

CHAPTER XIII.

Showing how Passe-partout perceives once again that Fortune favours the Brave.

The project was a difficult one and a bold, almost impossible to carry out. Mr. Fogg was about to risk his life, or at least his liberty, and consequently the success of his undertaking; but, nevertheless, he hesitated not a moment. Besides, he found in Sir Francis Cromarty a sturdy ally. Passe-partout also was at their disposal; he was quite ready, and his opinion of his master was rising every moment. He possessed a heart, after all, beneath that cold exterior.

Passe-partout was beginning to love Mr. Fogg.

The guide remained. What course would he take in this business? He would probably side with the natives. At any rate, if he would not assist, his neutrality must be assured.

Sir Francis put the question to him plainly.

"Your honour," replied the man, "I am a Parsee. The woman is a Parsee also. You may dispose of me as you wish."

"Good," replied Sir Francis.

"But," continued the guide, "you must remember that not only do we risk our lives in this affair, but we may be horribly tortured if we are taken alive. So take care."

"We have made up our minds to run the risk," said Mr. Fogg. "I think we had better wait till nightfall before we act."

"I think so too," said the guide, who then proceeded to give his employers some information respecting the lady. He said she was a Parsee, a celebrated Indian beauty, daughter of one of the richest merchants in Bombay. She had received a complete English education; her manners and tastes were all European. Her name was Aouda. She was, moreover, an orphan, and had been married against her will to the rajah. She had only been three months wed. Knowing the fate that awaited her, she had attempted to escape, but was immediately retaken; and the rajah's relatives, who were desirous, from motives of interest, for her death, had devoted her to the suttee, which now appeared inevitable.

These particulars only served to confirm Mr. Fogg and his companions in their generous resolve. It was then decided that the guide should take them as near to the pagoda as possible without attracting attention.

In about half an hour the elephant was halted in the brushwood about

five hundred yards from the temple, which was not visible; but the shouts of the fanatics were distinctly audible.

The best manner of releasing the intended victim was then discussed. The guide was acquainted with the pagoda in which he declared the young woman was imprisoned. Was it possible to enter by one of the doors, when all the band of priests, etc., were wrapped in a drunken sleep? or, should they enter through a hole in the wall? This could only be decided when they reached the pagoda. But one thing was very certain, and that was that the deed must be done at night, and not at daybreak, when the victim was being led to the sacrifice. Then human aid would be powerless to save her.

So the party waited till night. At about six o'clock in the evening it would be dark, and then they would make a reconnaissance. The last cries of the fakirs would by that time be hushed. The Hindoos would by that time, according to custom, be wrapped in the intoxicating arms of "bang"--liquid opium mixed with hemp; and it would be possible to glide past them into the temple.

The whole party, guided by the Parsee, then advanced stealthily through the forest. After ten minutes' creeping beneath the branches of the trees, they reached a rivulet, whence, by the glare of the torches, they were enabled to distinguish the funeral pyre, composed of the fragrant sandal-wood, and already saturated with perfumed oil. Upon this pile lay the dead body of the deceased prince, which was to

be burned with his widow. A hundred paces from the pyre was the pagoda, the minarets of which uprose beyond the tops of the surrounding trees.

"Come on," whispered the guide.

With increasing caution the Parsee, followed by his companions, glided silently amongst the tall grasses. The murmur of the breeze through the trees was the only sound that broke the silence.

The Parsee soon halted on the border of the clearing. Some torches lit up the space. The ground was covered with groups of tipsy sleepers, and bore a great resemblance to a battle-field strewn with dead bodies. Men, women, and children lay all together. Some drunken individuals still staggered about here and there. In the background the temple loomed amid the thick trees. But greatly to the disappointment of the guide, armed rajpoots kept watch by torchlight upon the doors, in front of which they paced up and down with naked swords. No doubt the priests within were equally vigilant.

The Parsee advanced no farther. He perceived at once that it was impossible to force an entrance to the temple, and he led his companions back again. Sir Francis and Mr. Fogg also understood that no more could be done in that direction. They stopped and consulted together in undertones.

"Let us wait a little," whispered the brigadier. "It is only eight o'clock. Those sentries may go to sleep later."

"That is possible, certainly," said the Parsee.

So they all lay down under the trees and waited.

The time passed very slowly. At intervals the guide would go forward and reconnoitre. But the guards were always there; the torches burned brightly still, and an uncertain glimmer penetrated through the windows of the temple from the inside.

They waited until nearly midnight. There was no change in the situation. The sentries were sleepless, and it became evident that they intended to keep watch all night. They were probably quite sober. It now became necessary to try another plan and to cut through the walls of the pagoda. There was then the chance of finding the priests awake inside, watching their intended victim as closely as the soldiers guarded the door.

After a final consultation, the guide expressed himself ready to proceed. Mr. Fogg, Sir Francis, and Passe-partout followed. They made a long detour with the intention of approaching the pagoda from behind. About half-past twelve they gained the walls without having encountered anyone. Evidently no watch was kept at the side, but it was equally evident that there was neither window nor door at the

back.

The night was dark. The moon, then in her last quarter, appeared scarcely above the horizon, and was covered frequently by thick clouds. The trees also served to render the darkness more profound. It was enough to have reached the wall, an opening must be discovered or made. To accomplish this, Mr. Fogg and his companions had nothing but their pocket-knives. Fortunately, the temple walls were only composed of bricks and wood, which would not be very hard to cut through. Once the first brick had been taken out, the rest was easy.

They set about the work immediately, and as noiselessly as possible. The Parsee and Passe-partout worked away to loosen the bricks in a space about two feet wide. The labour was continued, and they were getting on capitally, when a cry was heard from the interior of the temple, and was immediately succeeded by others from the outside. Passe-partout and the guide ceased working. Had they been heard, and had the alarm been given? Common prudence necessitated a retreat, which was effected in company with Sir Francis Cromarty and Phileas Fogg. They ensconced themselves again beneath the trees to wait until the alarm, if it were an alarm, had subsided, and ready in that event to resume their operations. But, alas! the guards now completely surrounded the pagoda and prevented all approach. It would be difficult to depict the disappointment of these four men at this unfortunate contretemps. As they were prevented from approaching the victim, how could they hope to save her? Sir Francis Cromarty clenched

his hands, Passe-partout was almost beside himself, and even the guide had some difficulty in preserving his self-restraint. The impassible Phileas Fogg alone preserved his equanimity.

"I suppose we may as well go away now?" whispered Sir Francis Cromarty.

"That's all we can do," the guide assented.

"Don't be in a hurry," said Mr. Fogg. "It will suit me well enough if we reach Allahabad at mid-day."

"But what do you expect to do if we remain here?" said Sir Francis.

"It will be daylight in a couple of hours, and--"

"We may get a chance at the last moment."

The brigadier would have liked to have been able to read the expression of Mr. Fogg's face. What was he thinking about, this cool-headed Englishman? Would he, at the last moment, throw himself upon the burning pile, and snatch her from the clutches of her executioners openly?

Such a proceeding would have been the height of folly, and no one could for a moment imagine that Mr. Fogg was so foolhardy as that. Nevertheless, Sir Francis consented to wait the dénouement of this

terrible scene. But the guide led the party to the edge of the clearing, where, from behind a thicket, they could observe all the proceedings. Meanwhile, Passe-partout had been hatching a project in his busy brain, and at last the idea came forth like a flash of lightning. His first conception of the notion he had repudiated as ridiculously foolish, but at length he began to look upon the project as feasible. "It is a chance," he muttered, "but perhaps the only one with such bigoted idiots." At any rate he wriggled himself to the end of the lowest branch of a tree, the extremity of which almost touched the ground.

The hours passed slowly on, and at length some faint indications of day became visible in the sky. But it was still quite dark in the neighbourhood of the pagoda.

This was the time chosen for the sacrifice. The sleeping groups arose as if the resurrection had arrived. The tom-toms sounded. Chants and cries were once more heard. The sublime moment had come!

Just then the doors of the pagoda were opened, and a strong light flashed out from the interior. The victim could be perceived being dragged by two priests to the door. It appeared to the spectators that the unhappy woman, having shaken off the effects of her enforced intoxication, was endeavouring to escape from her executioners. Sir Francis Cromarty was deeply agitated, and seizing Mr. Fogg's hand convulsively he perceived that the hand grasped an open knife.

The crowd now began to move about. The young woman had been again stupefied with hemp-fumes, and passed between the lines of fakirs who escorted her, uttering wild cries as they proceeded.

Phileas Fogg and his companions followed on the outskirts of the crowd. Two minutes later they reached the bank of the stream, and stopped about fifty paces from the funeral pyre, upon which the corpse was extended. In the dim religious light, they could perceive the outline of the victim close beside her deceased husband.

A lighted torch was then quickly applied to the pile of wood, which, saturated with oil, was instantly in a blaze. Sir Francis Cromarty and the guide had to exert all their strength to restrain Mr. Fogg, who, in his generous indignation, appeared about to rush upon the blazing pile.

But just as Phileas Fogg had succeeded in throwing them off, a change came o'er the scene. A cry of terror rose from the natives, and they bowed themselves to the earth in indescribable terror.

The old rajah was not dead after all; there he was standing upright upon the fiery funeral pile, clasping his young wife in his arms; ready to leap from amid the smoke into the midst of the horror-stricken crowd. The fakirs, the guards, the priests were all seized with superstitious fear, and lay, faces to the earth, not

daring to lift their eyes to behold such a stupendous miracle.

The resuscitated man was thus practically quite close to the place where Phileas Fogg and Sir Francis Cromarty were standing with the guide.

"Let us be off," exclaimed the "spectre."

It was only Passe-partout, who had, unperceived, gained the pyre under cover of the smoke, and had rescued the young lady from certain death. It was Passe-partout himself who, thanks to his happy audacity, was enabled to pass unharmed through the terrified assemblage.

In an instant the four friends had disappeared in the woods, and the elephant was trotting rapidly away. But very soon the loud cries and the clamour that arose told them that the trick had been discovered, and a bullet whizzed by as an additional confirmation. For there upon the blazing pile lay the rajah's corpse; and the priests quickly understood that a rescue had been so far successfully accomplished. They immediately dashed into the forest, accompanied by the soldiers, who fired a volley; but the fugitives had got away, and in a few moments more were out of reach of arrows and bullets both.