

The Tiger

By Gerald Burrard

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Who's Who in the Story.

Geoffrey Barraclough is tracking down "The Tiger" in India. With Sher Khan a Pathan, he started for the Holy mountain. The Tiger's stronghold, but on the way is attacked by the enemy and takes refuge with Phyllis Merridew, a missionary's daughter, and her father. The Merridews are captured and taken to the Holy mountain, and Geoffrey, following them, is also captured. Their efforts to escape are fruitless, until Sher Khan breaks into the underground chamber where they are to be tortured and momentarily routs the enemy. They take refuge in a cave filled with gold and jewels and escape through a tunnel.

CHAPTER 25—A STRANGE WEDDING

"Father! Look at father! Quickly! He is falling!" exclaimed Phyllis. Geoffrey sprang from his pony and handed the reins to Sher Khan. He was just in time to catch the missionary as he faints. "Jogaroo, quick! Hold the horse. These ponies bolt at once if left." Carefully he lifted Mr. Merridew off his mount and gently placed him on the ground. He placed his hand over his heart. It was still beating, but he was shocked to note how feebly. "Sher Khan, hobble the horses with their girths or reins or anything, but do it as quickly as you can. Then

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bring my bedding roll. Phyllis, dear, stay by your father. I will help Sher Khan. We must get food as quickly as possible.

Tibetan girths are mostly made of yak's hair ropes or strips of hide, and it was not long before all six ponies were effectively hobbled to immediately began grating, apparently none the worse for the night's journey. But Sher Khan was an embryo horse dealer, and like most Pathans he was a first class judge of horse flesh. Geoffrey then unrolled his reindeer skin sleeping bag, and gently slid it over the missionary's unconscious form.

"What food have you, Jogaroo?" "Only some chappatti, Sahib, I had nothing else." Geoffrey quickly divided the unappetizing looking bits of leathery bread into four equal portions, and was glad to see that Phyllis ate hers almost greedily. There could not be much wrong with her if she could eat gold and stale chappatti like that. Jogaroo had a tin mug and in this they melted some snow which was still lying in patches on the northern slopes of the hills. Geoffrey sprinkled a few drops of the cold water over Mr. Merridew's face and forced some between his lips. To his relief he saw the missionary slowly open his eyes and gaze inquiringly.

"Don't talk. We are quite all right. Try and eat this." He soaked a bit of chappatti in the snow water and put it into his mouth. Bit by bit he fed him the poor food, but after the missionary had swallowed but a quarter of his share he said he could eat no more.

"Look here, dear, I think rest will do your father more good than anything else. He will be quite warm and comfortable in my sleeping bag. I will lie down beside him. Now please try and go to sleep too. Remember you can help the rest of us by keeping strong more than in any other way. Here are Sher Khan's blankets. I don't know where he has gone for the moment. But he would like you to have them. No, really, darling, I mean what I say."

"Thank you, Geoffrey." Mr. Merridew's voice was very feeble. "I want to talk to you now Phyllis cannot hear."

"Don't you think, sir, you had better try and sleep too?"

"Afterwards, my boy, but I must speak to you first. Now tell me truly, although I feel that in your case such a question is an impertinence, you do really love Phyllis? You do not think that your feelings have been aroused by the mutual dangers you have undergone?"

"No sir, I can swear to you that I love her. I have done so ever since about a ship, and at Bombay I was miserable at the thought of never seeing her again. I can well understand your question, but I can assure you that I love her with my whole heart."

"Thank God for it. I felt sure you did, but just wanted to make quite positive. Now, listen to me, I am dying. No, don't interrupt. I cannot last much longer and doubt if I will live until sunset. I think one of those blows must have injured me somehow inside. Anyhow it is not as if I was in my first youth, and what ever the cause I know that I will ever be in the presence of my Maker. For myself I do not mind. In fact I am glad in many ways, although I would have wished to have made some more converts. But Phyllis will miss me sadly. I fear. My one wish now is to see her happily settled. If all these trials have been sent in order that she might find a husband, such as you, then I can thank God for my great longing is to see her married before I go. Believe me there is little enough time. I am sinking fast. Will you let me marry you both today before I die?"

He could hardly speak above a whisper, but his eyes were strangely bright, and as Geoffrey looked at him he felt that the missionary's feelings about his end were probably correct. Geoffrey clasped his hand. "Of course I will, sir, if Phyllis is willing. It is my dearest wish that she should become my wife, and of course you would be the person to marry her, so why not now?" But really, sir, I cannot have you talk so gloomily about yourself. You will be all right with food and rest." But in his heart of hearts Geoffrey knew that he was wrong.

It was early afternoon when he awoke and the sun was very hot. Phyllis was already awake and seated by her father holding his hand. Geoffrey saw at once that the missionary had told her of his fears about himself and his desire concerning them. Her eyes were wet with tears, but she looked bravely into her father's face.

"Geoffrey," called Mr. Merridew, and his voice was painfully feeble, although the words were clear, "the time has come. First let us have another meal, as Sher Khan has just told me he has killed some more pigeons."

The Pathan brought Geoffrey two more birds, freshly roasted. "Come, Sahib, eat. The Miss Sahib has already ready eaten, as have Jogaroo and myself. We have been having good shikar (hunting)." "Yes, they have done splendidly. As soon as you have eaten, Geoffrey, I want to conduct the service which will make you and Phyllis man and wife. Phyllis, dear, here is the ring. It was your mother's wedding ring, and I have worn it on my little finger ever since she died when you were five years old. Thank God those men did not take it from me."

Geoffrey soon finished his meal, and then Mr. Merridew had Jogaroo summoned. "I would like him to be present. Although he has never accepted Christ he is all a Christian should be in deed and I think in thought. He is a friend."

The ceremony was brief yet marvelously impressive. Mr. Merridew was unable to stand alone and was supported by the fierce old Pathan on one hand and the faithful Jogaroo on the other. His voice rose almost to its full strength as he repeated the final blessing while Geoffrey and Phyllis knelt before him. But it was his last effort, for it was only his force of will and character which had enabled him to endure so long. As Geoffrey and Phyllis rose he swayed and tottered. Sher Khan lifted him up in his arms and laid him down

once more on the sleeping bag. There he lay for a minute with closed eyes, a look of great content on his noble face. Then he held out a hand each to his daughter and son-in-law. "Phyllis, try and not sorrow; remember I am very happy. I feel that you will win through to freedom together."

Still clasping their hands, his gaze wandered first to Jogaroo and then to Sher Khan. "May God bless you both, my friends, and reward you for your loyal friendships."

He smiled at Phyllis and closed his eyes. A tremor passed over his face and his grip relaxed. All was over. Geoffrey stole quietly away, leaving Phyllis alone with her dead father for a space of time, while he and his two men immediately set about preparing a grave. They had no tools beyond their knives, but at last the work was done, and as they rested Geoffrey saw Phyllis approaching. Tears were glistening in the corners of her eyes, but her smile was brave. She saw what they had done and smiled again in thanks.

Reverently Geoffrey and Sher Khan carried the body to the grave, and Geoffrey repeated what he could of the burial service, while Phyllis stood beside him. They filled in the low grave with earth, sand and stones, and laid a cross of larger stones upon the top. The sun was setting when Sher Khan gave a warning hiss. There, a full half mile away, the evening light shined full upon him, was a man on horseback sitting motionless and watching them. Geoffrey seized the Pathan's glasses and saw he was a Chinaman, but even as he looked the stranger wheeled his pony round and rode rapidly away.

"We must hurry. There is no time to lose. The man is without doubt one of the Tiger's scouts." Sher Khan set the example by walking quickly towards the ponies. Geoffrey and Jogaroo immediately followed suit and in a very few minutes the ponies had been caught and saddled in spite of their utmost protests.

"We are the two bravest, Sher Khan, so we will rest our last night's ponies. Jogaroo, tie the baggage on to this mare, and be pointed to the one which Sher Khan had ridden. I will lead my own mount free, and we can use it as a spare."

Phyllis joined them having rolled up the bedding. "I have said my good-bye," she said, and Geoffrey knew what she meant. He helped her to mount and then the little party cantered up the valley in the swiftly falling darkness. Did ever a bridal couple set out on a stranger honeymoon?

"Whither are you making, Sahib?" asked Sher Khan when Geoffrey first pulled up to a walk. "At present I am working west. After a bit we must go south and cross the mountain range to which Kailas belongs. It will not be a difficult crossing—there are passes everywhere—but they are very high. However we will be able to ride. Then I want to cross the river Suttlej and make for the Indian frontier. It is no use trying for any particular pass. It will all depend on where we find ourselves. I don't think the Tiger can have more than 200 men at most, and he is sure to have sent many off in ones and twos as scouts. I fancy that he will keep his main body near the frontier so as to be certain of cutting us off. I know I would if I were in his place. If we can only avoid his scouts we will stand a very good chance. I doubt if any will risk an attack until they have collected almost overwhelming numbers. For the time being their job will be to keep in touch with us and gradually ring us round. But really we ought to elude them with any luck with the greater part of western Tibet in front of us."

The next ten days seemed like one protracted nightmare. All night rides across the barren upland, day long periods of anxious suspense, punctuated by snatches of sleep; the perpetual diet of roast pigeon and cold water—usually melted snow—varied on one great occasion when Jogaroo managed to knock over a blue Tibetan hare which scuttled away from under his feet; the frustrated attempt at crossing the Kailas range when a band of the enemy discovered them and suddenly opened fire; the wild gallop north once more in the darkness; the successful passage of the range by a pass of over 15,000 feet on which the snow still lay in great white sheets—luckily the gradients were so easy that it was possible to ride all the way, but even the sturdy little Rudok ponies showed signs of great distress; the drop down into the canyon of the Suttlej when every nook and every hollow was a probable hiding place for a lurking fox.

The crossing of the river was in itself a real adventure. They did not dare to use one of the regular bridges, and had to risk a ford. For a whole day they stayed in a large cave in the foot of cliffs which form the sides of the canyon. They watched the waters rise as the sun melted the feeders, for bound by the prisoning night's frost. Then as the shadows lengthened once more the tide began to slacken until at midnight the river had fallen several feet. They held their feet high as the ponies boldly waded through the turbid current and dismounting on the southern bank, rubbed the brave beasts' legs to try and save them from the awful cold. Then up, up through a mass of cliffs and only reached the levelled levels were gained once more.

They skirted the towns of Dongpu and Daba and were heading for the Niti pass and safely when a body of some 20 mounted men suddenly appeared from a narrow gully. They were known to an older generation of sportsmen as the "Lal pahar" (Red hills), so called on account of their deep red color. The moon did not rise now until later and the continued their march in the early morning, but on this occasion they were very nearly caught. As it was, a handy ravine hid them in the nick of time, and following its course they rode northwest away from the enemy, but away from the pass as well.

On, on they trekked past the old Tibetan gold works near Dogkwa Kur and past the sniping ground of Gandok where they were again discovered by a band of mounted Chinamen who pursued them at a mad gallop across the great Gandok plain, where Geoffrey had once shot some Ovis Ammon (the great wild sheep of Tibet) some years before the war. His knowledge of the ground saved them, for he led the way down, down into the great ravine of the Hop Gach, three thousand feet in depth, and shook off their pursuers once more as they threaded northward along the sandy bottom. But they were again discovered as they climbed the farther side, and only reached the top by a narrow path riding through an intermittent but persistent fusillade.

the shadows of hills and cliffs. They no longer marched by night. The road was too rough and too uncertain. They trusted to cover and hoped for the best. At last success seemed really within their grasp. "Tomorrow," said Jogaroo, "we will cross the pass."

The start was made before dawn, and they gained the boulder strewn valley which led up to the pass without being detected. Here they were compelled to leave their ponies. The gallant little beasts had stood the strain wonderfully, having had no feed other than what they had gained when grazing, but they were very done up and the road ahead was altogether too rough. So with sorrowful hearts they turned them loose. Gra-

ing was plentiful and Geoffrey knew that they would be able to shift for themselves as well as the wild antelope and sheep. Jogaroo tied the baggage to his back, and they set out on their final climb. They had not ascended more than a few hundred feet when Phyllis looked around and gave a cry of alarm.

There galloping up the rough valley were more than a hundred men and at their head rode the unmistakable figure of the Tiger himself. "Come on," called Geoffrey, "we have a good half mile start," and seizing his wife's hand he pulled her up the slope.

(Continued Tomorrow.)

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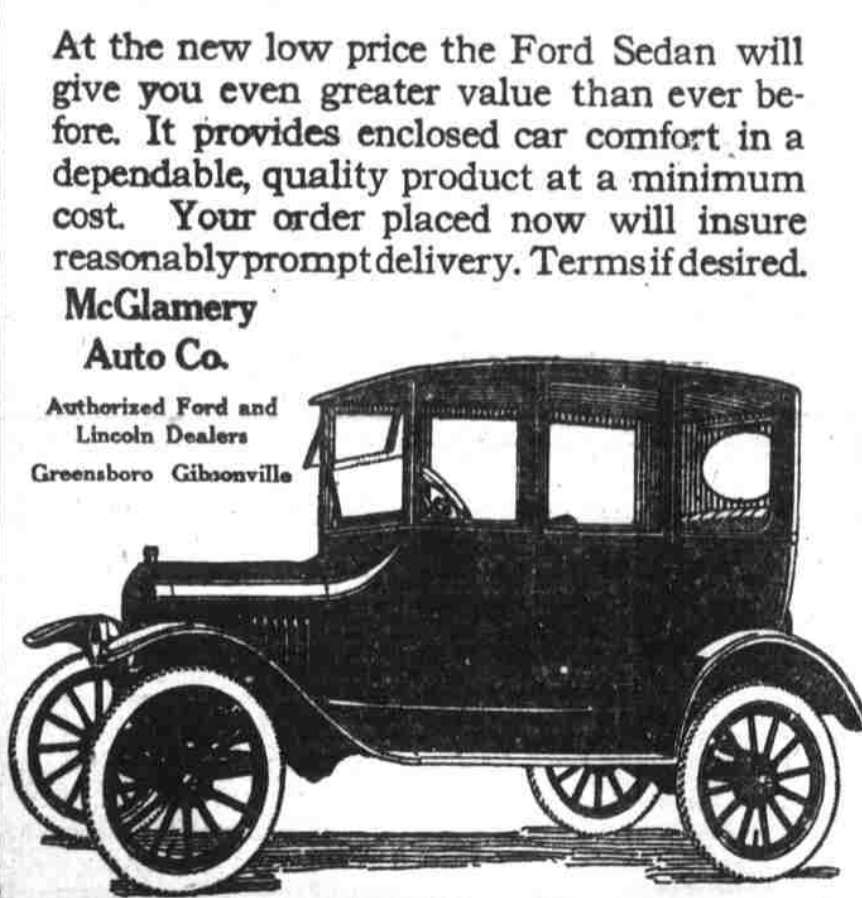
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