work. "It is high time that we were on our way back. Lead us to the glade, Mulha, and we will see what we can do with the other beasts. We might even be able to drag one of the pigs away, or take the head of the deer. Now, up with your end of the stick."

He grasped the other end, and lifting the stick each placed one end on his shoulder. Jack carried one of the guns, declaring that he was now perfectly well again, while Owen had already slung the second over his shoulder. Then they set out through the forest, Jack bringing up the rear, till they reached the glade in which their first shots had been made. And here a few minutes sufficed to sling a portion of the deer to their stick.

"I hate to have to leave the pigs," said Owen, as they prepared to move off again. "But it cannot be helped. Still, it seems so cruel to kill animals when one does not even intend to carry them away. We will see what the captain says. Perhaps he will allow us to return with some of the men, for fresh meat is always wanted."

The additional burden told heavily upon Owen and Mulha, for the head of a full-grown rhinoceros is no light weight. But the quarters of the deer happened to be of small proportions, so that they were able to stagger along, streaming with perspiration as they went, for the heat was great, even beneath the shadow cast by the trees of the forest. Indeed, so close was the atmosphere that they were forced to rest after a while, and came to a halt beside a stream which gushed out from the undergrowth, and trickled away between the grass and stones at their feet.

"I am thirsty, sahibs," said Mulha. "Shall we rest here for a time?"

He lowered his end of the pole as Owen did the same, and then went down on hands and knees beside a pool of the clear running water. Then, having satisfied his thirst, he strode off into the forest, returning with a huge bunch of bananas, which he offered to his companions.

"I had forgotten food," he said. "There has been so much to do and so much excitement that I did not desire any. But the work we have been doing has made me hungry. Will the sahibs eat?"

Owen and his friend Jack Simpson were growing lads, and had had nothing since breakfast. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that they eagerly agreed to such a proposal, and having slaked their thirst took the fruit and ate it with the utmost pleasure.

Then Owen and Mulha took up their burden again, and the party moved off through the trees, their road leading them all the time downhill towards the low-lying coast. Occasionally as they went through the forest a troop of monkeys would cross their path, just as one had done when they were in the glade, and would disappear amidst the trees, chattering and screaming, and hurling defiance in their own tongue at the heads of the intruders. Another wild pig scampered across the path, and once, to the astonishment and dismay of the party, they suddenly sighted the flank of an enormous animal, apparently almost asleep beneath the shade cast by the trees.

"Rhino again!" exclaimed Owen, as he lowered the stick. "Get your gun ready, Jack, and what about a tree?"

He rapidly selected a likely one, and at his order the whole party ran towards it. They were in the act of climbing into the lower branches when the beast, hearing their movements, strode from beneath the shade, and disclosed the gigantic proportions of an elephant. He stared at them with suspicious eyes, while he swayed slowly from side to side. Then, as Owen lifted his weapon, the huge beast turned and went off at a trot, smashing the boughs and smaller trees which lay in his path, and crashing through the underwood and tenacious creepers as if they were merely dried sticks which

would break at a touch. It was with a feeling of relief that the three hunters listened as he plunged on his way.

"One would prefer his room to his company," laughed Owen, as he turned a somewhat scared face to his comrades. "A rhino was bad enough, but an elephant might be worse. You see, if he had chosen to turn nasty and we had clambered into the tree he might have rammed it down with his head. I have heard of such things happening. Then, where should we have been?"

"It would have been better to have given in to the rhinos," smiled Jack. "We've had an escape and are lucky. Let's push on again. I shall be glad when we are aboard."

There was no doubt that all had had enough of adventures and would welcome the sight of the ship. And for this reason Owen and Mulha picked up their burden with eagerness, and strode on through the forest, Jack following, gun in hand, while he searched on every side for signs of the beast or of others which might happen to be in the vicinity. Once he gave vent to a shout, which brought them all to a halt. But it was a false alarm, and no doubt the condition of his nerves was responsible for it.

"The narrow escape I have had and that crack over the head have put me out," he said, by way of excuse. "I'll be honest. I have got the jumps this afternoon, and imagine I see a rhino or an elephant in every shadow. Push on. Take no notice of me. I am a regular girl to be so scared."

"Hark! That was a gun surely!" suddenly remarked Mulha, lifting his head in a listening attitude. "I even fancied I heard one an hour ago, as we were clambering out of the tree. Why should they fire from the ship?"

"Perhaps they have completed their preparations for sailing and want to get away," Owen ventured. "Or a favourable breeze has sprung up, and the captain wants to make the most of it. Listen! You can hear the wind as it strikes the tops of the trees."

"And there goes another gun!"

Jack Simpson looked at his comrades, who stared back at him doubtfully. All had heard the gun, and had wondered what it could mean. Nor were their difficulties lessened, for as they gathered up their trophy again and pressed downhill towards the shore, a salvo of artillery burst from the ship, while firing seemed to come occasionally from another point away to their left. Worse than that; as they decreased the distance between themselves and the shore, and came to a part where the forest was not quite so thick, they imagined that they caught the far-off sounds of shouting, while Owen declared that he could hear musketry firing, as though men were engaged in warfare.

"I feel sure of it," he said doggedly, as his companions argued that this could not be the case. "I have heard it so often before at home, and it sounded just like that. I tell you we are not the only ones who have met with trouble. Those on the ship have been attacked."

"Then supposing they are forced to sail away?"

Jack asked the question and looked at his companions in dismay, while the faces of Owen and Mulha showed that the same fear had occurred to them and that they were uneasy.

"We should be in a hole, that is all," said Owen quietly, after a long silence, during which the firing continued. "But I am sure the captain would never desert us. He would lie off the land, hoping to pick us up later. But what is the use of wondering, when by pushing on we can see what is actually happening. My advice is that we get to the shore as soon as possible, and that we take good care as we get to the edge of the forest that we are not seen, and that we do not expose ourselves. It might, and probably would, make all the difference to our safety and to our escape, supposing the ship has been attacked. Pick up the stick, Mulha, and be careful not to let that gun go off, Jack, or we too might be attacked."

At his words the native seized his end of the stick and they lifted their trophies. Then, with Owen in advance and Jack in rear, they walked on towards the shore, till the forest became far less dense, and they caught a glimpse of the ocean.

"Halt!" cried Owen, who took command for the simple reason that Jack did not venture to do so. "Now wait here while I push on a little and see what is happening. There is a bit of high ground just in front, and from there I shall be able to see the ship. There go more guns, and – hark!"

"An enemy without doubt," exclaimed Mulha with assurance. "Sahib, I know what is happening. I have not sailed so often across the seas between this and England without learning who are to be avoided. In these parts, within sail of the Malaccan Straits, there are pirates, recruited from India and the Malay States, who waylay the biggest ships. They have attacked East Indiamen very often, and have even matched their strength against war vessels. They must have gained information of the arrival of our ship, and have sailed here hoping to capture her while she was refitting. But push on, sahib. If these pirates are indeed within sight our plight is very serious."

Owen nodded curtly to him, and strode on at once. Little by little, as they had plunged on through the forest toward the sea, and the sound of heavy firing had continued, he had gathered the fact that the ship was being attacked. Then he remembered a warning which Mr. Halbut had given him, and felt sure after Mulha's words that the attackers must indeed be pirates.

"And of the worst sort," he said to himself as he ran forward. "They are the worst lot of cut-throats in existence, so Mr. Halbut said, and are a perfect pest. In fact, something will have to be done soon, for they prey upon the shipping in these parts, and are so bold that they even run up into the path of the Indiamen and make some their victims. Here I am."

He threw himself on hands and knees as he came nearly to the top of the rising ground, and slowly crawled to the very summit. Then, selecting a low bush he wedged his way into it, and struggling on, regardless of the thorns, finally obtained a clear view through the leaves which clothed the farther side. What he saw brought a low cry of astonishment from him, for the East Indiaman was under sail, and was firing rapidly at a number of large native craft which hovered about her. Then he turned, and backing from the bush waved to his companions. And very soon they, too, were gathered on the rising ground, and were watching from the security offered by the bush.

"It is as you said, Mulha," said Owen at length. "Those ruffians must have discovered the ship by accident, or, seeing their strength, must have gained information of our coming and set out with the fixed intention of making an attack. In either case, they are here, and we are in a pretty plight. As for the ship, she seems to be holding her own. Probably she caught sight of them the instant they appeared, and made preparations."

"And did her best to bring us off, sahibs," added Mulha, pushing his long arm through the bush and pointing to the shore below. "Watch there, sahibs."

All eyes were turned to the point he indicated, and another sound escaped Owen's lips. For he caught sight of the ship's boat, by which they were to have returned, dragged some few feet up on to the sand; while pushing away from the spot, and just then free of the surf, was a huge native boat, filled with men who were shouting excitedly and brandishing their weapons.

"Poor fellows! They must have been too late, and unable either to return to the ship or escape the enemy," exclaimed Owen, as he caught sight of three limp figures stretched on the sand. "These ruffians must have crept along the coast and come upon them unawares. And now they are off to help the main attack."

"Leaving the boat for our use, perhaps, sahibs," whispered Mulha. "All is not lost for us yet. We might put off as the night comes."

Whether this would be possible it was hopeless to decide at that moment. For the ship upon which they had sailed from England might not make good her own escape. But it looked as if she would; for as the three stared out to sea they saw her, with sails fully set, steering out of the bay. And as she went smoke belched from her sides, for she carried a dozen guns, the shot sometimes striking the water and ricocheting, while some few crashed into the four native craft which hovered about her, drawing excited cries of approval from Owen and his friends. It looked, indeed, as if she would

make good her escape, for within half an hour she had drawn away from the enemy, while one of the native craft lay well in rear, her mast having been knocked down by one of the shots.

"She will stand out till she has shaken them off," said Owen at length, "then she will make all ready for a renewal of the battle, and will wait on the chance of our returning. It's getting dusk, Jack. We shall have to make the most of the evening."

CHAPTER VI

A Trap for a Trap

That Owen and his companions would indeed have to make the most of the coming darkness was abundantly clear to all. But how to make the most of the time, was a question they asked one another. What could they do? What course could they take? As they lay there beneath the shadow of the bush, following the movements of the Indiaman and of the four native craft, the one idea filled their minds – they must escape. They must leave the shore that very night if ever they were to do so.

"But how? That is the question," blurted out Owen, as if thinking aloud, as he stared first at Jack Simpson, and then into the thoughtful eyes of Mulha. "That is what bothers me. There is the boat below, I know, but – "

"She is heavy, and the labour would be great, sahib," ventured Mulha. "Still, when it is a matter of life men can do much, even to pulling a heavy boat far out to sea, for the ship will never dare to lie close in to the bay."

"And I own that I feel done up. Completely played out," said Jack, dropping his aching head on his arms. Indeed, a glance at his pale face showed that he was feeling the effects of the stunning blow which he had received, and that he told but the truth when he said that he was done up and of little service where more effort was required.

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