

**THE MYSTERY OF
THE BLACK
JUNGLE**

THE MYSTERY OF THE BLACK JUNGLE

EMILIO SALGARI

**TRANSLATED BY NICO LORENZUTTI
EDITED BY CATHERINE PECK**



The Mystery of the Black Jungle

By Emilio Salgari

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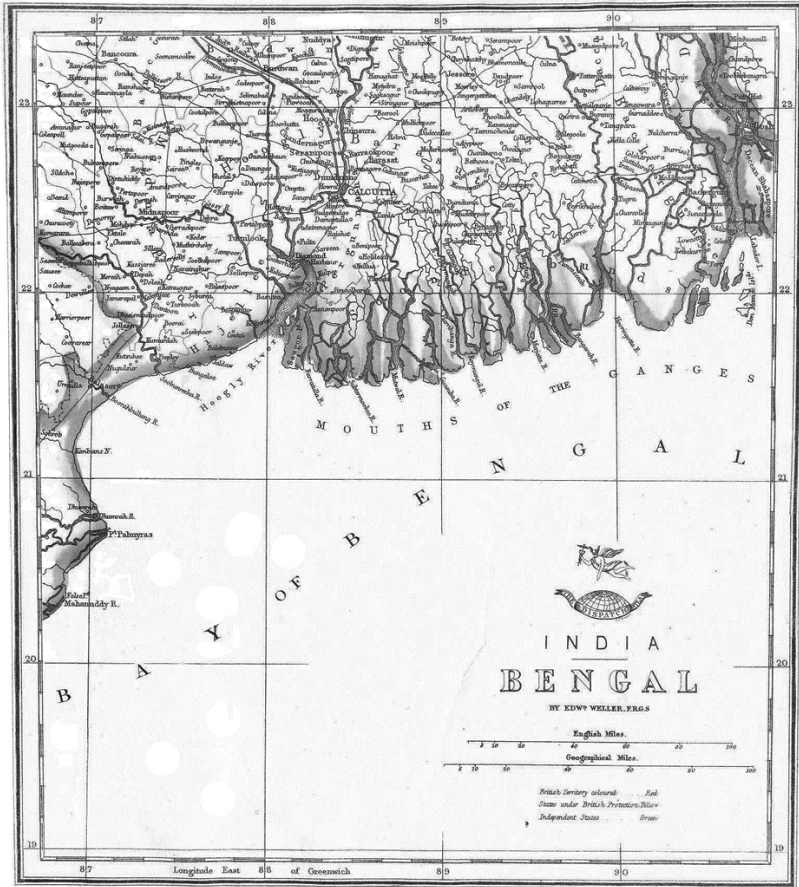
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Dev & Son Lith^{rs} to The Queen

Engraved by Edw. Wallis, Duke St. Birmingham.

Part I

The Strangers

Chapter 1

A Murder

The Ganges, the great river sacred to Hindus, emerges from the snowy mountains of the Himalayas and flows through the rich provinces of Kashmir, Delhi, Agra, Benares, Patna and Bengal, giving life to some of the most populous cities in India. Three hundred miles from the sea, it divides in two, forming within its branches a vast delta unique to the world.

A multitude of streams emanate from those imposing arms; large and small canals crisscross an immense tract of land bounded by the Bay of Bengal, creating an infinite number of islands, islets and sandbanks, known to the world as the Sundarbans.

No place is stranger, more desolate or more frightening than the Sundarbans. No cities, no villages, no huts or hovels; endless jungles of thorny bamboo stretch from north to south, east to west, the tops of their tall stems swaying in the wind among a deadly miasma rising from the rotting foliage and human corpses set adrift upstream in the Ganges.

By day, a dismal silence reigns supreme, unnerving even the bravest of souls, but once darkness descends, the air fills with a frightening cacophony of howls, roars, and hisses that make the blood run cold.

Ask a Bengali to set foot in the Sundarbans and he will refuse; an offer of a hundred, two hundred, five hundred rupees, will not sway him. Ask a Molanghi¹ and he will refuse just as adamantly, as to set foot in those jungles is to ask for death.

A thousand dangers lurk beneath the foliage among the mire and shallow waters. Large and ancient crocodiles patiently await their prey, hiding by ponds and riverbanks; tigers stalk passing boats, ready to pounce upon the

¹ A member of a tribe that lives on the outskirts of the Sundarbans

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first sailor that strays too close to shore. Rhinoceroses roam and attack at the slightest provocation; snakes abound in infinite varieties, from tiny poisonous serpents to enormous pythons large enough to grind an ox within their coils. But perhaps the deadliest threat are the Indian Thugs, men that skulk in the shadows, searching for victims to strangle and sacrifice to quell their goddess' thirst for blood.

And yet, despite these dangers, on the evening of May 16, 1851, a large fire blazed in the southern part of the Sundarbans, about four hundred paces from the three mouths of the Mangal, a wide-banked, muddy-watered branch of the Ganges that empties into the Bay of Bengal.

The flames shone brightly against the dark sky, illuminating a large bamboo hut before which slept a man wrapped in a large *dupatta*, a cape made from coarse cloth. He was a handsome Bengali, about thirty years of age, with muscular limbs and dark bronze skin. Three horizontal lines of ash streaked his brow, marking him as one of Shiva's devotees.

Though he slept, his dreams must have been troubling, for he frowned at times, and his forehead beaded with perspiration. His strong chest heaved against his *dupatta*, as mumbled whispers escaped his lips.

"It's almost time," he smiled. "The sun is setting, the peacocks have fallen silent, the marabous have flown off... a jackal cries... Where is she? Why isn't she here?... What have I done? Isn't this the place?... Come, sweet vision... I long to see you... I must see you... even if only for a minute..."

"Ah, there she is, there she is!... Looking at me with those dark eyes, a smile on her lips... Such a beautiful smile! Divine vision, why do you stand before me in silence?... Why do you look at me so?... Don't be afraid; I am Tremal-Naik, Hunter of the Black Jungle. Speak, let me hear your sweet voice... the sun is setting, it's growing dark... No! Don't go! Don't go! Please!"

Suddenly the Bengali let out a sharp cry, his face twisted in anguish.

Drawn by the noise, a second Indian ran out of the hut, a shorter agile man with strong powerful legs. His proud bearing, dark eyes, earrings and the *languti*² about his thighs, indicated he was a Maratha, a warrior from a tribe in Western India.

² Short loincloth

“Poor master!” he muttered, studying Tremal-Naik. “Another nightmare!”

He stirred the fire then sat down beside the hunter, taking up a fan of peacock feathers.

“What a mystery!” mumbled the sleeping man. “Is that blood?! Are those nooses? Run, sweet vision, run... it isn’t safe!”

“Blood, visions, nooses?” muttered the Maratha, surprised. “What a dream!”

Suddenly the hunter opened his eyes and sat upright.

“No, no!” he exclaimed, “Don’t...!”

The Maratha looked closely at him.

“A bad dream, master?” he said, a note of compassion in his voice.

The Bengali closed his eyes, opened them once again and fixed them upon the Maratha.

“Ah, it’s you, Kammamuri!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, master.”

“Watching over me?”

“And keeping the flies away?”

Tremal-Naik took a deep breath and wiped his brow.

“Where are Hurti and Aghur?” he asked.

“In the jungle. They found some tiger tracks last night and went off in search of it this morning.”

“Ah!” Tremal-Naik replied dully.

He sighed heavily and frowned.

“What troubles you, master?” asked Kammamuri. “You seem ill.”

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

“You were talking in your sleep.”

“What!?!”

“Yes, master, you spoke of a strange vision.”

A bitter smile spread across the hunter’s lips.

“I’m suffering, Kammamuri,” he said angrily. “I’m suffering terribly.”

“I know, master. I’ve been watching you for the past sixteen days. You’ve grown melancholy, taciturn, and yet not so long ago you were not like this.”

“That’s true.”

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“Have you grown tired of the jungle?”

“Of course not, Kammamuri. This is where I was born and raised; this is where I’ll die.”

“Well then? What’s caused this sudden change?”

“A woman, a vision, a spirit!”

“A woman!” Kammamuri exclaimed in surprise. “A woman?”

Tremal-Naik nodded then pressed his brow as if to stifle a disturbing thought. Silence fell between the two men, broken only by the murmur of the stream and the cries of the wind.

“Where did you see this woman?” asked the Maratha after a few minutes had passed.

“In the jungle,” Tremal-Naik replied darkly. “I’ll never forget that night, Kammamuri! I was hunting for snakes along the bank of a stream when a vision appeared just twenty paces from me, among a thicket of blood-red *mussaenda*. She was radiant, superb. I never thought the gods could create such beauty. She had large dark eyes, fair skin, and long black hair.

“She stared at me for a moment, sighed sadly, and vanished. Stunned, I stood there, unable to move. Once the shock had faded, I went to look for her, but it had grown dark and she was nowhere to be found. Was she an apparition? A woman or some kind of spirit? I’m still not certain.”

Tremal-Naik fell silent. He was shaking visibly and Kammamuri wondered if his master had been taken with fever.

“That vision affected me deeply,” Tremal-Naik added angrily. “A strange feeling took hold of me, as if I’d been bewitched. Since that day, I see her everywhere, dancing before me in the jungle, swimming before the bow of my boat when I’m on the river; my thoughts always turn to her; she appears in all my dreams. I think I’m going mad...”

“You’re scaring me, master,” said the Maratha, looking about nervously.

“Who was she?”

“I don’t know, Kammamuri. She was beautiful though, very beautiful,” Tremal-Naik exclaimed passionately.

“A spirit!?”

“Perhaps.”

“A goddess?”

“Who knows?”

“And you’ve never seen her again?”

“I’ve seen her several times. I returned to that stream at the same hour the following night. When the moon rose over the forest, that divine apparition appeared amongst the *mussaenda* bushes once again.

“Who are you?” I asked. ‘Ada’, she replied. Then she sighed sadly and disappeared, as she had the first night, as if the ground just swallowed her up without warning.”

“Ada?” exclaimed Kammamuri. “What kind of name is that?”

“Not an Indian one.”

“That’s all she said?”

“That’s all.”

“It is so strange; I would never have returned.”

“Yet, I did. A powerful force kept drawing me towards that place; I tried to resist it several times, but no matter what I did, I always went back. It was as if I’d been bewitched.”

“How did you feel in her presence?”

“My heart beat wildly.”

“And you’ve never felt like that before?”

“Never,” said Tremal-Naik.

“Do you still see her?”

“No, Kammamuri. She appeared for several nights, always at the same time, always in the same mysterious way. She would look at me in silence then disappear without a sound. Once, I waved to her, but she did not move; another time I tried to speak, but she put a finger to her lips and signalled me to be silent.”

“You never followed her?”

“Never, Kammamuri, that woman frightens me. Fifteen days ago, she appeared dressed in a red silk *sari* and remained longer than usual. The next night I waited for her again; I called out to her several times, but to no avail; I never saw her again.”

“A strange adventure to be sure,” mumbled Kammamuri.

“It’s terrible,” Tremal-Naik continued hoarsely. “I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, it’s like I have a fever; I long to see her once again.”

“I think I understand your problem, master.”

“Yes?”

“You’re in love.”

“What?”

Several sharp notes sounded from near the vast swamp south of the hut. The Maratha shot to his feet.

“A *ramsinga*!”³ he exclaimed, terrified.

“What of it?” asked Tremal-Naik.

“It heralds misfortune, master.”

“Nonsense, Kammamuri.”

“The only other time I’ve ever heard a *ramsinga* sound in the jungle was on the night poor Tamul was murdered.”

The hunter frowned at that sudden recollection.

“Don’t worry,” he said, forcing himself to appear calm. “Playing the *ramsinga* is a common skill; you know the odd hunter ventures into the jungle from time to time.”

He had just finished speaking, when they heard a bark followed by a roar.

Kammamuri shook from head to toe.

“Master!” he exclaimed. “Did you hear that? There’s trouble nearby.”

“Darma! Punthy!” yelled Tremal-Naik.

A superb Bengal tiger came out of the hut and fixed her eyes upon her master. She was followed by a black dog with sharp ears and a long tail wearing a large collar bristling with metal thorns.

“Darma! Punthy!” repeated Tremal-Naik.

The tiger grunted then leaped and landed at her master’s feet.

“What is it, Darma?” he asked, gently stroking the great feline’s back. “You seem uneasy.”

Instead of running to his master, the dog pointed his nose towards the south, sniffed the air and barked three times.

“Could something have happened to Hurti and Aghur?” the hunter mumbled uneasily.

“I fear so, master,” said Kammamuri, eyeing the jungle nervously. “They should have returned by now.”

³ A long Indian trumpet made of four pipes of fine metal which can emit sound over a great distance

“Did you hear any shots during the day?”

“Yes, a few in the middle of the afternoon, then nothing more.”

“Where did they come from?”

“South, master.”

“Have you seen anyone suspicious roaming about the jungle?”

“No, but Hurti told me that one night he spotted several shadows lurking about the shores of the island of Rajmangal, and then Aghur reported hearing strange sounds emanating from inside the sacred banyan tree.”

“From inside the banyan tree!” exclaimed Tremal-Naik. “And you haven’t heard or seen anything?”

“No, nothing. What are we going to do, master?”

“There’s not much we can do. Best we wait here.”

“But they could be—”

“Shh!” said Tremal-Naik, squeezing Kammamuri’s arm tightly.

“What is it?” the Maratha whispered uneasily.

“Look over there; something’s moving among the bamboo.”

“Someone’s coming, master.”

Punthy whimpered a third time as more sharp notes from the *ramsinga* filled the air. Tremal-Naik drew a pistol from his belt and quickly loaded it. Suddenly a tall man dressed in a *dboti*⁴ and armed with an axe, rushed out from among the bamboo and ran towards the hut at full speed.

“Aghur!” Tremal-Naik and Kammamuri exclaimed simultaneously.

Punthy ran towards the man, howling sadly.

“Master... master!”

He reached the hut in a flash. Eyes bulging, limbs trembling, he moaned softly and collapsed among the grass.

Tremal-Naik immediately rushed to his side and cried out in surprise.

The Indian appeared to be on the verge of death. Numerous cuts lined his blood-streaked face and his lips were covered in bloody foam; he looked about wildly, panting heavily.

“Aghur!” exclaimed Tremal-Naik. “What happened to you!?! Where’s Hurti?”

At the sound of his companion’s name, Aghur’s face twisted in fear. He tore at the ground, clawing up the dirt around him.

⁴ A large rectangular piece of cloth worn about the waist

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“Ma... ster... ma... ster,” he stammered, deeply terrified.

“Yes, Aghur.”

“I’m... suff... occ... I... ran... ma...ster!”

“He’s been poisoned,” whispered Kammamuri.

“No,” said Tremal-Naik. “The poor devil ran here at full speed, he’s just winded; he’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

As the hunter had predicted, Aghur grew calmer as he caught his breath.

“Now tell me what happened,” said Tremal-Naik, once the Indian had rested. “Why did you come back alone? Why are you so afraid? Where’s Hurti?”

“Master!” the Indian mumbled with a shudder. “What a tragedy!”

“I knew that *ramsinga* was a bad omen,” sighed Kammamuri.

“Continue, Aghur,” urged the hunter.

“If only you’d seen the poor wretch... I found him lying on the ground, as stiff as a board, his eyes wrenched from their sockets...”

“Hurti’s been killed!” exclaimed Tremal-Naik.

“I found his body at the foot of the sacred banyan tree.”

“But who could have done this? And why?”

“I do not know, master.”

“We must avenge him! Start from the beginning; tell me everything.”

“We’d set off to look for the tiger and spotted the beast in the jungle about six miles from here. It had been injured by a blast from Hurti’s carbine and was heading south, trying to escape. We tracked it for four hours and came upon it once again near the shore, not far from the island of Rajmangal; however, before we could kill it, it spotted us, leaped into the water, swam to the island and hid somewhere beneath the great banyan tree.”

“And then?”

“I wanted to return to camp, but Hurti refused. He said the tiger had already been injured and was easy prey so we swam to the island then split up to go look for it.”

The Indian stopped. He had turned pale with fear.

“Night had begun to fall,” he continued gloomily. “All fell silent as darkness spread over the jungle. Suddenly, I heard a sharp note from a

ramsinga and my eyes met those of a shadow half hidden in a bush just twenty paces from me.”

“A shadow!” exclaimed Tremal-Naik. “A shadow?”

“Yes, master, a shadow.”

“Who was it? Tell me, Aghur, tell me!”

“A woman.”

“A woman!”

“Yes, I’m almost certain it was a woman.”

“Beautiful?”

“It was too dark to tell.”

Tremal-Naik put a hand to his brow.

“A shadow!” he repeated several times. “A shadow on the island! Continue, Aghur.”

“It looked at me in silence, then raised an arm and gestured for me to go. Surprised and scared, I obeyed, but I had not gone more than a hundred paces when a cry of agony reached my ears. I recognized the voice immediately: it was Hurti.”

“And the shadow?” Tremal-Naik asked excitedly.

“I didn’t turn to see what had become of it. I ran through the forest, carbine in hand, and soon reached the great banyan tree. Poor Hurti was at the base of it, lying on his back. I called his name, but he did not respond; I touched his arm, he was warm, but he had no pulse!”

“Are you certain?”

“Positive, master.”

“Where had he been hit?”

“There was no wound on his body.”

“Impossible!”

“Yet, that’s how it was.”

“And you didn’t see anyone?”

“Not a soul and I did not hear a sound. Frightened, I dropped my carbine, jumped into the river and swam back as quickly as I could. Once ashore, I raced back towards our hut, never once looking back, never once stopping to take a breath! Oh, poor Hurti!”

Chapter 2

The Mysterious Island

A deep silence followed Aghur's story. Tremal-Naik, sullen and restless, began to pace before the fire, head lowered, arms crossed, a frown upon his brow. Kammamuri had curled up into a tight ball, frozen in horror. Even Punthy had fallen silent as he lay by Darma's side.

Several sharp notes from the mysterious *ramsinga* tore the hunter from his thoughts. He raised his head, cast an eye upon the jungle then walked back towards Aghur.

"Have you heard that *ramsinga* before?"

"Yes, master," replied the Indian, "Once."

"When?"

"Six months ago, the night Tamul was murdered."

"Kammamuri thinks it heralds tragedy."

"I agree, master."

"Have you ever laid eyes upon the person playing it?"

"No master, but I'd wager the musician has some connection to the mysterious shadows on Rajmangal."

"Who do you think they are?"

"Spirits, master."

"What? Nonsense!"

"Pirates then," said Aghur.

"Why would they suddenly start murdering my men?"

"Who can say? Perhaps to frighten us or keep us away."

"Have you seen their huts?"

"No, but I know they gather beneath the sacred banyan tree every night."

"That's a start," said Tremal-Naik, "Kammamuri, go get the oars."

"What do you have in mind, master?" asked the Maratha.

The Mysterious Island

“We’re going to the banyan tree.”

“No, master!” the two Indians cried simultaneously.

“Why not?”

“They’ll kill you just as they did poor Hurti.”

Tremal-Naik’s eyes blazed darkly.

“I’m a hunter. I’ve never trembled before anyone; we’re going to that island, Kammamuri!” he exclaimed in a tone that brooked no argument.

“Master...”

“Are you afraid?” Tremal-Naik asked disdainfully.

“I am a Maratha,” the Indian replied proudly.

“Then let us go. I’m going to find out who these mysterious people are, why they’ve declared war upon us, and who that woman is.”

Kammamuri picked up a pair of oars and headed towards the shore.

Tremal-Naik entered the hut, pulled a carbine from the wall, took up a flask of gunpowder and tucked a large knife into his belt.

“Aghur, you’ll remain here,” he said, turning to go. “If we haven’t returned in two days, bring Darma and Punthy and look for us on Rajman-gal.”

“But, master...”

“Have you lost your nerve?”

“No, master. I just don’t think you should go to that cursed island.”

“I won’t let my men be murdered at will, Aghur.”

“Take Darma with you. She could be of great assistance.”

“She’d give us away. I want to land unseen. There’s no need to fear, we’ll return soon. Goodbye, my friend.”

He slung the carbine over his shoulder and left to join Kammamuri, who was waiting for him beside their *donga*, a small dugout canoe carved from a single tree.

“Let’s go,” he said.

They jumped into the boat and slowly pulled away from the shore.

Fog rippled over the canals, islands and sandbanks, shrouding the stars. Vast forests of thorny bamboo stretched out on either side of them, the tall stalks tangled in vines and creepers. At times, growls and hisses emanated from among the grass and bushes lining the shore. Rows of palms

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and *latanie* towered above the dark horizon, a few coconut and mango trees growing among them laden with exquisite fruit.

A heavy silence filled the air, broken only by the murmur of the shallow waters lapping against the mangroves and the sound of a gentle breeze rustling through the bamboo.

Tremal-Naik, silently clutching his rifle, lay in the stern, his eyes darting from shore to shore as he scanned the banks for hidden dangers. Kammamuri, sitting in the middle, made the small *donga* fly, a long, sparkling wake stretching out behind it. From time to time, however, he would stop, hold his breath and listen, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound.

They had been afloat for more than thirty minutes when several notes from a *ramsinga* suddenly broke the silence. They had come from the right bank and were much louder than before; the musician must have been no more than a hundred paces from them.

“Stop!” whispered Tremal-Naik.

He had barely uttered that command when a second *ramsinga* sounded in reply. It had come from further off; a melancholy tune, contrasting oddly with the bright lively notes they had just heard.

Indian music is based on four styles, closely related to the four seasons of the year, each one having its own particular tone. It is melancholy in winter, lively in the spring, languid in the stifling summer heat, and sparkles brilliantly in the fall. Why were those two instruments playing so differently? Kammamuri feared it was a signal.

“Master,” he said, “They’ve spotted us.”

“It appears so,” replied Tremal-Naik, listening intently.

“Should we retreat? They’ll be expecting us.”

“Have you ever known me to retreat? Keep rowing, they can play their *ramsingas* all night for all I care.”

The Maratha began to row once again, driving the *donga* ever forward. The river began to narrow and the air grew warmer. Several fireflies appeared in the distance, specks of light shining bizarrely over the dark surface of the river. Suddenly, as if drawn by a mysterious force, they swirled before the *donga*’s bow then flew off as quickly as they had appeared.

The Mysterious Island

“We’ve reached the cemetery,” said Tremal-Naik. “We’ll reach the banyan tree in ten minutes.”

“Do you think we should cross in the *donga*?” asked Kammamuri.

“All we need is a little patience.”

“It’s never wise to offend the dead, master.”

“Brahma and Vishnu will forgive us. Start rowing, Kammamuri.”

With a few strokes, the *donga* entered a small basin; enormous tamarind trees towered about them, their branches arching over the water in a tangle of vegetation. Several bloated corpses floated nearby, the tributaries of the Ganges having dragged them to the Mangal.

“Keep rowing!” said the hunter.

The Maratha was about to pull on the oars, when the dark canopy suddenly gave way to open sky and their eyes fell upon a storm of long legged, black-winged birds with large sharp beaks diving towards the water.

“What now?” Kammamuri exclaimed, surprised.

“Just a few marabous,” said Tremal-Naik, “Probably come in search of their next meal.”

Hundreds of those sombre birds, common to the sacred river, were swarming upon the cemetery, their wings fluttering cheerfully as they alighted upon the dead.

“Keep rowing, Kammamuri,” repeated Tremal-Naik.

The *donga* headed ever forward. A half hour later, the two men had crossed the cemetery and reached the mouth of a large basin. An island divided it in two, an immense tree towering a few paces from the shore.

“The sacred banyan tree,” said Tremal-Naik.

Kammamuri shuddered at the sound of that name.

“Master!” he whispered, gritting his teeth.

“Don’t worry, my good Maratha. Take in the oars; let the *donga* coast to the island. There may be someone about.”

Kammamuri quickly did as instructed then lay flat against the bottom of the boat; Tremal-Naik loaded his carbine and stretched out by his side. Carried by a light current, the *donga* tacked slightly and headed towards the northern tip of the island of Rajmangal, home to the mysterious men that had murdered poor Hurti.

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A profound silence reigned. The breeze had ceased to blow and the bamboo had fallen still, even the waters appeared to have lost their voice.

Disturbed by the eerie calm, as they drew nearer to the island Tremal-Naik cautiously raised his head and carefully scanned the shore.

At last the *donga's* keel thudded gently against sand and stones a hundred paces from the banyan tree; the two Indians did not move. Ten anxious minutes passed before Tremal-Naik peered over the side. The first thing he spotted was a black shape lying among the grass, about twenty metres from the river.

"Kammamuri," he whispered, "Load your pistol."

The Maratha did not wait to be told twice.

"What is it, master?" he whispered.

"Look over there."

"A body!" said the Maratha, his eyes widening in alarm.

"Shh!"

Tremal-Naik raised his carbine and aimed it at the dark silhouette stretched out before him, waited an instant then lowered it without firing.

"Let's go see who he is, Kammamuri," he said. "I don't think he's alive."

"What if he's only pretending to be dead?"

"Then he'll regret it."

The two men disembarked and silently headed towards the body, keeping close to the ground. They had arrived to within ten paces of it, when a marabou squawked noisily and flew off towards the river.

"It is a body," whispered Tremal-Naik. "If only—"

An exclamation of rage cut short his words as he caught sight of the dead man's face.

"Hurti!" he cried.

The poor man was lying on his back, his arms and legs strewn awkwardly, frozen in the final throws of death. His face was twisted in terror, eyes bulging from their sockets, tongue jutting from his mouth. His knees and feet were broken; someone had dragged him there.

Tremal-Naik knelt over the unfortunate Indian and looked for a wound, but at first glance could not find a single scratch. However, upon closer examination, he found deep marks around Hurti's neck and a large bruise on the back of his head that appeared to have been made by a rock.

The Mysterious Island

“They knocked him out before they killed him.”

“Poor Hurti!” muttered the Maratha. “Why would anyone want to kill him?”

“We’re going to find out; I won’t allow this act to go unpunished, you have my word. Now, back to the boat.”

“What about Hurti? Are we just going to leave him here?”

“We’ll set him adrift in the Ganges come morning.”

“The tigers will probably get to him before we return.”

“I’ll stand watch over the body.”

“What? You’re not going back with me?”

“No, Kammamuri, I’m staying here. I’ll return once I’ve dealt with his murderers.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed, master.”

A disdainful smile spread across the proud Bengali’s lips.

“I was born and raised in the jungle! Go back to the hut, Kammamuri.”

“No, master!”

“What?”

“If something were to happen to you, who’d be here to help? Let me stay; I’ll follow your every command.”

“Even if I decide to set off and find my vision?”

“Yes, master.”

“Very well then, you may stay, my good Maratha; the two of us will do the work of ten men. Come!”

Tremal-Naik walked back to the river, tipped the *donga* on its side and forced it beneath the waters.

“Why did you do that?” Kammamuri asked, surprised.

“No one must know we’re here. Now, let’s try to solve this mystery.”

To ensure they would not miss their first shot, they replaced the powder in their carbines and pistols then headed towards the large banyan tree looming majestically in the darkness.

Chapter 3

Avenging Hurti

Banyan trees, also known as Pagoda fig trees, are stranger and larger than one might imagine. Their trunks are as tall and as thick as the largest oak trees. Thin root-like shoots tumble from their infinite branches and embed themselves in the soil, infusing the trees with nutrients and thickening as they age. As the branches continue to spread, they generate a labyrinth of bizarre columns, at times an entire area of forest can be comprised of a single tree.

In the province of Gujarat a banyan tree named *Cobir bor* is revered by Indians, for it is believed to be more than three thousand years old, extends for six hundred metres and has no less than three thousand column-like roots. It extended even further in ancient times, but part of it was destroyed as the waters of the Nerbudda River eroded its island home.

The banyan beneath which the two Indians were about to pass the night was enormous, it having more than six hundred columns. Its immense branches were laden with small vermilion fruit, and its strong thick trunk appeared to have been severed at the top.

Having carefully scouted their surroundings to ensure they were alone, Tremal-Naik and Kammamuri sat down before the base of the tree, side by side, their loaded carbines resting upon their knees.

“And now we wait,” whispered the hunter. “I wouldn’t want to be the first person to come within range of my carbine.”

“Do you think Hurti’s murderers are going to return?” asked Kammamuri.

“I’m certain of it. We’ll solve this mystery before the night is up.”

“So, we’ll kill the first man that dares show his face.”

“It depends on the circumstances. Now keep your eyes open and try not to make any noise.”

He pulled a betel leaf out of his pocket, added a bit of walnut and some lime to it and began to chew.

Two hours passed slowly. All remained quiet beneath the great tree. It must have been close to midnight when Tremal-Naik, who had been straining his ears to catch the slightest sound, heard a strange rumble emanate from beneath the ground.

The hunter began to grow uneasy.

“Kammamuri,” he whispered, “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” asked the Maratha.

“A rumbling sound.”

“Where?”

“I think it came from somewhere beneath us.”

“Impossible, master!”

“I doubt I was mistaken.”

“What do you think it was?”

“I cannot say, but we’ll find out soon enough.”

“Master, I don’t like this place.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Afraid? I’m a Maratha!”

“Then let’s see who’s behind all this.”

A second rumble emanated from beneath the ground. The two men looked at each other in surprise.

“It almost sounds as if someone’s playing a *bauk*⁵,” said Tremal-Naik.

“Yes,” replied Kammamuri. “There must be caves beneath this island. What are we going to do, master?”

“We’ll stay right here. Someone’s bound to come out from somewhere.”

“Tikora!” yelled a voice.

The two men sprang to their feet. The voice had come from nearby, so close in fact, it sounded as if the speaker were standing behind them.

“Tikora!” whispered Tremal-Naik. “Who’s calling out?”

He scanned his surroundings but could not see anyone; he looked up and saw only the tangled branches of the banyan tree stretching above him in the darkness.

“Could someone be hiding among the branches?”

⁵ A sacred ceremonial bass drum of enormous proportions

"I don't think so," Kammamuri replied nervously. "The voice came from behind us."

"It's strange."

"Tikora!" repeated the same mysterious voice.

The two Indians looked about once again. There was no mistaking it; someone was close by, but to their surprise and terror, that someone remained invisible.

"Master," whispered Kammamuri, "It could be a spirit."

"I don't believe in spirits," replied Tremal-Naik. "It's a man and we'll find him soon enough."

"Oh!" exclaimed the Maratha, stumbling back three or four steps. "Look! Up there, master! Look!"

Tremal-Naik raised his head and spotted a sliver of light rising from inside the severed trunk. Despite his courage, his blood turned cold.

"A light!" he stammered, dismayed.

"Let's go, master!" begged Kammamuri.

For the third time, a mysterious rumble emanated from beneath the ground, but this time it was followed by the brassy notes of a *ramsinga*.

The music seemed to come from inside the banyan's trunk. Almost instantly, a reply sounded off in the distance.

"Let us flee, master!" Kammamuri urged again, terrified.

"Never!" Tremal-Naik exclaimed resolutely.

He instinctively placed his dagger between his teeth and grabbed his carbine by the barrel as if to use it as a club, but then just as quickly thought better of his plan.

"Come, Kammamuri," he said. "It's best we learn who we're dealing with before we start a fight."

He led the Maratha to a spot behind four thick roots about two hundred paces from the banyan tree, from where they could spy on the large trunk without being seen.

"Not a word now," said Tremal-Naik. "We'll attack on my signal."

One last sharp note emanated from the colossal trunk and was greeted by wild cries from the Sundarbans. The sliver of light projecting through the tree's summit went out, and a head wearing a yellow turban appeared in its place.

Avenging Hurti

It scanned its surroundings for a few minutes, as if to ensure that no one was lurking about beneath the great tree, then it protruded further, and a man, an Indian judging by his appearance, came out, grabbed one of the branches and slid to the ground.

Forty Indians followed behind him; they were naked to the waist, each man's chest marked by a tattoo: a series of ancient Sanskrit letters encircling a Naga, a snake woman with a coiled serpentine body. They wore *dbotis* of yellow cloth about their hips and silk *rumaals*⁶ weighted with a lead ball about their waists, their sharp daggers protruding menacingly from behind those strange belts.

The band of Indians silently gathered round an old man and sat down.

"My sons," he said gravely, "Our mighty hand has struck down the wretch that dared set foot upon our sacred shore. Another victim for the altar, but our work is not yet done. Our beloved goddess demands more blood."

"Command us, great leader, and we shall obey."

"You are brave," said the old man, "but this is not the time. We face a grave danger, my sons. A man has dared look upon our beloved priestess."

"Blasphemy!" exclaimed the Indians.

"Yes, my sons; a man has dared look her in the face. He will not escape the goddess' wrath!"

"Who is this man?"

"You will learn all in time. Bring me the victim."

Two Indians stood up and headed towards the spot where Hurti's body lay. Tremal-Naik had watched that strange proceeding in frozen silence, but as the two men grabbed the body by the arms and began to drag it towards the banyan tree, he shot to his feet, carbine in hand.

"Wretches!" he muttered, taking aim.

"What are you doing, master?" whispered Kammamuri, quickly pulling down the rifle barrel.

"Let go, Kammamuri," said the hunter. "They killed Hurti. I'm going to avenge him."

"You'll get us both killed! There are forty of them!"

"You're right, Kammamuri. We'll wait for better odds."

⁶ A kerchief used as a strangling cloth

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He lowered his carbine and crouched back down behind the roots, biting his lip to suppress his anger.

The two Indians had dragged Hurti's body into the middle of the circle and dropped it before the old man's feet.

"Kali!" he exclaimed, raising his eyes towards the heavens.

He drew the dagger from his belt and plunged it into Hurti's chest.

"The wretch!" howled Tremal-Naik. "This is too much!"

He sprang from his hiding place, leveled his carbine and fired. A flash of light tore through the darkness; the old Indian, struck in the chest by the hunter's bullet, fell forward onto Hurti's body.