

SLAUGHTER OF A MALE RHINOCEROS IN THE SOONDERBUNDS.

BY AUCEPS.

“The Soonderbunds,” including “Edmondstone,” which is generally distinguished under the characteristic of Tiger Island, in consequence of the locality in question being infested by the above race of animals, has of late years engaged the attention of the local Government of Fort William. It was deemed expedient by the executive authority to propose a plan to bring this extensive tract of woodland territory under a state of cultivation; and in order to carry out this desirable measure by an order in Council, it was arranged that the whole of this howling wilderness, which was inhabited by ferocious beasts of prey only, should be carefully surveyed, as far as it was found possible to accomplish that object, and afterwards subdivided into separate and distinct allotments, comprising so many stipulated *beggahs* of land in each parcel, upon a very liberal scale. This laudable point having been eventually achieved, the Government in the next place proposed to make grants of land to such persons as might feel disposed to embark their capital in the new undertaking of cultivating the Soonderbunds.

It must be observed that the whole of the above territory abounded in Soondree timber, from which fact the forest originally took its name, and as “coal” is not generally used for culinary purposes throughout any part of India, but “charcoal” in all instances that relate to domestic economy, so the wood, as it was cut, paid for the outlay bestowed upon the labour employed to hew it, which was a vast encouragement to those early beginners in life, who are eager at all times to handle something “really” tangible on their embarking upon a new speculation. As the whole of the charcoal consumed in the populous city of Calcutta, and the districts around it, proceeds from the furnaces situated contiguous to the Soondree forest, the undertaking may be supposed to have answered satisfactorily from the commencement.

The terms under which these grants were communicated to the early settlers were as follows: First, they were to covenant and agree that one-half of the land allotted to them should be properly and effectually cultivated within the first ten years of their occupying them; and, secondly, that at the expiration of twenty-one years the whole of the estates confided to their care and management; on the completion of their lease, should be well and truly improved. If so, the adventurers were to become perpetual possessors of their estates, paying a “nominal” fine only to the Government; whilst, on the other hand, should any neglect or other circumstance have caused the parties to infringe the conditional contract, then the right and title to the lands were to be forfeited, and the same were, it was understood, to revert to the Government.

Very few individuals embraced the offers held out to them. The ungly woodland was a “choleraic” nursery. The same was intersected by road rivers and innumerable nullahs, all communicating with the great Ganges, which latter had, there can be no doubt, in a past era, overflowed the lands which at this day constitute the forest under consideration.

That this desert had been once densely populated with human beings we must be led to imagine, from the circumstance of the ruins of numerous Hindoo temples and fanes having from time to time been discovered by persons who have been engaged in grubbing up the grounds allotted to them to cultivate. The great labour and expense attendant upon bunding or embanking, with a view to prevent the aggression and encroachment of the water from inundating the enclosed lands during the wet monsoon, when the rivers are overflowed for miles together, presented another feature of the most difficult nature to surmount; and where in certain instances from 7,000 to 25,000 beggahs of land (a beggah is three-fourths of an English acre) represented the minimum and the maximum of each separate allotment, the task proposed, in the terms on which these tellurial allotments were to be cultivated, precluded in the majority of instances a naked possibility for any person in his senses to accept them.

Four enterprising young men, however, clubbed together, and agreed to risk the speculation offered them by the Government. The party consisted of Messrs. B—d, P—n, L—s, and S—s. All of these gentlemen were on the staff of the Bombay Marine establishment, and were residents in Calcutta. They bargained with the Council authorities for a grant of 7,000 beggahs of ground, on the conditions previously considered, which was assigned to them. Within a fortnight afterwards they commenced operations. They left Calcutta in three beaulieughes (covered boats), and passing into the salt-water lake, arrived at their new settlement. Having surveyed the same and the neighbourhood around, they hit upon a spot on which they judged they could erect a domicile suitable to their condition and circumstances. During the first night they remained in their boats upon the water, and their ears were incessantly assailed by the roaring of tigers, leopards, panthers, intermixed with the piercing forlorn yells of the prowling hyæna and re-choing howlings of hundreds of jackals. The swarms of mosquitoes, straying from their jungle recesses, kept up an incessant buzzing throughout the nocturnal hours, and these winged sanguinary assailants ruled absolute in the floating mansions of man, puncturing by the agency of their punient probosces the faces and hands of the inmates, attended with blistering irritation. It was a night of horror to them—an interval of forest solemnity, which preyed upon their feelings so as to exclude sleep altogether.

Morning at length arrived, and relieved them from the irksome penalties which they had previously endured. The shrill clarion notes of numberless jungle-cocks, proceeding from various quarters of the dreary forest that surrounded them, appeared alone to afford life to the scene they were destined to contemplate; whilst on the banks of the nullah in which their boats lay were to be observed swarms of huge coarse-mailed alligators, courting in a basking mood the welcome advent of the orient sun. This being the first result of their experience, the pilots pretty well understood what obstacles and annoyances they would have to contend against; so having finished their morning meal, they weighed anchor and paddled their way back to the town of Calcutta.

They perceived that fish of various kinds abounded in all the nullahs through which they passed, and that there was a good supply of pure water, an elementary object which is most desirable in India.

They, in the next place, but not without great difficulty, enlisted the services of a complement of coolies to accompany them, and to colonize on their new estate. One-hundred-and-twenty of the above mortals, provided with pickaxes, saws, spades, hoes, axes, and other implements of husbandry, set off in boats to the spot to which their services were to be directed. For the first month the whole of the staff were compelled to sleep in their boats, and to recommence their disforestation operations throughout the day. In less than one month they had succeeded in clearing away one acre and a-half of jungle, and had contrived to construct, by means of sawing thick planks from the Soondree timber which they had felled, a strong and lofty barricade of a quadrangular form, which effectually kept off the obtrusive assaults of tigers and other ferocious beasts of the jungle. This step having been judiciously adopted and completed, the same operated as a centre for other radiant performances to proceed, and in twelve months, by a course of persevering and enduring energy, not only was to be seen a good substantial dwelling-house erected on the ground, but two compact villages of tidy mud-huts, with little gardens laid-out before them, teeming with juvenile models of human life, in the character of groups of native children. Nevertheless, this united club of early adventurers had to compete with so many nullahs and small rivers in their circumflexed piece of territory, that the task of bunding the same, or any moderate portion of it, appeared at first sight impracticable. They, however, by a degree of unremitting labour, eventually succeeded in beating out the water and of draining the enclosures effectually, and had by that means ultimately erected a spacious and substantial dwelling-house on the most eligible site they could select for the purpose which was airy, dry, and well-furnished with every domestic comfort which the luxuries of Calcutta could afford them.

They stated to me that during the grubbing season—that is, that of clearing the ground of the superincumbent timber—it was by no means an uncommon circumstance for coolies to be carried off by tigers; but, as the jungles diminished, these ferocious beasts receded into the interior, and were not so daring as they at first were, when man was never, or seldom seen, nor his works at all understood by them.

But as there is an exception from every general rule, so the following narration may tend to qualify an exception in the present instance:

In the month of April, for several successive nights, two very fine mastiff dogs, which were kept in an open yard before the dwelling, as a protection against native depredations (and it may be proper in this place to observe, by the way, that they were of so ferocious a nature as to have previously destroyed two errant robbers at different periods, in the act of plundering the premises), manifested signs of great uncasiness, by indulging in unusual ululations, as if they vocally sympathised with their own fears, or anticipated some unpleasant catastrophe. Two of the inmates (Mr. P and Mr. B) were determined, if possible, to unravel the mystery of this canine spell, and arming themselves each with a double-barrelled gun, loaded with balls, they took up their position on a wall about eight feet high, which overlooked a broad square deep tank communicating with the compound (paddock).

They had not been posted there ten minutes before the dogs began to bay almost simultaneously, apparently labouring under a morbid

paroxysm of dread and consternation. They had not courage enough in them to bark or challenge: their natural tone of spirit was quailed, indicating that there was close at hand some object which inspired them with a doleful panic.

By the faint portion of light afforded by a waning moon and a few feeble stars, the sentries could but indistinctly discern a huge, grotesque looking object moving leisurely towards the tank. At first sight, they mistook the beast for a bullock approaching the water to slake its thirst; but then, again, upon consideration, all the bullocks on the farm had been impounded and securely housed for the night the evening before. Still the object continued to advance at a sluggish pace, occasionally halting and apparently gazing around.

The nearer it approached, its form became better capable of being distinguished, and P. and B. eventually descried in its advancing person and character a "huge rhinoceros." It was of no possible utility for the shooters to wage summary war against a thick-mailed beast of the above kind with common fowling-pieces, whose hide would prove invulnerable to the missile directed against him; nor were they desirous of alarming their obtrusive visitor by discharging their fowling-pieces at the mailed monster, which would only have ended in the fruitless effect of deterring him from revisiting his accustomed watering-place in future; for it was quite evident that he was in the constant practice of so doing, as the indentations of his broad footmarks were distinctly recognized on the ensuing morning on various parts of the compound abutting on the tank.

They felt desirous of effectually destroying the monster, and of ridding the locality of his presence. They had recourse to an expedient which was ultimately adopted on the following morning. They despatched half-a-dozen men to their town residence in Calcutta, detailing to their friends the facts of the case, desiring one of them to proceed without loss of time to their estate, and to bring with him a six-pound carronade, such as is used on large merchant ships, with a necessary supply of grapeshot. This summons was promptly obeyed, almost as soon as the instructions were received, for in the course of the following afternoon Mr L. arrived at the farm furnished with all that was necessary to enable the parties to wage war against their formidable enemy, should he be disposed, during his nocturnal peregrinations, to pay them another visit.

By the help and assistance of a dozen coolies the gun was placed in such a position that the muzzle should point immediately opposite the last step of the animal's descent to the water, spotted with grape, whilst a rope-ladder was provided to enable the hunters to escalate the wall and descend at pleasure to the *locus operandi*. These preparations having been accomplished, the parties retired indoors to partake of their dinner, and contemplate and talk over the project they had concocted. The signal of the dogs was to act as the word "onward" with them; and about eleven o'clock at night Growler began to bay the beast's approach, whilst Griper joined in the complaint preferred by his elder companion; and now that all was ready, L—s, provided with a lighter rope in his hand, and scaling the wall, seated himself just behind the gun, whilst his two comrades took possession of the parapet.

With the aid of a powerful achromatic telescope, the *ghindhur* became

distinctly visible in the act of advancing towards the tank. The two gentlemen seated on the wall were directed not to fire their pieces until it was fairly ascertained that the shot proceeding from the cannon would take effect. At length the critical moment arrived which was to decide on the merits or disappointment of the adventurers. The unsuspecting brute sluggishly and heavily paced his way down the path conducting to the water, and was in the act of entering it, when the portable thunder of the concealed enemy repercussively resounded again through the dense and deep forests which enfrowned around, succeeded by a quadruple salute from the fowling-pieces. After some seconds had elapsed it was deemed necessary to ascertain whether they had proved fortunate enough to crown their ambition with regard to destroying the animal, or had failed in their projective enterprise. Upon examining the premises, the *locus in quo* presented no likeness of a rhinoceros. The "animated target" was not to be recognized. It remained evident that he had either repelled the balls by the contumacy of his invulnerable hide, or had walked away with the rotund missiles from the spot where he was wounded, to linger in the jungle. So the affair was abandoned for the night.

On the following morning two coolies came running up to the house, crying, "*Burrah ghindhur hi, gautch neoper, Sahib*" (There is a big rhinoceros lying under a tree, sir). Upon this, they loaded their guns, and, accompanied by the two dogs, proceeded to the spot, conducted by their guides. At first view, it appeared doubtful whether he was alive or dead: had he been the former, it would have been hazardous to fire, for he might have roused himself, and come down on them with the most savage ferocity. They therefore gave the coolies orders to approach nearer to him, assuring them that they would protect them with their guns should he be disposed to encounter their presence. With this assurance, they cautiously approached his person, when they joyfully cried out, "*Mergier, Sahib*" (He is dead, sir). They then fearlessly went up to the beast, and, upon examination, discovered that one of the balls had perforated his thick hide and passed into his flank, another had penetrated his right shoulder, and a third had taken him bodily—the last was his mortal wound. He had progressed more than a quarter of a mile from the spot on which he received his death-blow; and it is difficult to conjecture how he could, under the endurance of so much pain, have accomplished so long and painful a journey.

Mr. L. severed the head from the body, and took it back with him to Calcutta to be cured; and the same he resolved to preserve as a trophy to gaze upon in after-times. Several strips were cut from his hide, which were also preserved. He was a bicornuous brute, which are to be met with only occasionally in the dense forests of the Indian Peninsula. It was afterwards ascertained that the beast adverted to had been a terror to the coolies for several months before, and that two of the colony had fallen victims to his ferocity. They at first attributed their deaths to tigers; but a man, on seeing the approach of the mailed brute, concealed himself in the jungle, when he observed him come down upon a *rooter*, working near the spot, with maddened fury. The threatened woodman had just time to ascend a Soondree tree before the beast could come up to him, and, by this seasonable opportunity afforded him, narrowly escaped with his life.