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TIGER LADY

Adventures in the Indian Jungle

by

OLIVE SMYTHIES



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mango grove and a cluster of Tharu huts, spreads for several miles northwards to the forest-clad hills and the dark backing of Mahabharat beyond. Behind Mahabharat again, floating in the sky, ethereal, glowing like pink pearls in the morning sun, tower at close range the great giants of Himalaya, the eternal snows 'changeless since the world's beginning, but changing to every mood of sun and cloud.' There is no such view to equal this in all the Himalayas, and so in all the world.

At Kasra, farther down the Rapti valley, in the time of Maharaja Chandra, King George V had a camp and shoot in 1911-1912 at which a record bag was made (39 tigers, 18 rhinos, 4 bears and several leopards, in 11 days.) Here also Maharaja Joodha has shown grand sport to many distinguished guests."

It was to this wonderful country that we set off for a tour one January. Neither my husband nor I felt very fit, and I was a little anxious at going off into the blue. In the day I forgot my fears, but at night I would lie awake and worry over what would happen if either of us fell ill so far away from help.

Our first camp was at Simra, a tiny village on the Nepal railway situated just where the line leaves the cultivated plain and enters the forest. This forest stretches for 10 miles in a wide belt, and is entirely waterless except for a pipe-line laid down by some Rani before the railway was built. She apparently felt sorry for travellers who had to journey so far in the hot weather without water. The pipe flows into a pool where many animals come to drink at night. We heard a leopard roaring near our tents in the early morning.

Our first few marches lay westwards through Terai

country, the road, or rather track, passing now through dense forest before emerging into open village lands and savannahs, and crossing numerous swamps and Terai streams. This tract of country is very malarious even in the cold weather. As usual, we gave the servants quinine every few days, but several of them were down with malaria. First the washerman, then Krishna and the cook. Quinine appears to react on them more vigorously than it does on Europeans, which is fortunate.

Our third march was long and tedious. My husband, who was suffering from lumbago, found riding on an elephant very painful, and was obliged to walk. His temper was not improved when he found that our guide had taken us a long way round, entailing at least four extra miles. The guide was a Forest guard and he was supposed to know the country, but he frankly admitted that he never went into the forest, which was far too dangerous, being full of tigers, bears and wild elephants!

The cartmen were annoying. No sooner were their carts loaded up than they started to oil the wheels, having neglected to do so while they had been sitting idle; this at last accomplished, they set off, only to stop at the first stream to clean their teeth. We came upon the whole cavalcade drawn up by the water, the cartmen busy with their sticks cleaning their teeth, which glistened white and repaid them for their trouble. But in consequence our camp was not pitched till after sunset.

We found it difficult to find a site for the tents in the dense forest. A gang of coolies cleared a space by hacking down small trees and shrubs. As usual we were objects of curiosity, and my knitting aroused great interest. The cook was often surrounded by a crowd who watched his culinary efforts with awe, and one day I was amused to

see one of the jungly onlookers beating up some eggs.

We marched on westwards, our track following the frontier between Nepal and India, which here is a line cut through the forest with occasional pillars. We camped at Bikna Tori on a fine site used by Viceroy's when they shoot in Nepal.

As our cook was still down with fever the butler did the cooking for a few days, with disastrous results to my teeth. His cutlets were covered with a granite-like substance which broke one of my back teeth in half. As the nearest dentist was in Calcutta, many days' journey away, this was a serious matter, but being anxious not to miss the tour I decided to carry on as best I could with a jagged tooth. I tried various things to cover up the sharp pieces, but could not manage to do it till I recalled that I had a file in my manicure set. It had a pointed end which I had to cover with cotton-wool before it could be used in my mouth. Evelyn had to act as dentist, and he filed away for the best part of an hour, until the jagged piece of my tooth was more or less rounded off, and I had great relief. His expression while doing this was so comic that I could not help laughing, which delayed the proceedings, as every time I laughed the cotton-wool round the point of the file fell off, and had to be tied on again. At the end of the tour I had to go to Calcutta at a cost of 500 rupees, so the butler's cutlet became very expensive.

After Bikna Tori we toured through some of the finest Terai forest of Nepal, where the Maharaja's distinguished guests have been to shoot. When these august people arrive, motor roads are made, and they travel in two hours the distance we journeyed in four or five days.

On the second day out of Bikna Tori we came to a camp in the jungle where *keddah* operations were being carried

out. There were 32 elephants, some of them large tuskers. A few days previously a female elephant had been captured with her tiny baby, and the officer in charge of the operations took us to see them. The mother was tied to two large tuskers with a rope round her neck, one end attached to each male; the rope was as thick as a ship's cable and about 15 yards long on each side. Each of the tuskers had a man on his back controlling him, and nearby stood two more tuskers in case they should be needed. We were not allowed to approach nearer than 20 yards. The mother elephant struggled from time to time to free herself, lurching away and being pulled up by the taut rope. Sometimes she kicked up large pieces of earth. It seemed a miracle that she did not hurt the little calf, who was usually pottering about under her belly. He was the sweetest little thing, about a month old according to the *mahawats*; he looked rather like a large pig; he had a tiny trunk and when he had an opportunity he helped himself to a meal. Our presence, however, agitated the captive so that she strained more strongly at the rope. I asked if the cable ever broke and was told it did sometimes! The elephant men were showing signs of anxiety, so we reluctantly tore ourselves away. A captive is tied up like this for a month, after which she is more or less tame.

In this part of the jungle there are a number of small herds varying in size from ten to thirty elephants. We camped in the heart of this elephant country, a small patch of jungle being cleared for our camp.

About midnight we were awakened by a tremendous hullabaloo. One of these small herds had, by accident or intentionally, visited our encampment; there was shrill trumpeting mingled with the shouts of our elephant men

and camp followers, who were all busy throwing dry grass on the camp fires to frighten the herd away. The clerks felt their tent shake as an elephant brushed against the ropes. There were two tuskers, three or four females, and a couple of young ones whose high piping voices could easily be distinguished.

My husband rushed out of our tent to see what was happening, leaving me alone inside. I did not feel at all safe, so I put on a coat and went and stood by a camp fire. After about two hours the herd moved off, and the camp went to sleep again. It was thrilling while it lasted. If the herd had stampeded they could have gone through our tents like paper hoops.

Next day we marched on deeper into the elephant country. We were in the Reu Valley; our road passed through large patches of the most gigantic grasses twice the height of an elephant, where the Head Assistant told us many rhino lived. He said that a month earlier a wandering pedlar had suddenly met a rogue elephant and had been killed by him, and by the side of the road we saw the unfortunate man's skull. Just then we heard the noise of a tree being broken by an elephant and we got our rifles ready, but he did not molest us.

The havildar had been clamouring for some venison, saying he was fading away with so much hard work, marching nearly every day, and only meat would restore him, so I went out to hunt for more meat for the camp. I went on a tall female elephant whose *mahawat* had the reputation of knowing the jungles well. We wandered through seas of tall grass, all green and tawny brown, perfect camouflage for the tigers. I only saw one *sambar* hind, but a wild boar got up near us, and ran off ahead of the elephants. As the meat is considered a great delicacy

by the Nepalese I shot him. The *mahawat* lamented that we could not find a *sambar* stag, for although he liked wild boar, a *sambar* is a much bigger animal, and would provide so much more meat for our large camp.

Our next march was into the famous Chitawan Valley. We camped at Khasra, which has a superb view. One looks across a wide valley of gigantic grasses and forest to the Mahabharat hills, beyond which tower up the snow mountains.

In these tall grasses live many rhino, very strictly preserved by the Nepalese Government. Armed sepoy, living in outposts in the forest, guard the valley. A rhinoceros is much prized for its horn, which is valued at £100-150, being used as an aphrodisiac throughout India. If left unguarded, the rhino would certainly be poached and soon exterminated as they have been over most of South-East Asia.

Next morning my husband had one of the excitements of his life, and I regret very much that I was not with him. Having crossed the Rapti river and inspected some forest, he came on to a plain with most of the grass burnt off, but with patches left unburnt here and there near a Tharu village. It looked a grand place for a black partridge, and one or two were calling, so he and Krishna dismounted from the elephant to try and shoot a brace. He had successfully bagged one and lost another, which he was searching for in a narrow band of unburned grass running alongside a field of mustard. Suddenly, 40 or 50 yards away, a series of extraordinary noises, grunts and bellows were heard approaching. My husband and Krishna were arguing whether the noise was due to buffaloes, or bullocks, or what, when the point was solved by the appearance of two enormous rhino about twelve yards away!

The searchers hastily scrambled across the rhino ditch surrounding the mustard field, but as they felt very exposed and unsafe out in the open, they scrambled back again and climbed up a convenient tree. This appeared to disturb the rhino, now about six yards away, and they went away towards the village. My husband had a good view of the pair from the top of the tree as they wandered through more mustard fields, creating much excitement among the villagers who were working in the crops. The rhino then circled round into the burnt and unburnt grass area in the direction of the camp, and in about twenty minutes they were lost to view.

Meanwhile the *mahawat* on the elephant had seen the rhino in the mustard fields, and brought his elephant up to the tree in which his master and Krishna had taken refuge. After some discussion they decided to return to camp along a cart-track, although it followed the route taken by the rhinos. They had gone about 200 yards and were passing a small patch of tall unburnt grass about 30 yards away when without warning the larger of the two rhino charged straight at the elephant like a runaway tank.

Very few elephants will stand up to a charging rhino, and the elephant in question was a rather timid young tusker. Expecting him to bolt, my husband clung to the *mahawat*, and Krishna clung to his master, shouting to him to shoot; but as Evelyn had only a gun and a number 6 shot, and in any case dared not release his hold on the *mahawat*, he did nothing but hope for the best and prepare for the worst.

Unexpectedly, the young tusker stood firm, and the rhino, when about five yards from the flank of the elephant, turned abruptly and galloped off behind its tail. But for

that providential turn, the elephant would have been caught in its side by some two tons of matter moving at about twenty miles an hour. The impact would undoubtedly have overthrown the elephant, with fatal results for itself and its three riders.

Having been treed by a rhino, and then charged by one—all in the space of half an hour—my husband had had enough excitement and decided to call it a day. He came back to camp. Krishna decided to make something more than a day of it, and pleading how sorry his old mother would be if anything happened to him, begged that he might not be taken into those rhino-infested areas again.

We marched on across the Rapti Valley, travelling almost due north to Narayangarh. We had a long, tiring day, as the valley is ten miles wide at this part, and our path, winding as it did, was nearly fifteen miles. The country we traversed consisted mostly of grasses, but occasionally we passed a village surrounded by rice fields. The crops had been cut, so there were no rhino to be seen, although their fresh footprints could be detected in the fields.

The villagers dig enormous trenches, 6 feet deep and 6 feet wide, round their land in an attempt, generally futile, to keep out the rhino.

Numerous black partridge rose out of the grass, but we had no time for shooting that day. The view of the mountains was magnificent. We had Manaslu (26,700 feet) directly ahead of us towering up into the sky. It looked only twenty miles away but was in reality about fifty.

We headed due north towards the low outer hills, where our camp was pitched on the bank of the Gandak

river, which makes its way from glaciers and eternal snows through terrific gorges. A place had to be cut out of the jungle for our tents, and an army of coolies hewed down trees and cut shrubs. They even cleared a vista to the river's edge, so that we could enjoy the beautiful view. We were again in country never before visited by Europeans.

One afternoon a cow-herd came into the camp to tell us that one of his calves had just been killed by a leopard. It was four o'clock before we were able to collect the elephants and start. The cow-herd guided us to the place where the kill had taken place; it was on a plateau of tall grass partly burnt and dotted with trees. We could see a drag through the grass, which to our minds looked more like a tiger's work, but the boy was positive it was a leopard; he said he had seen it, and it was yellow and white with spots.

Leaving the boy we followed the drag, and found no calf, but a full-grown black bullock, hardly eaten. It all looked very promising. We *ghoomed* around for a short while, but the grass was so thick and tall that we decided it would be impossible to see a leopard even if it were quite close. My husband fixed up a makeshift *machan* of our wooden bath-mat, in a convenient tree. I sat up, and although I saw nothing I had plenty of thrills. I heard footsteps behind me several times, or thought I did, but I realised later that the noise was caused by tiny birds, about the size of wrens, who made more noise among the dry leaves than half a dozen leopards would have done.

I returned to the camp at sunset and decided to try again next day. We left the camp at one o'clock. On our way we passed some mustard fields in which we saw at least a hundred peafowl. The jungle through which

we passed was bright with various flowering shrubs, colebrookia with its coral-like flowers, purple indigofera, and the sweet-smelling clerodendron with its flowers like chestnut blooms.

We found the kill had been dragged farther, more had been eaten, and the remainder covered up with grass. My husband fixed my *machan* in another tree, and I settled down for a good long sit-up.

I refused to let the noises of the birds excite me; but one hopeful sign was that though many crows were flying about not one of them descended on to the kill.

At half-past four I was growing a little weary when suddenly I noticed a movement in the grass on my right. I waited tensely, then saw a great mass of yellow and could make out the form of a tiger lying down. We had not asked His Highness the Maharaja for permission to shoot any tiger, so it was impossible for me to fire. I do not know how the tiger had come so near, for I had never heard a sound. I do not know how long he had been there.

After a time he sat up and I saw him quite plainly. He was about thirty yards away, but slightly screened by a bush with feathery leaves. I watched him for over an hour. Sometimes he yawned, and then he would lie down and have a nap.

My husband had said that he would come for me at six, and soon I heard his shout. I did not answer, hoping that he would not come and disturb the tiger. At last the beast stood up. He was a magnificent specimen. He stalked slowly towards the kill, looking terrific. My husband shouted again, and I saw the tiger prick up his ears and look in the direction of the noise. He was not worried, and stood presenting a target I could not have

missed. Then he moved slowly away. Obviously he was not hungry, and perhaps wished to have a drink at the stream nearby. I watched him till he disappeared in the grass, then I shouted for Evelyn to come up. He arrived in about five minutes, and as he was approaching my tree he saw the tiger in the grass only a few yards away from the elephant.

We were moving down the river next day or I should have stayed until darkness hoping to see the tiger return to his kill. It is thrilling to see a close-up of a fine tiger even if you have no intention of shooting it.

The following day we did our first move down the Gandak river in dugouts, of which we had a fleet of ten. Our tents and luggage went in carts along the bank. We fished all likely places on the way down, but we never saw a fish. We shot down one fierce rapid, the water splashing aboard. If I had not had great confidence in my crew I should have been really alarmed. We landed on a pebbly island with a gorgeous run on either side, but there were no fish. We saw the footprints of a huge rhino that had been on the island recently.

We camped in the forest on the high bank of the river. A clearing had been made for us. The next morning, when I was interviewing the cook, I heard shouts of "*Gaendar, gaendar*" (rhino, rhino).

We went to the bank of the river, and there on the opposite side was a huge bull rhino having a drink. His thirst quenched, he wandered along the bank in full view, and then proceeded to swim the river, which is at least 200 yards wide. It was a wonderful sight to see him wade in deeper and deeper until he began to swim and we could see only his ears and his very large horn. Chiri and some of the camp men ran down our bank to try and

turn him back, but he took no notice, and on landing he trotted off into the jungle near our camp.

In the evening another rhino came for a drink—a younger one and more skittish. We watched him prancing and gambolling about like a kid.

That night, after having baths and listening to the news and commentary on the radio, we called for dinner and made our way into the little dining-tent.

We had just started on our soup when a terrific noise came from the kitchen tent. Men were shouting and beating tins frantically. We jumped up and looked out to see what all the excitement was about, and there between our tent and the kitchen, silhouetted in the glow of the camp fire, was a gigantic animal. It stood stock-still. My husband turned on his torch, which lit up the head of a big bull rhinoceros—probably the same one that I had seen swimming the river in the daytime.

Our cook and butler had at first thought it was a buffalo wandering into the camp, and they had tried to shoo it off by beating on the frying-pan. When they realised it was a rhino, they had hastily retired towards the kitchen fire, redoubling their clamour.

My husband got his gun and fired a shot into the air, whereupon the huge animal lumbered away into the darkness and we resumed our disturbed dinner.

A quarter of an hour later, the local Forest officer and some of his staff, who were camped more than half a mile away, arrived in a great state of agitation. They had heard the shot and feared a rhino had attacked the camp.

Almost simultaneously a terrific din arose from the Tharu village nearby, where apparently the rhino had decided to get his evening meal of rice. After all these excitements, however, there was peace for the rest of the

night; but in the morning we could hear several rhino calling in the high grass on the other side of the river.

As there were no fish to be caught, I amused myself by going up and down the river in a dugout armed with a rifle and a gun. There were many Brahminy duck, which I stalked and shot as they flew off. These duck generally go about in pairs, and seem devoted to each other. When one is dropped, the mate is greatly concerned and flies around in a frenzied way uttering loud quacks.

There were crocodiles of both sorts in many places, and these I stalked. I usually landed from the dugout and approached on foot. Sometimes I crawled on all fours so as to get within easy shot.

One evening Bir Bahadur and I landed from our dugout and crept through the forest which bordered the river. We crawled to the bank and, peering below us, saw about twenty crocodiles, most of them half in the water. There was one evil-looking mugger (man-eating species) lying on the bank about one foot from the water. I waited for half an hour hoping some more would come farther up the bank, but they seemed disinclined to leave the water's edge. I could hear them calling to each other with the funny rattling sound they make: some of them had their mouths wide open, and some of them lay in groups across each other. In the water I could see others just below the surface, their eyes and snouts just visible.

After half an hour I decided to have a shot at the man-eater, about one hundred yards away. I took careful aim and was delighted to see I had hit him. He lay prostrate, and I thought I had bagged him. All the others had disappeared in a flash. Bir Bahadur and I got up and started down the bank when I saw the monster wriggle painfully and manage to squirm into the water and dis-

appear. We called up the dugout and went to the place where he had submerged, but he had vanished. We probed about with long poles, but there was no trace of him. My husband said I should have got another shot in as he lay as if dead.

Our fourth camp down the river was on a side branch of the Gandak as there was no suitable ground on which to camp by the main river. We hunted about for a site, and had chosen one when Chiri came dashing up to say there was a dead man lying in the water, and a dead horse. We hastily pushed off elsewhere, but could not find a nice place. The local Forest guard told us that there were many rhino about, and that they could sometimes be seen in herds of twenty or thirty. Our clerks were so alarmed that they sat up all night by a huge bonfire, and they also had a petromax lamp. We did not believe this tale, but we kept a gun handy.

We had just gone to bed when we heard heavy footsteps near the tent. My husband had his gun, but mine was under my bed. In the pitch-darkness I got out of bed and groped for my gun case. Having found it I tried to put up my gun in the dark. Even in daylight it is a difficult gun to fit, and in the darkness I made an awful clatter. All the time my husband was urging me to be quiet.

The rhinos (we discovered next morning that two were there) were near us for nearly an hour. They splashed about in the river, making a great noise. We stayed awake until they moved off, each of us with a loaded gun by our bedside. The guns, of course, were only to make a noise in case the rhinos came too close or tripped over our tent ropes.

Near our camp was a small copse of sal: the elephant men thought that it would be a nice place to pitch their

tents, but the local forest people warned them that a goddess lived there, and that if the elephants stayed near it they would all die next day, also any men with them, so they had to find other quarters. No one was daring enough to test the truth of this.

We continued down-stream until we reached Tamaspur, where we had a wonderful camp. We had visited this place two years before, and I have described how we reached it in dugouts from Tribeni in a previous chapter. Then, we had thought we had reached the edge of the world. Now, coming from so far up river, we thought we were nearing civilisation again. We camped a mile from the river on a park-like place at the edge of a huge forest. There was plenty of game, and I had some shooting. We had a final try for some fish, but it was quite hopeless, and during our fifty-mile march down the Gandak we never saw a fish and never had a bite.

Our whole camp moved down-stream to Tribeni in a fleet of three dugouts and two large country boats. The servants and camp followers sang and beat tom-toms as the boats glided along. We saw many crocodiles. At one spot, I was near the bank in my dugout and saw a monster within five yards of me. His eyes and snout were just above water. I fired at a duck just as my husband was opposite this crocodile, which dived into the river, nearly upsetting his dugout, to the alarm of the crew.

At Tribeni we bid farewell to our dugout men. They were grateful for the money we paid them. I do not suppose they had ever seen so many rupees before.

We reached the railway at Bagaha. It seemed strange to see a train again. There was a party of Tibetans in the station, very ruddy of face, with long pigtailed. They wore high boots made of felt, and their clothes were made of

cloth spun from wool of their own sheep. It was very hot in the sun, and the heat was altogether too much for these men, dressed for an altitude of 10,000 feet. They had stripped to the waist, tying their coats round themselves. They had several things for sale, blankets, cloth and skins.

A party of these Tibetans travelled on our train. They were going to Calcutta to sell their bundles of skins. At one small station there was a heap of stones lying near the platform. My husband, being a keen geologist, descended from our carriage and crossed the line to see if there were any fossils among the stones. He was followed by one of our orderlies, and they began hunting for fossils. The Tibetans, full of curiosity, joined them, and soon all the passengers from the train turned up. The Tibetans enquired what we were searching for and Krishna replied that he was searching for gold. Excitement became intense, and everyone began rushing about collecting pocketsful of stones. The train began to whistle frantically, but no one was in a hurry and it was some time before everyone had taken their seats and we resumed our journey to Raxaul on our way back to Kathmandu.