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# THE JUNGLE PEOPLE

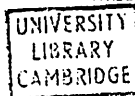
MEN, BEASTS AND LEGENDS OF THE MOÏ COUNTRY

by  
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Translated from the French by  
Eleanor Brockett



A comfortable seat



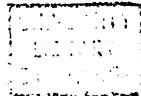
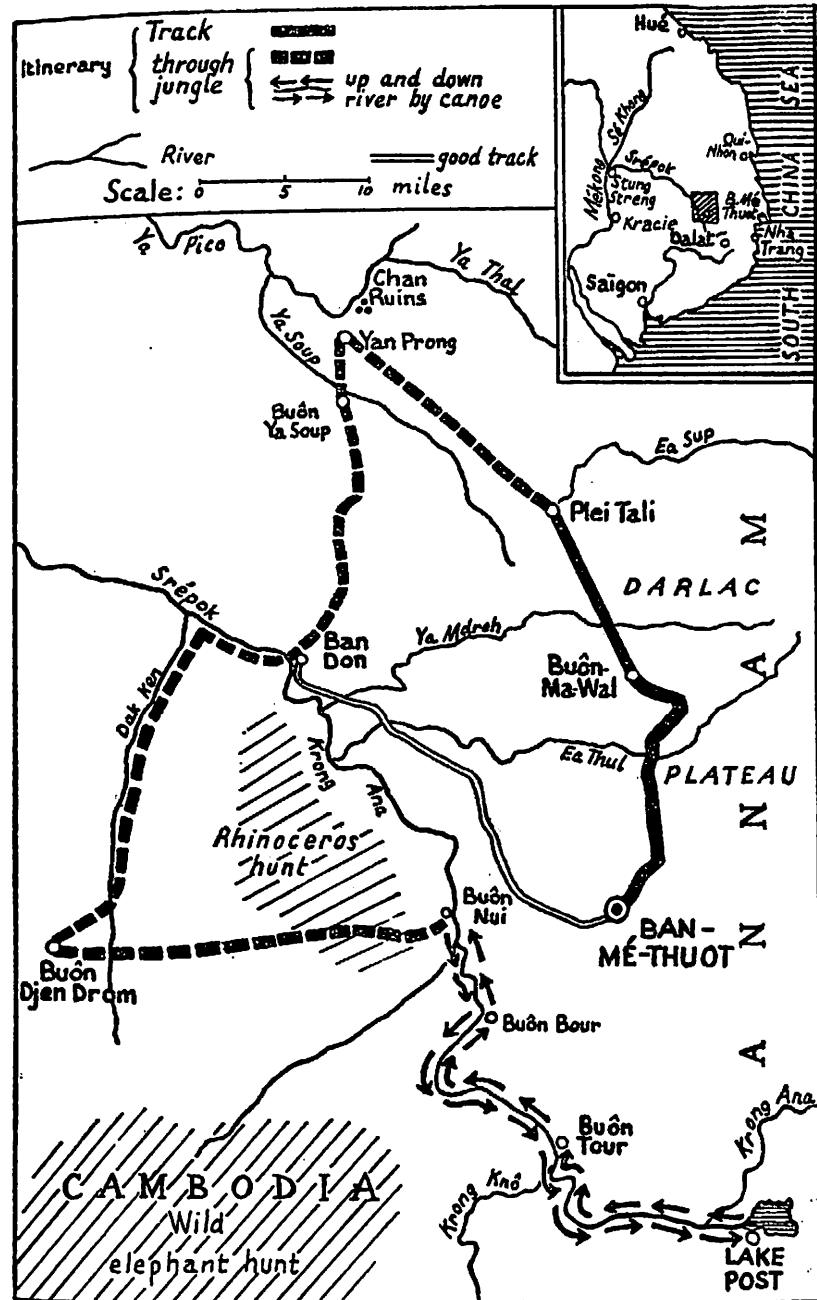
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TO MY DAUGHTER  
LAETITIA  
I DEDICATE THESE TALES OF MEN  
AND BEASTS WHOM WE CALL WILD

57.1896



But there was nothing unusual in my reception, nothing that led me to suppose that my retinue had been plotting my death. I'Doat was waiting for me on the sloping river-side.

"Well?" he asked, doing his best to appear nonchalant.

I made no reply, pretending for my part to be interested in a flight of griffon vultures that was just passing overhead.

He tried to draw me out.

"And did you pull the beard of the Yang Prong?"

He must have seized his courage in both hands to have taken up my quip like that.

"No, there were too many bats on it!"

And we laughed together, he relieved to see me back, and I delighted with my expedition.

I suggested that we should camp for the night just where we were. The water's edge was only a couple of paces away, the water was clean and the elephants could revel in it. Water, their paradise, their source of rest, refreshment and fun!

"Never!"

The cry came from I'Doat. He looked at me horrified.

I felt that this time I had overstepped the limits of his patience. The elephant driver came forward to help me into the saddle, and prrrt! . . . the next moment he was perched on the animal's huge head. We set off at full speed due south, where we stopped at the village of Buôn Ya-Soup for the night.

All's well that ends well!

## CHAPTER FOUR

*We capture a Crocodile—On the Track of the Rhinoceroses—The Legend of the Wild Dogs—Lost in the Jungle—We meet I'Rit and the Canoeists—My First Experience of the Rapids—Incantations to the Spirit of the Water.*

"M<sup>B</sup>A! M<sup>B</sup>A!" ("Fetch it!")

We were at Ban-Don where the Laoan, Mnong and Djarai hunters were assembling for the great rhinoceros hunt.

"M<sup>B</sup>a! M<sup>B</sup>a!"

The hunters' elephant drivers were making the elephants work, getting them to clear a corner of bush where the camp could be set. It was quite entertaining to see them seize sturdy bamboos and break them as if they were glass, and lay their trunk upon a shrub which was in the way, uproot it and throw it away. One heard crackling, a tree branch would snap and the uprooted tree would topple over and fall. Then it was the next one's turn.

Our mounts were unsaddled and taken by their *cornacs* to bathe in the waters of the Srépok, which was about a hundred yards wide at this point. The elephants swam about trumpeting joyfully, the tips of their trunks out of the water and apart from that only the tops of their heads emerging, like little islands.

We were to reach the forest early on the morrow and stay there a week, possibly longer.

We were going to be present at a great hunt in the high forest which would mean penetrating into the most inaccessible reaches of nameless mountains. The marches would be long and the going difficult. Stops would be made where possible along the rhinoceros tracks, and for our hours of sleep we were

to entrust ourselves to chance miradors, perched among the tangled lianas of huge trees.

For the moment, however, I gave myself up to the delight of living in the charming village of Ban-Don situated in the midst of enchanting country.

To the east, the rolling hills of central Darlac petered out at the edge of the waters of the Srépok, low because of the dry season. On the gentle green ripples of the river canoes glided amid nenuphars and lotus flowers. Through the lacework of the bamboo groves could be glimpsed the thatched roofs of the huts whence came the melancholy call of a khèn.<sup>1</sup>

After all the emotional upheavals of the past few days, it was fitting that I should take some rest. But it was not to be for long! In the afternoon when I was thinking of having a good siesta, my elephant drivers arrived at my hut at the gallop.

At the bottom of the trough of lotus and arrowheads which bordered the river-bank the Moïs had just harpooned a crocodile.

I ran to the water's edge.

Poor crocodile! He was not a pretty sight. His head and tail were pierced with spear thrusts, he was dripping with blackish blood and seemed to be giving no further sign of life. Nevertheless, I'Doat brought me my gun and explained that the Moïs wanted me to administer the *coup de grâce*.

"Do you think he needs it?"

"It is an honour which you cannot refuse . . ."

I complied and in a highly spectacular manner fired the entire contents of my gun at the root of the crocodile's tail.

The effect this had was totally unexpected. The unprepossessing saurian opened his formidable jaws, swept the ground with an angry lash of his tail, and tumbled towards the bank charging the onlookers who surrounded him.

I felt I was "losing face", as they say in Asia.

I'Doat and the elephant drivers stood there in dumb amazement, as if their feet were rooted to the ground. Then, throwing caution to the winds, a native jumped onto the amphibian

<sup>1</sup> A sort of Laoan violin.

nearly on his head, and began to belabour his body with frantic spear blows. The crocodile showed his teeth again, but did not react any more violently. Then, the height of boldness, two or three Moïs came to the rescue, plunged their weapons in the wide-open mouth and, making a concerted effort and with amazing skill, turned the saurian over on to his back.

With the help of a *coupe-coupe* the crocodile's head was severed from his body and the skin skilfully removed. Yet—an extraordinary example of the vitality of these animals—I noticed that for more than half an hour afterwards the gigantic jaws were still opening and shutting and the eyelids still moving up and down.

For a whole week, consumed with impatience to be off into the forest, we had lived in the feverish atmosphere of preparation for the hunt.

At last the great day arrived! At dawn, when the caravan of hunters was about to leave the village, the whole populace was excitedly astir and the humid atmosphere of the river-bank seemed charged with electricity.

And indeed these hunts were great events, events which took place only two or three times a year, in the winter season—intrepid undertakings full of risk, but also full of promise. It took two or three months to prepare for such an expedition and meant weeks of toil on the part of the natives to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion.

Old I'Boun, an unforgettable Djarai, was to be one of our party.

He was one of the greatest hunters of the Darlac region, and through his hunting had succeeded in amassing a considerable fortune. This took the form of a number of pitchers filled with thousands of piastres which he had carefully buried.

"As he gives big *bouns* as often as he can and has many friends, we do not think badly of his wealth," was I'Doat's comment.

Although the total number of guns did not exceed fifty, it

was an impressive company. There were fifty hunter elephants and ten others in reserve.

So we reached the first glade which abounded in stag, wild boar and wild buffalo. Travelling up hill and down dale we arrived at the banks of the Krong-Ana, romantic tributary of the Srépok. Beyond this point the great animals were at home, in their own realm.

We were to follow the hunters only for the first part of their expedition on the other side of the Krong-Ana, in the mountain massif inhabited by the rhinoceroses. We were then to return to the river to make our way by canoe up to the stupendous lake region.

Perched high upon his elephant which was pitching alongside mine, old I'Boun, his eyes mischievous, his cheeks the colour of a dried pippin, talked to me about his hunts. His was a true bushman's life which would justify a book to itself.

We were enclosed in a mysterious world of vegetation, and as we followed the buffalo vales which made good tracks, the forest became more and more dense.

The leaders came to us from time to time to report on the path being taken by the animals we were going to hunt. There were over fifty of them—ten enormous males and the rest females—coming down towards us.

The whole forest proclaimed the presence of the animals. First of all there were the flights of tick-birds, those tiny birds who live on the vermin of wild beasts and peck the hide of the rhinoceroses and elephants. They shot into the branches of the trees like rockets, squawking and screeching.

At the head of the procession, the Moïs sounded a sudden call on their buffalo horns. The sound travelled with us for a moment, faded away and was then renewed. I'Boun listened attentively, then excused himself and went ahead of our group into the dense woodland. I listened to the solemn sounds as they faded gradually on the wild forest air.

This meant that something was about to happen.  
Could it be the rhinoceros?

But it was more usual to find rhinoceros in mountain caves, among the rocks.

A hunter of I'Boun's escort brought his elephant up to within call of mine.

"Rhinoceros!" he shouted.

I had had an idea that it was.

We would have to halt at once and set up watch points around an improvised camp.

While the elephants were being unloaded, I'Boun ordered some of his men to cut down some large branches which were then trimmed into poles six feet long.

I admired the patient work of the natives as they skilfully wove lianas round the poles to make a clever contrivance rather like a raft. When it was finished, the raft was hooked on to extra tough lianas and suspended like a little balcony from half-way up the great trees which surrounded us.

This was the mirador, or observation platform. Wrapped in our mosquito nets we were also to take our night's sleep upon it.

By nightfall everything was ready. Our fires had kept away the pythons which frequented the nearby quagmires, and the prowling tigers.

Three groups of beaters, comprising six or seven men, had gone off into the forest, clad only in their belts and armed with *coupe-coupes*, the inevitable bows and large half-rusty flint-guns.

They had split up in the forest, each group going its own way to seek out the rhinoceros tracks.

I felt uneasy about them but was assured that they had not far to go. Comfortably installed in one of the highest miradors I certainly had no desire to change places with them.

I'Doat was madly keen to go off with one of the groups of beaters, but I firmly refused to let him.

After all, what would happen to me if my faithful companion got himself eaten? For I was quite lost in the densest bushland of Darlac.

So he sulked away in a corner of the mirador despite the lovely rifle I had just offered him in honour of the hunt and to replace his old gun.

We could hear the horns sounding in the distance, indistinctly.

A rhinoceros was in sight, and the beaters were sending it towards us. It was a hunter from my mirador who actually hit the animal. The natives have remarkable eyesight and can, from long usage, see through the gloom of the jungle even on the darkest night.

Seven animals were killed in the course of the night and by dawn the process of dismemberment had already begun. Every part of the animal had its value with the exception of the bones. The cooked meat, which was to be the hunters' food for several days, was spread out on improvised griddles, while the skins were made fast on either side of the pack-saddles and were beginning to dry.

The days and nights which followed were full of excitement. The hunters caught stags and they caught buffaloes; they caught bears with the precious claws which are sold at high prices to the Laoans for gree-grees or charms. The antlers of the stag and above all the horn of the rhinoceros are highly esteemed by Chinese doctors, who travel far to buy them from the Laoans on the day of the great market of Kratié.

"They are sold for up to a thousand piastres a pair, and the skin can fetch as much as five hundred piastres the picul," I'Boun informed me.

So the hunters did quite well out of it, although of course they took considerable risks.

On the entreaties of I'Doat, who insisted on reserving for me a wild elephant hunt in his own part of the country, I left I'Boun and the hunters at first light on the fifth day.

Our return to the Krong-Ana, where we were to exchange our elephants for canoes, was full of pitfalls and anxieties.

We were crossing wild desolate country, subject of many an evil legend, and our sole aim was to avoid the manifold dangers with which we were encompassed.

Happily the elephant drivers were born elephant drivers and not just the bearers of a title. It is a calling which demands

<sup>1</sup> A picul is about 130 lb.

in fact a combination of the qualities of strength, skill and equilibrium (this I found amazing), a perfect sense of direction and mastery of the art of loading, having regard to weight and to the type of terrain over which the elephant will be moving.

I had had absolute confidence in my driver ever since I had joined forces with him, but I still found some moments alarming, as for instance the crossing of a slippery arroyo, a sharp turn in the course of which the cage overhung an abyss, and descent over broken, rocky ground.

However, eventually everything calmed down and I could bring myself to contemplate unhurriedly the perfect formation of our caravan.

For me it was always *The Jungle Book* and all of Kipling's books which constituted my reading whenever we halted for any length of time. And my friend I'Doat was playing the part of the best Kim in the world.

Among the green disarray of the ancient trees, monkeys leapt about and accompanied us chattering. They looked as if they were thinking of taking aim to bombard us with huge jungle fruits but in the end refrained. Their raucous squawkings amused and irritated me at the same time, as did their little darting, mocking eyes. The elephant drivers chased them off with a special cry resembling the call of the tiger. This caused them to leap nimbly into the branches higher and higher until they reached the top where all the tree-tops mingled into one unbroken roof of foliage.

Bears, disturbed in their work of digging out roots, ran off before us as fast as their short paws could carry them. I forbade anyone to shoot at them.

"It is here, in these vast forests, that the wild dogs live," said I'Doat.

"The wild dogs? What are they like?"

I knew that this race of dogs was widespread in Darlac, but that one only rarely had the opportunity of seeing them.

"Their coat is of a reddish colour, like the forest at the end of the dry season, and they have a long bushy tail. When