

THE
PALL MALL
 GAZETTE

No. 9292.—Vol. LX.

FRIDAY EVENING, JANUARY 4, 1895.

Price One Penny.

THE FLYING MAN.

THE ethnologist looked at the bhimraj feather thoughtfully. "They seemed loth to part with it," he said.

"It's sacred to the chiefs," said the lieutenant; "just as yellow silk, you know, is sacred to the Chinese Emperor."

The ethnologist did not answer. He hesitated. Then, opening the topic abruptly, "What on earth is this cock-and-bull story they have of a flying man?"

The lieutenant smiled faintly. "What did they tell you?"

"I see," said the ethnologist, "that you know of your fame."

The lieutenant began rolling himself a cigarette. "I don't mind hearing about it once more. How does it stand at present?"

"It's so confoundedly childish," said the ethnologist, becoming irritated. "How came you to plant it upon them? Some cheap conjuring or other—and you a British officer!"

The lieutenant made no answer, but leant back in his folding-chair, still smiling, and reached after the matches.

"Here am I, come four hundred miles out of my way to get what is left of the folklore of these people before they are utterly demoralized by missionaries and the military, and all I find is a lot of impossible legends about a sandy-haired scrub of an infantry lieutenant. How he is invulnerable, how he can jump over elephants, how he can fly. That's the toughest nut. One old gentleman described your wings; said they had black plumage, and were not quite as long as a mule. Said he often saw you by moonlight hovering over the crests out towards the Shenda country. . . . Confound it, Gooch!"

The lieutenant laughed cheerfully. "Go on," he said, "go on."

The ethnologist did. At last he wearied. "To trade so," he said, "on these unsophisticated children of the mountains! How could you bring yourself to do it, man?"

"I'm sorry," said the lieutenant, "but truly the thing was forced upon me." He spoke between the last puffs of his cigarette. "I can assure you I was driven to it. And at the time I had not the faintest idea of how the Chin imagination would take it. Or curiosity. I can only plead it was an indiscretion and not malice that made me replace their folklore by a new legend. But as you seem aggrieved I will try and explain the business to you."

He threw away the end of the cigarette.

"It was in the time of the last Lushai expedition that the thing happened, and Walters thought these people you have been visiting were friendly. So, with an airy confidence in my capacity for taking care of myself, he sent me up the gorge—fourteen miles of it—with three of the Derbyshire men and half a dozen sepoy, two mules, and his blessing, to see what the water supply was like at that village you visited. A force of ten—twelve counting the mules—fourteen miles and during a war! You saw the road?"

"Road!" said the ethnologist.

"It's better now than it was. When we went up we had to wade in the river for a mile where the valley narrows, with a smart stream frothing round over our knees and the stones as slippery as ice. There it was I dropped my rifle. Afterwards the sappers blasted the cliff with dynamite, and made the convenient way

you came by. Then below, where those very high cliffs come, we had to keep on dodging across the river—I should say we crossed it a dozen times in a couple of miles.

"We got in sight of the place early the next morning—you know how it lies, on a spur half-way between the big hills—and as we began to appreciate how wickedly quiet the village lay under the sunlight, we came to a stop to consider.

"At that they fired a lump of field sateusep at us, just by way of a welcome. It came trauging down the slope to the right of us where the boulders are, missed my shoulder by an inch or so, and plugged the mule that carried all the provisions and utensils. I never heard such a death rattle before or since. And then we became aware of a number of these gentlemen carrying matchlocks and dressed in things like plaid dusters—you know the Chin style—dodging about along the neck between the village and the crest to the east.

"'Right about turn!' I said, grasping the situation with the skill of a born general. 'Not too close together.'

"And with that encouragement my expedition of ten men came round and set off at a smart trot down the valley again higher up.

"I was not to save anything our dead had carried, but we kept the second mule with us—he carried my tent and some other rubbish—out of a feeling of friendship.

"So ended the battle. Victoriously I admit. Glancing back I saw the valley dotted with the victors, shouting, and firing at us. But no one was hit. These Chins and their guns are very little good except at a sitting shot. They will sit and flunk over a boulder for hours taking aim, and when they fire running it is chiefly for stage effect. Hooker, one of the Derbyshire men, fancied himself rather with the rifle, and stopped behind for half a minute to try his luck as we turned the bend. But he got nothing.

"I'm not a Xenophon to spin much of a yarn about my retreating army. We had to pull up the enemy twice in the next two miles when he became a bit pressing, by exchanging formal shots with him; but on the whole it was a fairly monotonous affair—hard breathing chiefly—until we got near the place where the hills began to run towards the river, and pinch the valley into a gorge. And there we luckily caught a glimpse of half a dozen round, black heads coming slantingways over the hills to the left of us—the east that is—and almost parallel with us.

"At that I called a halt. 'Look here,' says I to Hooker and the other Englishmen, 'what are we to do now?' 'Ah,' pointed to the heads.

"'Headed off, or I'm a nigger,' said one of the men.

"'We shall be,' said another. 'It's the custom with 'em.'

"'They can pot every blessed one of us at fifty yards,' says Hooker.

"In the place where the river is narrow. It's just suicide to go down."

"I looked at the hill to the right of us. It grew steeper lower down the valley, but it still seemed climbable. And all the Chins we had seen hitherto had been on the other side of the stream.

"'It's that or waiting for them,' says Hooker.

"So we started slanting up the hill. There was something faintly suggestive of a road—a band of harder rock—running obliquely up the face of it, and that followed. That Tommy, the geological surveyor, when I showed it him, called it a dyke, though I always thought a dyke meant a ditch. Some Chins presently came into view up the valley and across the river, and I heard some shots. One bullet knocked a splinter off the rock a yard in front of me. Then I saw one of the Sepoys was sitting down about thirty yards behind us. He had simply sat down without a word, apparently not wishing to give trouble. At that I called a halt again, and told Hooker to try another shot at the enemy, while I went back. I found the man was hit in the leg. I took him up, carried him along to put him on the mule—already pretty well laden with the tent and other things, which we had had no time to take off. When I got to the rest with him, Hooker had his empty basket in his hand, and was grinning and pointing to a motionless black spot up the valley. All the rest of the Chins were behind boulders, or back round the bend. 'Five hundred yards,' says Hooker, 'if an inch. Laid him out like a bloomin' doornat. And I'll swear I hit him in the head.'

"I told him to go and do it again, though I had my doubts of the head, and with that we went on again.

"Now the hillside kept getting steeper as we pushed on, and the road we were following more and more of a shelf. At last it was mere cliff above and below us, and our bit of footing scarcely five feet wide at times. 'It's the best road as I have seen in Chin land,' said I, to encourage the men, though I had a fear of what was coming. For the rock every now and then crumbled at the edge.

"In a few minutes the way bent round a corner of the cliff. Three of the Sepoys were in front, then Hooker, then the mule and the wounded man, and the two other Sepoys, then the two white privates and myself. I heard a shout ahead, and saw one of the leading Sepoys—poor devil!—clawing at the rock to the right of him. Then he went down out of sight, and there was a gap in the ledge. The two other Sepoys had vanished. Then with a rumble some more of the ledge came away, making a clean break in the road. We heard two thuds out of sight in the valley. Later, when I looked over my shoulder but a great heap of rocks at the foot of the cliff. "For a minute, perhaps, we were all motionless and silent.

"As soon as he grasped the position one of the Derbyshire men fell swearing at the trap we had fallen into. The two Sepoys with the mule had halted quietly. Hooker grunted and reloaded, and came back past me to the bend.

"Now, when I came to look about me, I began to think we had not been so very unfortunate after all. We were on a shelf, perhaps ten yards across at its widest, and tilting inward a little. Above it the cliff projected, so that we could not be shot down upon, and below was an almost sheer precipice of perhaps two or three hundred feet. Lying down we were invisible to any one across the ravine. The only approach was along the ledge, and on that one man was as good as a host. Later the Chins tried dropping rocks upon us, but all they threw fell a yard or so clear of the ledge. We were in a natural stronghold, with only one disadvantage—our sole provision against hunger and thirst was one live mule—poor eating, and no good as drink. Still we knew we were at most eight or nine miles from the main expedition, and no doubt after a day or so they would send up after us if we did not return.

"After a day or so—"

"The lieutenant paused. "Ever been thirsty, Graham?"

"Not that kind," said the ethnologist.

"If'n. We had the whole of that day, the night, and the next day of it, and only a trifle of dew we wrung out of our clothes and the tent. And below us was the river going giggle, giggle round a rock in mid stream. I never knew such a barrenness of incident, or such a quantity of sensation. The sun might have had Joshua's command still upon it for all the motion one could see; and it blazed like a near furnace. Towards the evening of the first day one of the Derbyshire men said something—nobody heard what—'going out for drink,' I fancy—and went off round the bend of the cliff. We heard shots, and when Hooker looked round the corner the long valley was all blue and hazy between its steep sides, and the man had gone. All we could see was an ornamental gun-barrel projecting over the brow, and a bit of smoke drifting across the sky.

"In the morning the Sepoy, whose leg was shot, was in delirium, and jumped or fell over the cliff. I didn't see him go—I simply missed him after a bit. Then we took the mule and shot it, though didn't want to eat very much, and that must needs go over the cliff, too, in its last struggles. Leaving five of us.

"Peering over we could see the body of the Sepoy down below with his head in the water and the mule about twenty yards away. The man was lying face downwards, and, so far as I could make out, scarcely smashed at all. Badly as the Chins might covet his head, they had the sense to leave it alone until the darkness came. Further down was the heap of crumbled rock, where the three other Sepoys had fallen. As I looked over the edge and saw the river rippling, I was nearly tempted to go after the Sepoy. It seemed a pleasant and desirable thing to go rushing down through the air, with something to drink—or no more thirst, at any rate—at the bottom. I remembered in time, though, that I was the officer in command, and my duty to set a good example, and that kept me from any such foolishness.

"Yet, thinking of that put an idea into my head. I got up and looked

at the tent and tent ropes, and wondered why I had not thought of it before. Then I came and looked over the cliff again. This time the height seemed greater, and the pose of the Sepoy rather more painful. But it was that or nothing. And to cut it short—and it's the centre bit of the whole thing, Graham—I parachuted.

"We got all the ropes we had—not above sixty yards altogether—and tied them round the circumference of the tent, so as to meet in the centre, parachute fashion, with a loop to hold by. Of course my idea was for the tent to go down apex downwards—the other way it was certain to turn over, so I fastened this loop to the hole in the centre of the tent. Then the puzzle came—and we didn't solve it—how to have the whole affair extended when I jumped. My conception was for the four chaps to stand at the corners—two of them as near the edge as possible—and to let the thing be pulled out of their hands. We sewed up the door of the tent with unravelling string, pretty strong, and the same with the hole at the apex.

"By that time—for we were all in a fever of thirst and worked very slowly—the night had set in and the stars were shining. The valley below us was just a silent black pit, and I'm hanged if I liked the prospect when I stood near the edge with the ropes in my hand. 'One, two, three,' said I, and stopped.

"I heard one of the Sepoys give a grunt; then I pulled myself together and, with something between a swear and a sob, out I jumped into the air.

"I must have thought at a frightful pace. It seemed a long time before I was sure that the thing meant to keep steady. At first it heeled sideways. Then I noticed the face of the rock seemed to be streaming up past me, and me motionless. Then I looked down and saw in the dim the river and the dead Sepoy and the dead mule and the heap of crumbled rock rushing up towards me. But in the indistinct light I also saw half a dozen Chins, seemingly aghast at the sight of me, and that the Sepoy was decapitated. At that I wanted to go back again.

"Then my foot was in the mouth of one of the beggars, and in a moment he and I were in a heap with the canvas fluttering down on the top of us. A gun went off—heaven knows where. I fancy I dashed out his brains with my foot. I expected nothing more than to be brained myself by the others, but the poor heathen had never heard of Baldwin, and unconsciously bolted.

"I struggled out of the tangle of dead Chin and canvas, and looked round. About ten paces off lay the head of the Sepoy, staring in the moonlight, and further off was the mule. Then I saw the water and went and drank. There wasn't a sound in the world but the footsteps of the departing Chins, and a faint shout from above, and the swish and ripple of the water. I could see the heads of the chaps upon the ledge black against the sky, but it was too dark for them to see me. I heard Hooker shout my name, but I didn't see the force of answering and so telling the Chins it was a mere mortal had scared them. So soon as I had drunk enough water I started off down the river.

"That about ends the explanation of the flying man story. I never met a soul the whole eight miles of the way. I got to Winter's camp by ten o'clock, and a born idiot of a sentinel had the cheek to let fly at me as I came trotting out of the darkness. As soon as I had hammered my story into Winter's thick skull he sent Hobson and Banks to clear the Chins out and get our men down. But for my own part I had too good a thirst to provoke it by going with them. Besides, all the water I had swigged had somehow upset me. . . . It's a noxious drink this water—taken neat.

"You have heard what kind of a yarn the Chins made of it. Wings as long as a mule, hey? And black feathers! The gay lieutenant bird! Chir—ooh!"