

THE GOLDEN TIGER

BY

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IT is not long since the Rajah of Rhatameh took courage of his passion and murdered Mr. Tinspire, the British Resident, sending his head in a biscuit-box to his wife; yet the occurrence is hardly remembered. I, John Quirke, captain in the Bengal Staff Corps, have not forgotten—cannot forget it. And this is why.

I was in command of the Sepoy company forming Mr. Tinspire's escort when we fell into the trap which Rhatameh had laid. I was cut down, and thought to have been destroyed then and there, but instead was carried not ungently to the Rajah's palace, which was rather fort than mansion. He invited me to drink tea with him, and this I did, half expecting to find it poisoned, but unwilling to let him think that I cared over-much. No symptom of irritation followed on the first cup, so I drank a second, and Rhatameh and I chatted pleasantly away, for the most part about polo, at which he was an expert and I wished to be.

He made me forget I was his prisoner, not unlikely under sentence of death, as he described to me with all a sportsman's eye to detail how best to hold up a pony's head when making a cross-drive. From ponies we came to horses, and sending for his Wazir battle-steed he called me to admire his points, a thing I had no difficulty in doing, for they were patent. After this he showed me his sporting armoury, containing every species of weapon, from a saloon pistol to an

elephant gun. Comparatively ignorant about cattle, here I felt myself quite at home, and soon picked out the choicest items of his collection. With a Mannlicher repeater between us, we discussed grips and balances, cams and tumbling-blocks.

"You have shot tigers?" he queried.

"Five," said I.

"Thirty have fallen to my gun," he boasted, and in my heart I said he was a liar, for there were few great beasts in that country, and the rulers of Rhatameh only went abroad to make war. There was an explanation. "That sport costs too much money; every tiger I kill has to be sent up from Bengal. The dealers ask me 2,000 rupees each, and will do nothing until they are paid. . . . I despise the Bengalese—they are all tradesmen. They dare not face the king of the jungle: they entrap him and send him to me to be slain—and then they ask me for money, from me who did them this service. I say I despise them: they are afraid of the English. I am not afraid of the English. I have beaten the English at polo and in battle. You, an English officer, are my prisoner. I could spit in your face and you dare not hinder me. . . . But you, with your strange European mind, would say I was no gentleman, and to that I cannot listen. Therefore, I shall be gracious towards you."

I nearly grinned at the Rajah during this speech, for, hopeless as then would be my chance of ultimate escape, I knew my hand was heavy enough to shatter His Highness's skull if he attempted bodily insult.

Ignoring the side issue, I asked if he had shot lately. "Not tigers," he told me, with a suspicion of malice in his tone.

"You have no tigers now?"

He stared me abruptly in the face. "Yes, one: the Sacred Tiger. Have you not heard of him?"

I cudgelled my brains. "The Golden Tiger of Khandara. Is that the beast?"

"Kohilu, the Sacred Tiger of Khandara, is of ruddy gold," quoth the Rajah.

"Is it a tiger really, your Highness?"

"Think you it to be a mule?" he retorted. "Would you see for yourself?"

"If your Highness would bring me," I replied, and his crafty smile showed that he took my meaning.

"I will bring you," he acquiesced. "Kohilu will not harm his master, but I cannot promise you your safety."

"That I will answer for, if your Highness will permit."

He held up his hand warningly. "You may take no weapon. Whatever shall come to pass, the Sacred Tiger of Khandara must not be injured."

This was a stumbling-block for me, but although he looked me through and through I did not let him see it.

"I quite understand, your Royal Highness," I made answer, very quietly. "Sacred vessels are easy to crack, hard to replace."

"Silence!" ordered the Rajah, imperiously. "Keep your irony until you are facing Kohilu. Then say what you will—unless, indeed, something we cannot foresee should stop you."

Catching up his humour, I replied,

"Killing or being killed is my business. If I cannot do the one, I am not unprepared to submit to the other."

"Wait," said the Rajah, again. "It is easy to talk."

I bowed and declared myself at his disposal.

The Rajah took from his armoury a large gold instrument, not unlike an elephant goad fitted with a huge corkscrew handle.

He answered my questioning glance with the words, "My magic wand," and looked so unutterably conceited, that I would have given half my chance of escape for the kicking of him.

He was not a very powerful man, and, judging that his wand was heavier than the name implied, I offered to carry it for him, but he waved me back; nor did he trust it to a menial: we were to pay our visit to the Sacred Tiger absolutely without attendants of any kind. This did not astonish me, for it was natural that only few persons of the State should be allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, but it made me imagine that the

object of our visit would be so chained up that he could not overpower us by his greeting.

The temple of the sacred beast was outside the precincts of the palace, and, there being no steps, the entrance was approached by a long stone ramp of gentle incline. Up this I walked with a step so eager that I was begged to tarry by the Rajah.

That potentate, marking the few glances I cast around, called upon me to admire the view. "See Khandara and die," said he: whether he chose those words with special



"MY MAGIC WAND."

intention I am not sure. As I said, we were without escort; looking back, it seems to me that had I here overpowered my companion I could have bid strongly for my liberty, but, oddly enough, my mind was so full of the new adventure that the idea of flight did not occur to me. At that moment I believe that I would have accepted the intervention of British troops quite as unwillingly as the Rajah himself. What I wanted was the tiger—that seen, there was leisure to think of my personal safety. The fact of the matter was that the Rajah had nettled my self-esteem, and I would have faced a family of cats, naked, in the arena rather than flinch before his eyes. The outer gate of the temple was opened by unseen hands as we approached, and swung to again when we had passed through. Great bars descending from the walls secured it on the inside. We were now in a paved courtyard, guarded by very high, embattled walls. Behind us was the gatehouse, which had no visible door or window, and in front was a large edifice built in a gaudy rococo style, which hurt my eyes so that I do not care to describe it.

"Does the poor beast never try to run away?" I asked, on the spur of the moment.

"No," answered the Rajah, thoughtfully. "He never does": for once he did not take my meaning.

Arrived at the entrance to the temple proper, I noticed that it was closed by heavy swing doors without bolt, lock, or bar of any kind, but so constructed as to open only inwards.

The Rajah paused, and laying down his

burden, produced a printed document and a stylographic pen.

"You are sure of yourself?" he asked.

"Sure," I affirmed.

"Then sign this," he returned, and handed me pen and paper.

I read: "This is to certify that I, _____ here there was a blank for the name and other particulars—"enter the temple of Kohilu the Sacred Tiger of Khandara, of my own volition, at my own wish and under the protection of my own God. Signed day of _____ 189 _____."

"I will sign all but the last phrase," I declared. "I do not expect Providence to interest Himself in my foolhardiness."

The Rajah demurred. "All the others have signed," said he.

The words were dark, and it was with something of an effort that I modulated my reply: "The more reason, your Highness, for an exception."

"I do not make exceptions," said he.

"Then," I suggested, nonchalantly, "let us go back."

"Never," he rapped out, abruptly.

"Then," said I, in as nearly as possible the same tone as before, "let us go forward."

This irritated him to the serving of my purpose, and crumpling up the paper in his hand, he threw his weight against the doors and opened them wide enough for a man to pass.

"Enter," he cried, with the voice of a challenge.

"Thank you," I said. And with a final muster of my pride, in I strode, in my imagination buffeting death.

My nose received the first impression: there was no smell. Rather should I say



"'ENTER,' HE CRIED, WITH THE VOICE OF A CHALLENGE."

the penetrating effluvia of savage beasts was wanting or had been overcome by the odour of incense. The temple of the Sacred Tiger smelt like the sanctuary of a Catholic church rather than the cage of a wild animal. Yet a cage it undeniably was. Just clear of the doors swung fully back were the bars, iron, coated thickly with gold and of ancient design, but I suspect recent manufacture, for the gate which was open had very modern bolts and locks. The place was strewn with the litter of an ossuary. Lying in the middle was a long thin, white bone, unmistakably the *femur* of a woman, and not of a woman indigenous to the soil; but I saw no tiger or animal of any kind. A thought flashed upon me that the tiger of Khandara was Starvation, and that I had been lured here to die like a rat in a trap. I turned to make a frantic effort to battle my way out, and found the Rajah at my elbow quietly enjoying my trepidation.

"I thought," said he, slowly, "you wished to meet death."

"Visible, knowable death, willingly," said I.

"Death sleeps," answered the Rajah. "He is within."

Following the motion of his hand, I saw in the farther wall of the den another opening without a door, and leading apparently into darkness.

"I shall lead Kohilu forth," said the Rajah. And I was impressed by his dignity as he stepped into the cage and out at the farther opening as jauntily as I might enter my loose box.

Already marvelling when he passed into the pitchy darkness, I was really startled to see that darkness turn to light as if his presence were effulgent: although my

common sense quickly suggested that many men have electric light in their stables. A fantastic shadow was thrown on the wall, as if a child in cap and frock were prodding a prediluvian monster with a corkscrew.

All the time I heard a grunting like the modified rumble of a donkey-engine. The sense of mystification changed from the ludicrous to the unbearable, and I was on the point of following the Rajah, when the noise ceased and the light simultaneously went out.

I drew a long breath. There was a chink of metal: the Rajah reappeared, leading by a gold chain, not the thickness of a watch-guard, a gigantic tiger, thirteen hands at the shoulder—the height of a polo-pony—and gorgeously marked.

It took no notice of me, stalking round the cage at the end of its lead with the dull precision of a circus-horse. It struck me at once that it moved like no jungle creature I had ever seen, with its sharp angular steps and its tail dropped behind; but it was, none the less, formidable-looking, and my faith in the Rajah's intrepidity increased.

The tour of the arena twice made, the Rajah, following the beast, gently laid his hand on its withers, and the beast instantly stopped, falling into a statuesque attitude.

Said the Rajah, "Behold, Kohilu!"

I smiled in return and, approaching, made bold to stroke the beast. The Rajah motioned me back: "Remember, Kohilu my Familiar is Death." He appealed to the thing. "What art thou, oh, Heaven-sent one?"

"Tod," said a voice from Kohilu's inwards.

"Kohilu," explained the Rajah, rather



" KOHILU !"

naively, "thinks you are a German." But the Rajah over-estimated my credulity. I preferred to draw my own conclusions, and began to suspect I could deal with both Monarch and "Familiar."

"Kohilu is a man-eater?" I asked.

"Kohilu eats nothing else."

"Yet his coat is not mangy."

"The covering of the immortals cannot decay."

"He has not fed this morning." I pointed to the dry bones underfoot.

"The day is yet young," returned the Rajah, oracularly.

There was a little pause, and passing his hand again over the animal's withers he caressed him.

"A quiet brute is Kohilu," I said at last.

"Think you so?" snorted the Rajah, his fingers fumbling under the long hair.

"I do," said I, and, choosing my spot, carefully dropped my hand on the brute's muzzle.

The great lower jaw opened and shut with a convulsive snap, but my fingers were well out of reach, and I did not remove my hand.

The Rajah changed colour, and the angry look came again in his eyes.

"Awake, Kohilu," he cried, and, loosing the animal, sprang backwards. The immense fore-paws flew up and caught me a blow in the chest that grounded me, and the beast leaped high in the air, its tail just clearing my head. Realizing my danger, I scrambled to my feet. The tiger was bounding round the place with huge upward leaps, more like the movement of a kangaroo than any other beast I knew of. It would rise 12ft. or 14ft. into the air; in falling, smite the ground viciously with its tail, and bound forward again.

All the while its claws worked incessantly, its eyes shone with fire, and its jaws snapped and snapped. In its flight it scattered the bones and litter in all directions, but it did not approach the Rajah very closely. Seeing this, I knew my chance was to keep at His Highness's back until these antics ceased. With what ease I could pretend to I lounged over to him and took my place as it were casually. The animal's bounds grew even higher, and the crash of its concussion with the earth became deafening. "Now is Kohilu a tiger or not?" shouted the Rajah.

"Your Highness knows best," I answered. "But this I will say—Kohilu came not from Bengal."

"Kohilu came from Heaven."

"Then," said I, firmly, "Heaven is in England."

"In England! Infidel dog!"

"If Kohilu came from Heaven, then Heaven is Sheffield."

"You lie! Kohilu never saw England."

"Nuremberg, then?"

"Kohilu's eyes have never beheld Europe."

"Kohilu's eyes are electric lamps," I answered; and added, point-blank, "the fact is, your Highness, you are a child and Kohilu is your toy."

The words were yet on my lips when he sprang at me and flung me down right in the way the beast was coming, but I caught him to me and dragged him also down, determined I should not die alone. The beast fell short, and again leaped over us, the near hind claw tearing away the Rajah's turban as it took off.

Struggling, we rolled back to safer ground. The Rajah slipped out his poniard, but ere he could use it I snatched up that same long white bone which had caught my eye on entering the cage, and I knocked him senseless.

I had a mind to experience with his body the fate which he had intended to be mine, but what I can only call over-civilized sentimentality deterred me from doing so; and having removed his weapons, gagged and bound him, I sat down on his chest and reflected that it was high time to consider some means of escape.

Meanwhile the tiger bounded and jumped, sometimes swaying unpleasantly near. One conclusion I came to while watching—that the circular movement was governed by the action of the tail, and that this was an intermittent control effected by many incalculable trifles.

I must have been sitting so for over an hour before the mechanical force of the toy showed signs of slackening; from first to last the performance must have occupied nearly three hours. If it could hold on so long at high pressure, it seemed pretty clear that it might have sustained its first walking pace for a whole day.

So I argued as, with feebler and feebler bounds, the contrivance worked itself out. What struck my humour was that the last movements were accompanied by a buzzing sound that might have come from the mechanism of a clockwork train. And this mental vision gave me the clue to the nature of the Rajah's "magic wand." It was an exaggerated clock-key, no more.

When the thing had quite run out, I penetrated into the inner chamber in search of this key, and with the aid of a match found the electric light button and switched it on. The place was empty save for a few simple tools in a rack, and the object of my quest leaning against the wall: that it had, however, at one time been the home of a real tiger, I judged from its shape to be probable.

Returning to the toy I subjected it, somewhat gingerly I must confess, to examination. In the centre of the chest I found the winding hole and inserted the key: I had not given it a quarter turn when the great jaw crashed down on my head, half stunning me. Fortunately the other limbs did not move, and the mouth shut again after the second snap. Clearly I had to find the method of controlling the engine before I dared give it power. I passed my hand over the withers, and found there seven small circular knobs such as are attached to wash-house pipes. Not without some misgivings I climbed up on the animal's back to look at them. Brushing the hair aside, I read on each respectively: "*Rechtes Vorbein, Linkes Vorbein, Hinterbeine, Kinnenbachen, Schwanz, Augen, and Zerstörung.*"

The certainty of liberty sprang up within me, for I knew I could manage the machine with these handles. Did not *Rechtes Vorbein* and *Linkes Vorbein* mean off and near fore-legs; *Hinterbeine*, hind-legs; *Kinnenbachen*, jaw; *Schwanz*, tail; and *Augen*, eyes? . . . But what did *Zerstörung* mean? My thin German vocabulary did not contain the word. I had seen the animal use its legs, jaw, and tail, and its eyes light up, but could think of nothing else. I felt the handle: unlike the others it was turned off. There was no time for further consideration, so I turned off the others and descended to wind up the monster. It was a stiff job, and took me nearly twenty minutes. When it was finished I gave the three handles controlling the legs each a very slight twist. With a jerk the beast began to move, and, being uncontrolled by the action of its tail, bounced straight into the wall with a tremendous thud which shook the whole building: there its limbs still kept on work-

ing. Fearful of an upset, I jumped up and turned off the machinery.

I was now in a great dilemma to know how to get its head round again, the thing being much too heavy for my mere strength to be of any avail. To set it going again might overturn it, and that would be the ruin of my scheme.

I decided to try the effect of the off fore-paw alone, and set it gently in motion. This produced no useful result, merely causing the animal to vibrate, so I turned it off and tried the tail, which made the apparatus rock violently, but neither did any good. Not to be beaten without a struggle, I tried both tail and leg together. This was the secret: the beast lumbered round, carrying away great chunks of masonry with its paws.

Determined to thoroughly master the steering-gear before going any further, as soon as the thing was clear I mounted on its back and cautiously set it going. When I thought I



"I REMOVED HIS OUTER GARMENTS AND PULLED THEM ON OVER MY UNIFORM."

had room to turn, I stopped the near fore-leg, with the consequence that the beast swung sharply round, pitching me over his shoulder on to the still prostrate Rajah, but for whose intervention I might have broken my neck. I was on my feet just in time to save the beast from crashing into the wall.

Mounting again, I continued my experiments, with the result that in half an hour's time I was able to describe the figure of eight, and perform other exercises of the riding-school. When I thought myself fairly efficient, I again wound the animal up to the full, worked it into position for departure, and turned my attention to the Rajah. He had recovered consciousness, and regarded me with considerable dislike as I removed his outer garments and pulled them on over my uniform, along with his sword and other accoutrements. I also replaced my helmet by his turban.

He strove to work the gag out of his mouth, probably to invite me to kill him, for he was a proud man in his way, but I affected to ignore him, thinking that the most irritating treatment to which I could subject him.

Night was descending, and it behoved me to be off. To steer the beast out of the cage was a ticklish job, and before I could attempt to do it, it was necessary to force back the ponderous temple doors. By this time I had been nearly forty hours without solid food, and the strain on my weakened muscles made me tremble all over. So little nerve was then left to me after my exertions, that I did not dare to ride the animal out; but, setting it in motion, took my place in rear. It was as well I did so, for it brushed the bars near enough to have mangled my leg had I been on it. The court-yard reached, I clambered to my perch again, exulting in my success. . . . But only for an instant. Blackly in the gloom stood up the outer gate with its inexorable bars.

In my nervous state I was prostrated by this check: it seemed an end to all my hopes. Stopping the tiger, I stared painfully into the gathering darkness. Was I only a rat after all? Would the Rajah get the better of me? My impulse was to go back, make an end of him, and of myself across his body. But even then the slaying of a man in cold blood was abhorrent to me. Better to make one desperate effort to break out.

Digging my hands into the long hair, I crouched low as possible on the tiger's back,

and turned the first four handles as far as they would go.

The golden tiger rose in the air, came heavily to earth, and as it rose again I shut my eyes. There was a crash as of the crack of doom, the whole world staggered round me, and I thought my head was splitting—a great jerk—I opened my eyes and found we were bounding into unfathomable night at the speed of an express train. I dared not attempt to steer the animal at such a pace, which, indeed, threatened to shake myself and it to fragments; so, as uniformly as I could, I reversed all the handles.

When the speed was sufficiently reduced for me to use my eyes, we had left the ramp far behind and were chasing across a sandy plain. Whither I could not judge. From behind arose a great uproar of voices, and the discharge of the Rajah's seven-pounder gun, which none but he could handle, proclaimed that he was again at large.

The moon came up and told me that I was heading due south across the Rhata-meyan plateau, which extended for some fifteen miles in front of me till the mountains again arose. At my present reduced pace I ought to traverse this distance in five quarters of an hour. Then if I could strike the mountain road it should not be very difficult to gallop past the guard-house, leap the barrier, and be off up the mountain ere a bullet could stay me.

But the Rajah had not done with me yet, I found. One of his first acts must have been to wire a warning to the outpost, and as I approached the guard-house was ablaze with light, and I saw some score of men armed with rifles thrown forward into the plain. I stopped the tiger, so that the noise might not give them knowledge of my presence before I had settled my plans.

To gain the road was my only chance—but how to do it? To my horror I saw them lead out an elephant and anchor him across the path with the head towards me. At the same moment the galloping of horses came up on the wind behind. Cursing the momentary indecision which had added to my difficulties, I fumbled with my handles, but could not turn them on. At last my nerve had broken down.

The sweat broke out on my brow, and thinking I was about to fall from my perch I grabbed at the seventh handle.

I felt a tremendous concussion under me; there was a roar and a wave of fire, followed by smoke stinking of powder. I heard the



"NOT ALL RHATAMEH COULD STOP US NOW."

yells of frightened men, and the frantic trumpeting of the elephant.

As the vapour cleared I saw that the men opposed to me were gone, and that the elephant was lying prone in its chains.

The uproar of pursuit came nearer. Praising the gods, I turned the first three handles full on as before, and Kohilu bounded forward, once, twice, thrice—again: this time we landed right on the elephant, trampling the poor squealing monster into the earth. But Kohilu, though he toppled heavily forward, did not fall. Up again he bounded forward

into liberty. And not all Rhatameh could stop us now.

At dawn, after carrying me 120 miles, Kohilu received the contents of a British magazine rifle. It did not matter to Kohilu, and it told me a welcome tale. I had come on the bivouac of a regiment of Punjaubees. A taciturn Scots major was in command.

When he had listened to my story with a weary air, he remarked, "Made in Germany, of course. Everything's made in Germany nowadays."