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The Siren of the Snakes

By ARLTON EADIE

'A multitude of creeping things came out of the dark forest in a wave of hideous gliding death—a thrill-tale of India

"LIVE for ever, O protector of the poor! *Salaam*, O favored of Allah! Art thou not my father and my mother?"

One does not need to be long in command of a Gurkha battalion, occupying a frontier fort, before discovering that, when a Himalayan hillman starts addressing you in this strain, he intends to ask you to do him a favor. Knowing that in the absence of the assistant commissioner I was expected by the powers that be to act as judge, law-giver, policeman and general adviser to all and sundry, I resigned myself to the inevitable and summoned the Gurkha *bavildar* to act as interpreter. This man, Ramzan Mar by name, possessed the gift of tongues in no small degree; there was not a hill-dialect throughout the whole of Hindu-Koh of which he did not have at least a working knowledge. He possessed another gift which, in a native, is even more rare and precious—that of brevity. He ruthlessly divested the narrative of all those endless repetitions and flowers of speech so dear to the native heart, and presented me with the gist as follows:

The man was a messenger from a tiny village situated among the foot-hills about six miles to the east, and had "come before the *sabib's* face" to solicit aid in putting a stop to the depredations of some denizen of the surrounding jungles.

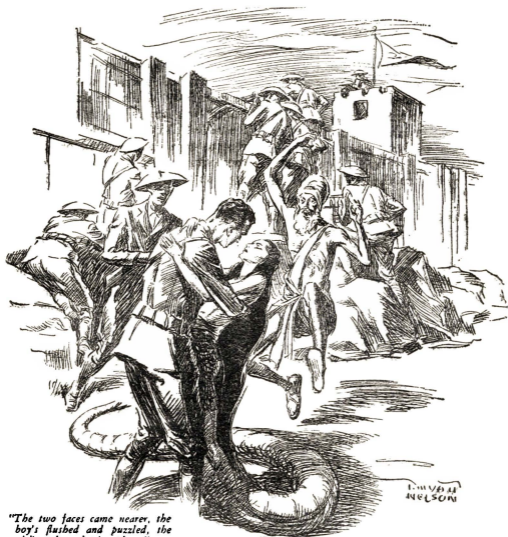
I can assure you that I grew interested when Ramzan's translation reached this point. One of the compensations of being quartered amid the somewhat

desolate mountains which form the northern bulwarks of Hindustan is that they contain hunting-grounds which may be classed among the finest in the world. Ibex, burrel, gazelles, chamois, and antelopes abound. Nor are the more formidable *ferae naturae* lacking; with patience—and luck—one might get a shot at a leopard or prowling tiger, and I at once surmised that it was some such animal that was causing the trouble. But it turned out I was wrong.

"It is not a tiger, *sabib*," Ramzan translated, after the man had replied to my question. "He says it is a gigantic python."

"A python?—a man-eating python?" I cried in amazement, my interest now at fever-heat. Many were the stories I had heard of the terrible power possessed by these huge reptiles, which, although lacking the poison-fangs common to the majority of Indian snakes, are nevertheless as much dreaded as any viper or cobra. They rely upon their immense power of muscular contraction to overcome their prey, encircling the victim in their deadly folds and crushing it to a pulp before swallowing it whole. But I had certainly never heard of an instance where one had deliberately attacked a village, and I made no secret of the fact that I was somewhat skeptical.

When Ramzan translated my doubts to the man they evoked a perfect torrent of protestations, accompanied by abundant excited gestures.



"The two faces came nearer, the boy's flushed and puzzled, the girl's pale and triumphant."

"What's he getting annoyed about?" I inquired.

"He says it is no ordinary snake, *sahib*," the Gurkha answered. "It is a fiend—a devil—a beast of Satan—into which the spirit of some long-dead witch has entered. Nobody in the village is safe from it. At first it attacked only the goats and sheep; but now it lies in wait among the terraced rice-fields and springs upon the women as they work. It enters the very huts. It——"

W. T.—5

"That will do," I interrupted, as I rose to my feet and made my way toward the quarters occupied by my second in command.

Gordon Meldreuth was in years but little more than a boy, having been drafted to the regiment when he passed out of Sandhurst a couple of years previously. He was a handsome, likable young fellow and, having many tastes in common, we had got on remarkably well together. He was as keen on big game

hunting as I was myself, and his face lit up with pleasure when I explained the situation to him.

"Of course I shall be only too pleased to come with you, sir," he cried, his eyes roaming round the trophies of the chase with which his room was decorated; from the leopardskin beneath his feet to the magnificent markhor horns above the mantelpiece. "I should like to add a sizable python to the list of my conquests!"

Returning to the orderly-room, I was able to send the messenger away happy with the assurance that on the morrow the two English *sabibs* would, Allah willing, effectually rid his village of the terror which beset it.

RAMZAN MAR accompanied us when we rode down the winding road from the fort at daybreak the following morning, starting thus early in order to get the business over before the heat of the day began.

The Nepalese mountaineers, from whom the Gurkha regiments are recruited, bear the well-deserved reputation of being as good *shikarees* as they are soldiers—which is saying a good deal for their abilities in the hunting line—and Ramzan was no exception to the rule. He was a grave, taciturn man, short in stature as are all his race, and his squat brown features would have undoubtedly failed to win any but a consolation prize at a beauty show. But he was a perfect cragsman, an excellent stalker and an adept in woodcraft generally, being as active and wary as a wildcat. On our arrival at the village he at once set about commandeering the services of all the able-bodied inhabitants to assist as beaters in the chase.

One of the villagers, who had been out early gathering wild honey, had seen the

python lying in a deep *nullab*, or gorge, with high, precipitous banks partly clothed in long *nurkal-grass*. So our forces were at once marshaled for the drive in the manner which Ramzan thought best. While the small army of beaters was proceeding to the head of the *nullab*, Meldreuth and I set off on foot to take up a position on a rocky promontory at the farther end, overlooking a spot where the python would have to pass. Scarcely had we arrived there, when there broke out a hideous chorus of whoops, yells and whistles as the beaters dashed into the other end of the gorge like a pack of fox-hounds. I well knew, however, that this ostentatious display of zeal resulted more from the prevailing idea that the greater row each man made the less chance there would be of the python coming near him, than from any eagerness in the pursuit.

Nearer and nearer came the din, until it sounded but a hundred yards or so from where we crouched with ready rifles. Then it became apparent that Ramzan's woodcraft was not at fault. The reed-like *nurkal-grass* round the edge of the little rocky clearing below was gently parted and through it emerged the flat, wicked-looking head of the python.

"Hold thy fire, *sabib*," whispered Ramzan, who had appeared as silently as a ghost behind us. "Wait till he is well out in the open."

I nodded my head to show that I heard his advice, and my finger took the "first pressure" on the trigger as the reptile began to emerge. It was in no hurry, however, in spite of the uproar behind it. An age seemed to pass before the entire length of its body became visible; but when it was fully revealed I could not help a slight gasp of astonishment escaping me.

Never in the whole course of my Indian experience had I even so much as heard tell of such a gigantic creature. The girth of the largest part of its body must have been at least three feet and its length at least thirty. By those who have only seen a python in a cage at the Zoological Society's Gardens, or a stuffed specimen in a museum, it may perhaps be thought that the mosaic-like markings of brilliant orange, brown and black would render it a conspicuous enough object; but, actually, the very reverse is the case. As the creature wound its sinuous way among the small boulders and clumps of sun-dried grass, it harmonized admirably with the color of its surroundings. Those seemingly conspicuous black stripes so nearly resembled the shadows cast by the stones and grass-stems that, had the python remained motionless, it would have been extremely difficult to detect its presence.

But I had little time in which to admire this example of nature's protective coloring. The python was now in the center of the little clearing—it seemed almost impossible to miss. I took careful aim along the sights and gently squeezed the final pressure on my trigger. At the same moment Gordon Meldreuth fired.

That python seemed to bear a charmed life! I saw the flash of my explosive bullet as it impinged on the rocks a few inches from the creature's head. Meldreuth was using solid, but the sharp *stod* of his bullet on the stones, instead of the unmistakable dull *plop* which it makes on striking flesh, told the same tale of an inglorious miss.

"*No luggat* [missed him]," whispered Ramzan in a tone of bitter disappointment; then—"Quick, *sahib*! Shoot again before he is out of sight."

Once more our rifles spoke. But by this time the now thoroughly alarmed

reptile had so changed its position that the sun was shining directly into our eyes, making accurate sighting difficult. Whether it was due to this fact, or to the feelings of exasperation at our first bungling, I know not. The only thing I am certain of is that, so far as injuring the python was concerned, we might have been merely pelting him with pebbles. Fortunately for the chase, however, his progress was now over fairly open ground, so that we could catch an occasional glimpse of his body as it wound in and out amid the boulders. He seemed to be making directly toward a spot on the left bank of the *nullah* where the sheer limestone cliff rose in a kind of natural dome, at the base of which—in spite of our efforts to head him off—he at length disappeared.

"*Shabash!* [bravo]," cried Ramzan, pointing to the numerous well-defined tracks among the beaten grass, showing the trails were frequently used. "We have him now, *sahib*. This is his lair."

As usual, the *shikaree* wasted but little time in words. Drawing his *kookerie*—that heavy curved knife which is a characteristic part of the Gurkhas' equipment, and which they are in the habit of using as much for domestic as for fighting purposes—he at once set to work hacking away the undergrowth around the place where the python had gone to earth. Presently he paused in his task and beckoned me to approach.

ONE glance was sufficient to show me that the place where the python had taken refuge was no natural fissure in the rock. The entrance was an arched doorway, richly decorated with native sculptures, the weather-worn appearance of which seemed to indicate an extreme antiquity. Immediately above the lintel was a large statue, which at first glance I

thought was supposed to represent a mermaid. Closer inspection, however, convinced me that I was looking upon an idol of a Hindoo goddess, Nāga-Kanya, the Snake Princess, who, half snake, half woman, is still worshipped by thousands of devotees.

"Why, this must be one of those old cave-temples dedicated to the snake-goddess, of which I have heard so much," cried Gordon Meldreuth; adding with a laugh, "Well, Mister Python has certainly sought sanctuary in an appropriate spot!"

I noticed Ramzan's eyes narrow suddenly at the words. As befits a true son of the prophet, he was accustomed to profess a supreme contempt for every brand of superstition not orthodox to his own faith; although later on I had cause to suspect that he was not so indifferent to the gods of the Hindoos as he affected to be. But the villagers themselves made no secret of their feelings. They hung back, gathering into knots and talking eagerly in low, awed tones, occasionally casting terrified glances at the statue over the cave-door. It was clear that the fact of the python seeking refuge in the Temple of Nāga-Kanya presented itself as no mere coincidence to their superstitious minds.

By this time the brushwood was entirely cleared away from the entrance, and Ramzan sheathed his *kookerie* and looked inquiringly at me.

Now, I do not mind admitting that had I been alone I should have given up the hunt there and then; for the prospect of seeking the python in its lair sent a tingling sensation down my spine merely to think of it. But I knew that the eyes of the whole crowd were upon me watching for the least sign of funk in the English *sabib*. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to unsling my rifle and make toward the cave with such outward

appearance of determination as I could assume.

The interior of the place was lit by a dim half-light, which filtered through a creeper-grown aperture high up in one of the walls. Pausing a few seconds to allow my eyes to grow accustomed to the semi-obscurity, I advanced step by step, my rifle held ready in my hands, searching the shadows on either side for some sign of the python. I breathed more freely when I had arrived opposite the gap through which the light entered, for here one could at least see the surrounding objects with tolerable distinctness; and here, to my unbounded surprize, I perceived evidence that at some period or other the cavern must have been occupied by a human being. A kind of rude couch of skins stood in one corner, together with a few earthenware vessels of primitive manufacture.

I had, however, but little time in which to take in the full significance of these details, for at that moment I became aware of two small points of light shining amid the inky blackness of the farther end of the cavern. They were the eyes of the python, intently watching my every movement!

FOR perhaps a full minute I stood stock-still, gazing at those two specks of greenish fire. Then—it may have been my imagination, or merely the natural effect of the straining of my own eyes in the darkness, but it seemed as if those bright, watching eyes were getting larger—nearer—that the python was silently writhing its way toward me as I stood.

Who has not heard of the hypnotic effect of a snake's direct gaze? Many were the accounts I had heard of that strange, uncanny power—heard and disbelieved—but at that moment I was on the point of receiving positive and practi-

cal proof of the matter. I felt a sense of mental numbness stealing over me; all danger seemed to be forgotten in a dreamy speculation as to what would happen next; all power of making effort seemed to be paralyzed. It appeared that there was no other course open to me but to wait there, silent, motionless, for the inevitable.

Then some flicker of my fast-expiring consciousness warned me of the peril in which I stood—that unless I roused myself and threw off the fatal lethargy, I was lost. Blindly, mechanically—almost, I may say, unconsciously—I raised my rifle and let drive with both barrels.

Fortunately the distance which separated us was so short that a miss was impossible. The two points of fire were extinguished as though they had been snuffed out by an invisible hand, and the next instant the cave was filled with the violent contortions of the reptile's coils in their last death-throes.

Scarcely had the smoke from the double discharge cleared away, when I saw another pair of eyes gleaming from the opposite corner. Heavens! had I penetrated into a perfect nest of pythons?

Even as the thought crossed my mind I was conscious of something brushing across my cheek. Whether it was some large moth, or dark-loving bat disturbed by the noise of my shots, I did not pause to consider. Without even waiting to reload my rifle, I turned tail and—well, let us call it, "retreated with all speed."

"Two of them?" cried Gordon Meldreuth, when I had explained what had happened.

I nodded. "I have accounted for one."

"And the other is coming out now. Listen!" he interrupted.

A slight, vague noise was approaching toward the mouth of the cavern, and something appeared indistinctly in the

gloom. In a flash Meldreuth had thrown his rifle to his shoulder.

"Hold!" cried Ramzan Mar, suddenly, knocking up his weapon so that it exploded harmlessly in the air. "That is no python, *sabib!*"

The *shikaree's* quick sense of hearing had not deceived him. A second later, to our unbounded amazement, there advanced into the sunlight a young girl, slight, graceful and well-formed.

So unexpected was her appearance that for a space in which one might count a hundred nobody moved or spoke. We stood—the beaters, Ramzan, Meldreuth and myself—like men suddenly frozen into stone, staring at the girl as she slowly advanced toward us.

She was not a native—or if she were she belonged to a caste with which I was unacquainted. Her skin was as light as any European's, and her features, framed in masses of waving black hair flowing loose on her shoulders, were of an almost classical regularity. In their flawless perfection they resembled more the ideal sculptures of ancient Greece than a creature of flesh and blood. Her tall, supple form was draped in the folds of a strange, iridescent garment; formed, I subsequently noted, out of the semi-transparent cast skins of snakes, and over her rounded bosom there fell a long necklace composed of the threaded teeth of the same reptile.

As we stood there, amazed and wondering, there came a yell of terror from the beaters, and with one accord they took to their heels, shouting out some unintelligible gibberish as they disappeared in the jungle.

"What are the fools shouting about?" Meldreuth asked, impatiently addressing Ramzan Mar. ...

"They say that this maiden is Nāga Kanya, the goddess of the snakes—she

who crushes the life out of mortal men with her embrace or poisons them with her kiss, O *sabib*," the Gurkha answered. Although the man endeavored to infuse into his reply some of his customary contempt, I could see by the expression on his usually impassive face that his mind was not entirely at ease.

But Gordon Meldreuth only laughed aloud.

"The fools fear that she will crush them in her embrace, do they?" he cried, his eyes fixed on the graceful figure before him. Then he laughed again. "Well, one might die a far less pleasant death than that!"

They were words spoken light-heartedly and in jest; words which were probably forgotten by him almost as soon as they had left his lips. But they were words which, in the light of after-events, were destined to remain inscribed on my mind with letters of fire, like a warning written by the prophetic finger of fate.

NIGHT—an Indian night. Not the windless, stifling night of the Plains, which seems but a brief spell of heat-laden darkness between two baking days, but a night amid the upper slopes of the Himalayas; where the wind, cooled over miles of glaciers, fills the lungs with its icy, exhilarating breath.

The moon had just topped the crests of the distant crags rising along the ridge of eternal snow, and was lighting up such a sublimely grand prospect of fell, forest and flood as could hardly be surpassed the world over. Our fort was set on a broad, jutting spur of rock commanding the pass below. On either side the mountains rose in rugged precipices, rocky amphitheatres, and gigantic buttresses toward the naked peaks which stood out in grand yet awful magnificence against the silvery sky. Glaciers lay in the hollows between some of the higher

spurs, while broad fields of virgin snow filled the head of the main valley. To the right, so near that the wind drifted the spray across the angles of the narrow, winding path leading up to the gate of the fort, there fell from above a foaming torrent which, roaring sullenly below, filled the valley with its deep, never-ending resonance. Farther down, the steep mountainsides were dark with vast tracks of somber-hued deodar forests rent here and there by long lines of uprooted and splintered trees, masses of earth-soiled snow and debris marking the course of avalanches which had swept from the towering heights above.

Such was the prospect spread out before me as I leaned over the stone parapet of the fort, smoking and musing over the events of the day. We had returned to the fort about nightfall, the mysterious girl accompanying us. I had been desirous of leaving her at the village in the foot-hills; but when we called there on our way back, the inhabitants resolutely refused to allow her to enter, finally backing up their refusal with volleys of stones and curses.

"Take the snake-witch from our doors, O *sabib*," they had shouted. "Are we weary of our lives that we should give shelter to Nāga-Kanya, the daughter of death and destruction? Take her hence, O *sabib*, or we will surely slay her."

After that there was no alternative but to lodge her in the fort until I could have her sent under escort down the Rotang Pass to Sultanpur, where she would be in safe and kindly hands at the mission-home.

Who was this girl? Where did she come from? By what train of extraordinary circumstances had she been enabled to enter, unharmed, into that python-haunted temple of the snake-goddess? Meldreuth and I had discussed these

questions over dinner without arriving at any satisfactory solution. Nor could the Gurkha sergeant Ramzan Mar enlighten us. He had questioned her in every one of the hill dialects without eliciting the least sign of understanding. As to the language which she herself spoke, Ramzan emphatically called upon Allah and the Prophet to witness that he had never before heard it spoken. One word she had repeated many times, "Vasantasena," at the same time pointing to herself. This, we assumed, was her name; for when we uttered the strange sibilant syllables she would nod and smile as though pleased. At the same time I noted that her smiles were sunniest when it was the young and handsome Gordon Meldreuth who spoke her name. She seemed to attach herself to him as a matter of course; for such a grizzled old veteran as myself she had scarcely a second glance.

A QUICK step on the concrete flagging of the courtyard roused me from my reverie. It was Gordon Meldreuth. As he came toward me, carrying his topee in his hand, as though to let the cool night breeze play on his uncovered head, the moonlight fell full upon his face. Maybe the cold white rays deceived my eyes, but it seemed to me as if his features were as colorless as marble and that his usually bright eyes were dull and troubled.

"I've warned the men who are to form the escort tomorrow, sir," he reported. "When do they parade?"

"At daybreak," I answered. "We at least owe it to the girl to get her as soon as possible to a place where she will be well looked after by sympathetic persons of her own sex. Then it may be discovered who she is and where she comes from."

"Yes," Meldreuth said, after a long pause. "Perhaps it will be best. Poor Vasantasena!"

I half turned and, under pretense of knocking the ash from my cigar, flashed a quick look into the young officer's face. There had been such a wealth of wistful tenderness in his voice as he uttered the sibilant accents of her strange name—a name which somehow vaguely suggested the hissing of a snake—that the suspicion which had been forming in my mind for the past few hours now flashed into sudden certainty. My impressionable young subaltern had fallen in love with this jungle girl!

"Yes," I repeated, this time in a tone of grim conviction. "It certainly is best that she should leave here."

If he noticed the irony of my utterance he gave no sign. For awhile he remained silently gazing at the distant moonlit peaks; then he passed his hand wearily across his forehead and laughed unsteadily.

"I'm not subject to nerves, sir, as you know"—he spoke with that constrained awkwardness of a man imparting a confidence of which he is half ashamed—"but tonight I have an unaccountable foreboding of coming calamity. If we were on the verge of a big push I could understand the feeling. But all is quiet on the frontier—yet death seems to hover in the very air."

I was now staring at the man in genuine astonishment. Had I not seen him dozens of times under heavy fire, and had I not known him for one of the coolest officers under my command, I should have thought he was suffering from funk—which was absurd. Yet here he was talking about "forebodings" like any nervous schoolgirl. He must have guessed what was passing in my mind, for:

"I know it sounds like so much absolute rot, sir," he said with a laughing shrug, "but the feeling is there all the same. I wouldn't have spoken of it, only

we've been something more to each other than mere messroom acquaintances, and—if anything should happen to me—I want you to look after"—again his voice grew softer as he uttered the name—"Vasantasena."

"Of course I'll do my best for the girl," I rejoined, somewhat impatiently. "But what is likely to happen to you? The hill tribes are quiet. What danger—"

"Hullo! What's up with the sentry?"

Meldreuth broke in suddenly with the words as he pointed to the Gurkha on guard. The man had come to a halt at the farther angle of the parapet, and although he had not challenged, was looking intently at something directly below. In a moment we had hurried to his side.

"What is it, sentry?" I asked.

THE man straightened up, came to the slope, and saluted before he answered:

"A snake, *sahib*. There—on the path below. And there is another—and another! By Allah! every snake in the mountains hath come at the call of that accursed witch-girl!"

Extraordinary as the assertion sounded, it certainly seemed as if it were true. The rays of the full moon lit up the landscape below until it appeared like a model carved in shimmering silver. By its light, almost as clear as day, we beheld a terrifying sight. From the dark forests of deodar-cedar, from the boulders lining the zigzag path to the fort, from the thickets of grass and reeds bordering the rushing stream—from every scrap of cover, it seemed—there emerged an ever-increasing multitude of creeping things.

Huge pythons, hooded cobras, slender whip-snakes, deadly puff-adders—every poisonous and loathsome thing that crawls was there—all forming one wave of hideous gliding death—all converging to

the path which led up to the fort in which we stood.

"Guard . . . turn out! Bugler, sound 'Fall in'!"

Meldreuth rapped out the orders smartly. There was no hint of nervousness about him now. In spite of his recent talk about premonitions, here, in the face of actual danger, he was ice-cool.

"Machine-gunners—to your emplacements. . . . Rifles, line the parapet. Bombers, make ready! . . . Point-blank range—independent firing. Take your own time, men, and let 'em have it hot. Rapid . . . load!"

For one brief second there sounded the faint metallic clicking as the cartridge-clips were pressed into the magazines and the breech-bolts thrust home. The next instant the peaceful stillness of the valley gave place to a pandemonium of hell. The fort had only two small guns belonging to a mule battery, but what we lacked in artillery was amply made up for in small arms and bombs. The quick rattle of the rifles; the sustained whirring of the machine-guns; the sharp bark of the little nine-pounders; the dull thudding explosions of the Mills' bombs—all combined to make up a devil's harmony difficult indeed to surpass.

Such was the mass of reptiles wedged in the gorge below that every shot must have told. But their numbers seemed endless. As fast as one rank of the mass was blown into writhing fragments, another advanced to take its place. The little white path was now black with the reptiles, living and dead. But in spite of the appalling hail of lead showered upon it, that nightmare host crept nearer and ever nearer to the gate of the fort.

"Steady, men. Keep cool and fire low. Gunners, concentrate on the head of the column."

And so the conflict went on; and a more

fierce or fantastic one was never waged on this planet—and probably never will be.

"*Sahib—Meldreuth sahib!*"

So engrossed had I been in the scene before me that I had all this time scarcely given a thought to the girl Vasantasena. But as these words fell on my ear, uttered in a soft whisper, the memory of the strange circumstances under which we had found her rushed back to my mind. I remembered the superstitious awe in which the natives held her—her dress of pythons' skins—her home in the den—and the horde of snakes which now beset us. Small wonder was it that my brain was in a confused whirl as I turned round at the sound of her voice, speaking, for the first time, intelligible words.

THE jungle girl was standing immediately in the rear of the firing-line. Her hair was unloosened, flowing about her breast and shoulders and showing up their gleaming whiteness against its raven hue. Her eyes were shining with excitement; her lips parted in a smile—it seemed of triumph. Her lissom form was swaying, undulating, like some graceful palm shaken in the wind—or like some serpent about to strike. . . .

"Meldreuth *sahib*," again she uttered his name; and yet again: "Meldreuth!"

I saw the boy turn and for a space look into her deep, compelling eyes; standing like a man fascinated—entranced. Then he took a step forward and caught the swaying figure in his arms.

"There is no danger——" he began: but his voice died away and a look of wonder came into his face. For her slender white arms had enfolded themselves about his neck; her lithe body pressed close to his. Nearer and nearer came the two faces—the boy's flushed, half puzzled; the girl's pale, coldly triumphant—her eyes never for an instant quitting

his—until at last their lips were pressed together in a lingering, passionate kiss.

"*Bismillah!* The snakes are at the gate!"

The frenzied shout from the parapet caused me to turn my eyes. It was true. About the one slender barrier which stood between the teeming horde and ourselves there was piled a mass of reptiles—I heard the timbers creak and groan beneath their weight. Bombs were useless now—they would only serve to blow in our own defenses. I shouted the order for the rifles to take up their position on the towers flanking the gate, and began to lead the way. But I had not taken a couple of strides before a terrible cry, coming from behind, caused me to stop dead.

Gordon Meldreuth was still on the same spot where I had last seen him, but instead of being in the embrace of Vasantasena he was now struggling in the coils of an immense python!

Heaven alone knows by what means it had gained access to the fort; nor was there time even to consider such a matter. With the rapidity of a whirling whip-lash, the rest of the creature's body wrapped itself round his legs, throwing him to the ground.

Even in the brief second that I stood fumbling with the flap of my revolver-holster I saw the terrible coils contract, and heard the sound—such as I never wish to hear again—as the bone-crushing pressure was exerted.

Revolver in hand, I dashed forward.

But Ramzan Mar was readier than I. He appeared as if by magic by the side of the pair in that devil's embrace, and raised his rifle until it almost touched the reptile's head. Then came a sudden flash of fire—a sharp report—and the hideous head disappeared—blown into space by the near discharge.

Snatching a *hookerie* from the belt of

the nearest man, I assisted Ramzan in hacking asunder the still palpitating coils of the python, until at last we had poor Meldreuth free. But one glance into his face was enough to tell me that he was doomed.

For a few seconds I stood, half dazed, looking down at the pitiful wreck of what, a few minutes before, had been a man full of life and the desire to live. Then a sudden thought came to me.

"Where is Vasantasena?" I asked of Ramzan.

"There, O *sabib*," the man answered, pointing with his reddened blade to the faintly moving fragments of the python.

"There?" I repeated, aghast, as the sinister import of his words came home to me. "There? Are you mad, *bavildar*?"

Ramzan shrugged grimly.

"At least she is not within the fort, *sabib*," he declared.

"You talk like a child—not a man!" I cried roughly, trying to fight down the ghastly conviction which was taking hold of my mind. "If the girl is not here she

must have contrived to lower herself over the wall of the fort, and so escape."

The grim old *shikaree* did not answer at once. Instead, he stooped slowly and raised from the ground some tattered fragments of snakeskin, such as composed the dress of Vasantasena. Stooping again, he disentangled a string of blood-stained objects—the necklace which she was accustomed to wear—and held it aloft.

"The snake-girl changed back into her natural form even as she held the captain-*sabib* in her arms," he asserted solemnly. "Of a truth, *sabib*, she was indeed—Nāga-Kanya, the queen of all the snakes. That is why they attacked the fort. Her subjects came at her command—and at her death they depart! Look, *sabib*!"

The Gurkha pointed over the parapet as he spoke.

Not a living creature remained in the pass below. But at the farther end of the gorge toward the foot-hills and jungles of the plains, a dark, undulating mass was slowly fading out of sight.
