

The Rajah's Fortress

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MELTON SEES THE CASTLE.

MELTON found himself standing in a large open space, somewhat octagonal in shape, which was hemmed in completely by a high stockade of teak logs the house with its own smaller stockade being a distinctive feature. On his right and left stood various smaller buildings of very rude construction but, directly before him, as he emerged from the gateway was the strange sight that had at first riveted his attention.

Ranged on low wheels along the stockade were a dozen very frail-looking cages, from which issued a succession of alarming sounds, while in front of them half a dozen of those same barbarous-looking savages that he had already seen, were moving about with hunks of raw meat on hooks which they thrust between the bars of the cages.

With amazement Melton moved forward and ventured to take a closer look. The first cage held a big, dingy-looking rhinoceros, who was prodding at the bars with his wicked looking horn. The

"Wait an' see," he replied, laconically. "An' will you do it, Mither Forbes?" he continued, turning to Melton. "Just let me hist ye on the big table in the kitchen an' you can slip through the trap-door like an eel."

Forbes's curiosity was aroused, and he assented to Mike's proposition. He knew there was little danger that he would be observed on the roof, for the night was dark.

McGore took him into the kitchen and made a high stand by putting one table on another. Forbes mounted this shaky structure and was able to reach the trap-door overhead and shove it aside.

With a spring he pulled himself out upon the roof. It was barely ten yards to the edge overlooking the kitchen window, and crawling very cautiously he soon gained the desired position.

At first he could see nothing but the darkness, but as his eyes grew accustomed to it, he began to perceive objects dimly. There was the stockade, that long white streak, and in front was the row of cages. The beasts were all awake, and, scenting danger apparently, were uttering growls from time to time, while the rhinoceros, to judge from the noise seemed to be prodding at the bars.

The next thing Forbes observed was that the space in the rear of the house was absolutely empty. Not a dacoit was in sight. He was eager to crawl up to the front of the building and try to learn something of their plans, but he knew McGore was

waiting patiently, so he made his way back to the trap door and whispered down: "All right. Not a soul in sight."

"Stay where you are a second," said Mike, and presently he passed up on a pole a basket containing half a dozen hunks of raw and bloody meat.

"Sling them as far as you can into the yard," he directed, "and then look out for fun. But hold on," he added. "Oi have a better plan still. Here, take this stick," and he handed up a long pole with a hook on the end. "Now when Oi open the shutter you hold the pole down till Oi fasten the strings on to the hook, do you see?"

"Yes," Forbes whispered, and then he crawled back to the edge of the roof.

In a moment or two the shutters creaked slightly, and then parted slowly. Forbes held down the pole while Mike hastily fastened on the ends of the cords.

"Now pull up," he whispered, and Forbes drew the pole up to the roof.

Up to this point he had no idea what the Irishman was about, and he waited with curiosity for the denouement.

It took Mike but a moment to draw himself through the trap door to the roof, and he crawled over to Melton's side, dragging the basket of meat with him.

He was chuckling with satisfaction.

"What are you going to do?" asked Forbes.

"You'll see in a minute now. We'll stay up here and watch the whole circus. There's no danger at all," and half rising he tossed the meat, piece by piece, far out toward the cages.

The sound it made in falling, slight though it was, attracted the dacoits, and two dusky forms moved along the side of the house and out into the open court. They discovered one of the hunks of meat and bent over it in curiosity.

"Now," exclaimed Mike, in a low dramatic whisper, "the time has come."

He took the cords from Forbes, and singling one out, handed the rest back.

"Now watch," he said, and he gave the cord a strong, steady pull.

A faint creaking sound. That was all.

The two dacoits heard it and raised their heads.

Then came a low, snarling growl, and the watchers on the roof waited in breathless suspense. A long drawn wailing cry floated out on the night air, chilling their blood, and then like a catapult a dark mass bounded into the air, and with another horrible yell plumped right down upon the two startled dacoits.

It was the Black Panther of Java.

Human cries of agony mingled for a moment with the snarls of the beast, and as McGore had anticipated, the foe made a general rush toward the center of the courtyard; but brave as they were they did not dare venture near the scene of

the conflict, simply contenting themselves with casting a few harmless spears.

The uproar was by this time terrific, for the beasts in the other cages were howling in rage and fear. Still McGore waited, leaving Forbes to hold the other cords.

One of the panther's victims succeeded in crawling away, and was dragged out of the reach by his comrades. The other was long since beyond all help.

Some one fired a shot, but it never touched the panther, and he kept on with his meal apparently undisturbed by the presence of so large an audience.

The dacoits forgot the attack on the house in this new excitement, and came forward intent on killing the brute, not daring, however, to venture near enough for the purpose. No one cared to wound him by a misdirected shot, and in the darkness accurate aim was impossible.

They had no suspicion of the real state of the case, but supposed the brute had broken his way out.

"Now give me the other cords," said McGore. "Here goes for the tigers," and he pulled the strings one after another.

The smell of the fresh meat had roused all of these animals' fierce instincts, and two of them bounded at once into the court and pounced down on the raw meat close beside the panther.

The amazed dacoits recoiled in fright, and a general movement was begun to the far end of the court.

It looked as though Mike's plan had met with full success already, but the Irishman was not yet satisfied. With the last cord he jerked open the door of the cage that held the rhinoceros.

Goliah, as Mike had named him, was a sullen, vicious brute, whose temper had been by no means sweetened by confinement. When he saw his bars slide slowly apart he raised his snout and sniffed the air. Perhaps he thought that open door was only a delusion, a dream that would vanish on close inspection.

He advanced toward it with a leisurely air.

No, it was no dream. The door was open. Goliah carefully put one foot on the ground and then another, and in a moment his whole bulk was out of the cage.

Then the full realization of freedom burst on him. The pure open air, the breeze blowing from the mountains, only reminded him of what he had been missing for the past few weeks. His short hair bristled with anger. His wicked horn went down. He snuffed the atmosphere. He scented the beasts and made a move in that direction.

Then the savage little eyes saw the moving figures of the men, his mortal enemies. He threw up his head with a defiant snort and dashed at a

swift, clumsy gait right down the courtyard toward the moving body of the dacoits, who were quietly retreating toward the broken stockade by which they had entered.

The dark apparition bearing down on them was not at once perceived, though the clatter of the hoofs attracted their attention. When they fully realized what was coming it was too late. Their hasty efforts to scatter only tangled them up in worse confusion.

The enraged brute, with a blast like a steam whistle, plunged into their midst, hurling them to right and left, impaling the shrieking wretches on his sharp horn, and trampling them fiercely under foot. He plowed his way clear through, and turning with difficulty, charged on them a second time.

Howling with fear, the dacoits, plunged over the brink of the island into the bed of the lake, while Goliah, with a vindictive bellow, proceeded to wreak his vengeance on the bodies of his victims who lay about the court.

It was a terrible scene, and the watchers on the roof were horribly fascinated by the dim panorama that was revealed through the shadows.

"We've saved the castle," said McGore. "They'll not venture inside this courtyard again."

"But the animals are lost," said Forbes.

"No, they ain't," replied Mike. "We'll drive them back with red hot irons. But here comes Goliah again. Now look out for a time."

CHAPTER XXI.

A MUTUAL SURPRISE.

WELL pleased with his raid on the dacoits, Goliah was now going to turn his attention to the animals who were still busy at the meats. Only two of the tigers had left their cages. The others, of a more cowardly disposition perhaps, had slunk back into their corners terrified by the uproar outside. McGore had not attached any cords to the cages containing the tiger cats. Those little creatures would only have scaled the stockade and made off.

The rhinoceros trotted slowly down the court, and as he drew near, veering from side to side in a very odd manner, it was seen that he had met with a curious mishap. A bronze shield had been impaled upon his horn directly through the center, and it rather impeded the brute's view.

Over the rim he caught a glimpse of the panther, crouching low, and without hesitation he charged on him. More by chance than design he steered a straight course, and the shield struck the brute and rolled him over and over on the ground.