

HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE

“Wiener Couplets” nearly as effectively as Johann Strauss’ famous orchestra in the “Volks-Garten” in Vienna.

The whole scene was rather unexpected in the home of a native prince in the wilds of East Bengal.

The Maharajah had fixed on a great tract of jungle in Assam, over the frontier of India proper, as the field of operations for his big-game shoot of 1891, on account of the rhinoceros and buffaloes that frequented the swamps there. As he did not do things by halves, he had had a rough road made connecting Cooch Behar with his great camp, and had caused temporary bridges to be built over all the streams on the way. Owing to the convenient bamboo, this is fairly easy of achievement, for the bamboo is at the same time tough and pliable, and bamboo bridges, in spite of their flimsy appearance, can carry great weights, and can be run up in no time, and kindly nature furnishes in Bengal an endless supply of this adaptable building material.

Our Calcutta party were driven out to the camp by the Maharajah’s Australian trainer in a brake-and-four. I had heard before of the recklessness and skill of Australian stage-coach drivers, but had had no previous personal experience of it. Frankly, it is not an experience I should care to repeat indefinitely. I have my own suspicions that that big Australian was trying, if I may be pardoned a vulgarism, “to put the wind up us.” Bang! against a tree-trunk on the off-side. Crash! against another on the near-side; down a steep hill at full gallop, and over a creaking, swaying, loudly protesting bamboo bridge that seemed bound to collapse under the impact; up the corresponding

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ascent as hard as the four Walers could lay leg to the ground; off the track, tearing through the scrub on two wheels, righting again to shave a big tree by a mere hair's-breadth; it certainly was a fine exhibition of nerve and of recklessness redeemed by skill, but I do not think that elderly ladies would have preferred it to their customary jog-trot behind two fat and confidential old slugs. One wondered how the harness held together under our Australian Jehu's vagaries.

The Maharajah had chosen the site of his camp well. On a bare *maidan* overhanging a turbulent river a veritable city of white tents gleamed in the sunshine, all neatly ranged in streets and lanes. The river was not, as most Indian rivers in the dry season, a mere trickle of muddy water meandering through a broad expanse of stones and sand-spits, but a clear rushing stream, tumbling and laughing on its way as gaily as any Scotch salmon river, and forming deep pools where great mahseer lurked under the waving fringes of water-weeds, fat fish who could be entrapped with a spoon in the early morning.

Each guest had a great Indian double tent, bigger than most London drawing-rooms. The one tent was pitched inside the other after the fashion of the country, with an air-space of about one foot between to keep out the fierce sun. Indeed, triple-tent would be a more fitting expression, for the inner tent had a lining dependent from it of that Indian cotton fabric printed in reds and blues which we use for bed quilts. Every tent was carpeted with cotton dhurees, and completely furnished with dressing-tables and chests of drawers, as well as writing-table, sofa and arm-chairs; whilst

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I had no idea of an elephant's climbing powers. These huge beasts make their way quite easily up rocky ascents no horse could negotiate. In coming down steep declivities, the wise creatures extend their hind-legs, using them as brakes. Cautious old Chota Begum would never ford any river without sounding the depth with her trunk at every step. On one occasion two of the Maharajah's fishermen were paddling native dug-outs down-stream as we approached a river. Chota Begum, who had never before seen a dug-out, took them for crocodiles, trumpeted loudly with alarm, and refused to enter the water until they were quite out of sight. The curious intelligence of the animal is seen when they are ordered to remove a tree which blocks the road. Chota Begum would place her right foot against the trunk and give a little tentative shove. Not satisfied with the leverage, she would shift her foot again and again until she had found the right spot, then, throwing her whole weight on to her foot, the tree would snap off like a wooden match.

There was a great amount of bird-life in the jungle. It abounded in peacocks, and these birds are a glorious sight sailing down-wind through the sunlight with their tails streaming behind them, at a pace which would leave any pheasant standing. As peacocks are regarded as sacred by Hindoos, the Maharajah had particularly begged us not to shoot any. There were plenty of other birds, snipe, partridges, florican and jungle-cocks, the two latter greatly esteemed for their flesh. I shot a jungle-cock, and was quite disappointed at finding him a facsimile of our barn-door game-cock, for I had imagined that he would have the

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velvety black wing starred with cream-coloured eyes, which we associate with the "jungle-cock wing" of salmon flies. The so-called "jungle-cock" in a "Jock Scott" fly is furnished by a bird found, I believe, only round Madras. An animal peculiar to this part of Assam is the pigmy hog, the smallest of the swine family. These little beasts, no larger than guinea-pigs, go about in droves of about fifty, and move through the grass with such incredible rapidity that the eye is unable to follow them. The elephants, oddly enough, are scared to death by the pigmy hogs, for the little creatures have tusks as sharp as razors, and gash the elephants' feet with them as they run past them.

I think that we all regretted the Maharajah's keenness about water-buffalo and rhinos, for this entailed long days of plodding on elephants through steamy fetid swamps, where the grass was twenty feet high and met over one's head, where the heat was intolerable, without one breath of air, and the mosquitoes maddening. A day in the swamps entailed, too, a big dose of quinine at bedtime. Between ourselves, I was terrified at the prospect of having to fire off the heavy four-bore elephant-rifle. The "kick" of fourteen-and-a-half drachms of black-powder is tremendous, and one's shoulder ached for two hours afterwards, though I do not regret the "kick" in surveying the water-buffalo which has hung now in my hall for thirty years. I have only seen two wild rhinoceroses in my life, and of the first one I had only a very brief glimpse. We were outside the swamp, when down a jungle-track came a charging rhinoceros, his head down and an evil look in his eye. One look was enough for Chota Begum. That most respectable

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of old ladies had quite evidently no love for rhinos. She lost her nerve completely, and ran away for two miles as hard as her ungainly limbs could lay leg to the ground. It is no joke to be on a run-away elephant maddened with fright, and it is extremely difficult to keep one's seat. The mahout and I hung on with both hands for dear life, the guns and rifles crashing together with a deafening clamour of ironmongery, and I was most thankful that there were no trees anywhere near, for the terrified animal's first impulse would have been to knock off both howdah and mahout under the overhanging branch of a tree. When Chota Begum at length pulled up, she had to listen to some terrible home-truths about her ancestry from the mahout, who was bitterly disappointed in his beloved charge. As to questions of lineage, and the morals of Chota Begum's immediate progenitors, I can only hope that the mahout exaggerated, for he certainly opened up appalling perspectives. Any old lady would have got scared at seeing so hideous a monster preparing to rip her open, and under the circumstances you and I would have run away just as fast as Chota Begum did.

The only other wild rhinoceros I ever saw was on the very last day of our stay in Assam. We were returning home on elephants, when they began to trumpet loudly, as we approached a little dip. My nephew, General Sir Henry Streatfeild, called out to me to be ready, as there was probably a bear in the hollow. Next moment a rhinoceros charged out and made straight for his elephant. Sir Henry fired with a heavy four-bore rifle, and by an extraordinary piece of good luck hit the rhino in

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the one little spot where he is vulnerable, otherwise he must have been killed. The huge beast rolled over like a shot hare, stone-dead.

One evening on our way back to camp, we thought that we would ride our elephants ourselves, and told the mahouts to get down. They had no fancy for walking two miles back to camp, and accordingly, in some mysterious manner of which they have the secret, gave their charges private but definite orders. I seated myself on Chota Begum's neck, put my feet in the string stirrups, and took the big *ankus* in my hand. The others did the same. I then ordered Chota Begum to go on, using the exact words the mahout did. Chota Begum commenced walking round and round in a small circle, and the eight other elephants all did the same. I tried cajoling her as the mahout did, and assured her that she was a "Pearl" and my "Heart's Delight." Chota Begum continued walking round and round in a small circle, as did all the other elephants. I changed my tactics, and made the most unmerited insinuations as to her mother's personal character, at the same time giving her a slight hint with the blunt end of the *ankus*. Chota Begum continued stolidly walking round and round. Meanwhile language most unsuited to a Sunday School arose from other members of the party, who were also careering round and round in small circles. Finally an Irish A.D.C. summed up the situation by crying, "These mahouts have us beat," whereupon we capitulated, and a simultaneous shout went up, "Ohé, Mahout-log!" It is but seldom that one sees a native of India laughing, but those mahouts, when they emerged from the

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cover of some bamboos, were simply bent double with laughter. How they had conveyed their wishes to the elephants beats me still.

The best of things must come to an end, and so did the Cooch Behar shoot. It is an experience that I would not have missed for anything, especially as I am now too old to hope to be able to repeat it.

The Maharajah was good enough to invite me again the next year, 1892, but by that time I was seated in an editorial chair, and could not leave London. In the place of the brilliant sunshine of Assam, the grimy, murky London atmosphere; instead of the distant roars from the jungle, the low thunder of the big "machines" in the basement, as they began to revolve, grinding out fresh reading-matter for the insatiable British public.

The memories, however, remain. Blazing sunlight; splendid sport; endless tracts of khaki-coloured jungle; princely hospitality; pleasant fellowship; cheery company.

What more can any one ask?