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VICEROY AND THE SECRETARY OF STATE

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## CHAPTER VIII

### TIGER SHOOT IN ASSAM: 1907

*Journal, February 28.* After the strenuous time we had had entertaining the Amir and playing up for the *Entente*, and the fatigue of the Minto Fête, we felt we were justified in having a week's holiday, and on the 17th February we started for Assam for a tiger shoot.

The *bundabust* was arranged by the Maharajah of Cooch Behar at a camp called Kolabari; we shot entirely from elephants and had a very exciting time.

We left camp at nine o'clock in motor-cars, crossing many small bridges over rivulets where notices were prominently displayed: "Elephants prohibited". As an ordinary elephant weighs four tons, I was not surprised.

Five miles from camp sixty-seven elephants awaited us, some with pads and some with howdahs, and the Maharaj Kumar, Cooch Behar's eldest son, came with me, while Cooch Behar went with the beaters.

We were all placed along a river-bed on the outskirts of a thick jungle at a considerable distance apart. The elephants then beat up towards us along a strip of land, which was drawn blank. Our positions were then changed, and we formed a line facing a dense jungle of such tall grass that only the heads of the *mahouts*<sup>1</sup> riding the elephants were visible. I was on the extreme right: we waited breathlessly. A soft wind cooled the air and made the sun less oppressive. The beaters formed a huge circle, all advancing together towards one goal, of which we were the centre. While the beaters were still some distance away there was not a sound to be heard, so that a sudden crackling among the hard dry stems of the pampas grass made one's breath come quicker; but nothing but a small deer galloped out of the thicket.

Nearer and nearer came the elephants till they were within eighty yards of us, their great unwieldy bodies forcing their way through

<sup>1</sup>The natives in control of elephants.

the jungle with a loud rustling noise, so that the only way of knowing whether any wild animal was approaching was by watching for movements in the grass. Suddenly, with a roar, out sprang a young tiger in front of Minto. He fired and wounded him, but it needed a second shot before he fell dead. At this moment, from the same part of the jungle, a huge tigress bounded across the small open space and galloped down the line, to be immediately hidden again by the tall grass. She had hardly passed before a second young tiger followed his mother and was killed by Eileen. Meanwhile the line of elephants had formed a circle which was gradually closing in, imprisoning the furious tigress who occasionally, for the hundredth part of a second, showed us a flash of yellow and black stripes. At last she was cornered: there was a cannonade; everyone was shooting amid a scene of great excitement, and it was impossible to say who had fired the fatal shot.

Exciting as the morning had been, it was as nothing to what occurred during the afternoon.

We had formed up on our elephants on the outskirts of a jungle with a bit of open country behind us. As the line of beaters approached, the trumpeting of the elephants warned us that some wild animal was not far away. So close came the beaters that the patch of ground enclosed could not have been more than a hundred yards square. Suddenly the jungle seemed alive with tigers! They appeared to be bounding wildly from side to side, almost touching the encircling wall of elephants. Of these some stood like rocks, but others, less accustomed to the roars of the tigers, and the reports of the rifles, backed and turned, in spite of the *mahouts'* punishing weapons, with which they urged them to remain staunch. Two stampeded, turned, and fled back through the jungle, their riders saving themselves as best they could from the branches of trees and other obstacles which threatened to sweep them from the howdahs. Meanwhile, rifles were fired into the tiny patch of ground as a glimpse was caught here and there of a tiger.

The uproar was deafening and I could feel my heart thumping with excitement. It was a most sensational scene, more like the Hippodrome than anything in real life, and the stage seemed overcrowded with struggling animals and shouting men. Suddenly a huge tigress bounded out of the thicket between me and Colonel Crooke-Lawless. He fired as she sprang towards him, and I saw a cloud of dust rise where his bullet struck the ground. I was shooting

with the Maharajah's all too heavy paradox gun. My first shot knocked the tiger over and gave me time to reload. She got up, apparently little the worse, and instead of breaking straight away, turned to the right, giving me a view of her body broadside in the open. My next shot again knocked her down, but she was up in an instant, and with a terrific roar, on she flew. One more chance before losing her! I fired, a moment of acute suspense, and then, to my joy, I saw her roll over and over, stone dead, shot through the heart. When a tiger is bounding along at that pace, one inch to the right or left and the wound is not fatal. My lucky star enabled me to aim straight and the great quivering tigress had fallen to my rifle.

This gives but a faint idea of what took place in that tiny space of ground. In twenty-three minutes four tigers had been killed, and in spite of the cross-firing everyone was safe. One's sensation when a tiger, wild with rage, with flashing teeth and flaming eyes, makes for one's elephant, is unforgettable. The *shikaris* were astonished at finding four tigers together. Cooch Behar, who had shot for thirty years, had never seen such a sight. My tigress was the biggest of the bag.

We had five miles to ride home on pad elephants, a back-breaking process, and we all felt exhausted after our excitement. Seven tigers in one day is a record!

During the shoot a Native clerk in one of the howdahs was heard to ejaculate from time to time: "My God! My God! but this is dangerous sport!" and when asked on another occasion whether he wished to accompany the shooting party he said: "My God! No! What I have seen, I have seen!" That night our camp was disturbed by a rogue elephant which came quite close to the tents, only disappearing into the jungle when badly wounded. An unpleasant and dangerous visitor.



foreign to the deep and glorious traditions of our country, have been perpetrated. It is true these are the doings of hare-brained, unsteady and immature youths who stand isolated in the community. I cannot help saying that at no stage in its history has the British Government shown greater calmness and strength of character than under our present Viceroy. Lord Minto seems to have been ordained by divine dispensation to have been in India at this juncture."

*January 29.* To-night we gave a Fancy Dress Ball in memory of the great-grandfather who lived for seven years in this house a hundred years ago, and whom Minto impersonated. Larry<sup>1</sup> and the Staff wore the exact uniform of that period.

*February 11.* We have had three thrilling days in the jungle at Lahapara in Assam, the Maharajah of Cooch Behar kindly undertaking to make all arrangements.

The first day we went after tiger. I cannot describe the tensivity of anticipation and silence as the beat gradually creeps nearer and nearer: every blade of grass and scrub is keenly watched: every sense is painfully alert. At last a flash of yellow appeared. I fired, and saw the tiger's white chest as he raised himself and, with a bound, dashed past our elephant into the jungle beyond. I thought I had missed him but the *shikari* declared he was hit, and with great rapidity the line of elephants was reformed surrounding the patch of jungle where Cooch Behar thought he was lying. As the circle narrowed, the tiger bounded out of a clump of thick grass, and made for Captain Jelf's elephant, smiting at his trunk with his mighty paw in passing. Then, with a desperate spring, he landed on the head of Eileen's elephant, which remained staunch, and the tiger was killed by her companion, Colonel Hammond, who hurriedly shot it over her head.

The next day we went after rhino. This is a dangerous sport, as, though elephants will stand the charge of a tiger, they will rarely face rhino or pig without wavering, as these animals frequently gore the most vulnerable parts of their huge bodies. It had been sternly impressed upon everyone that, as the kill of rhino in this district is restricted, no one except the Viceroy was to fire. The trumpeting of the elephants led us to expect some sport, and several elephants stampeded in spite of the desperate efforts of the *mahouts* to keep them in line. Suddenly a cow rhino dashed out of the jungle and charged straight for the elephant on which Eileen and the Maharajah were riding. In cases of self-defence the law is of course relaxed, and the

<sup>1</sup> Viscount Melgund, our eldest son.

Maharajah shouted to Eileen: "Fire! By God, fire!" but Eileen was obdurate until the rhino closed with the elephant: then both she and the Maharajah fired, with their rifles almost touching the rhino's back. Wounded, the rhino dashed back to the jungle, pursued by their galloping elephant. The Maharajah, grasping the howdah with one hand and holding his rifle with the other as if it were a pistol, emptied the magazine at the disappearing rhino, which was eventually secured, Minto having hurried to their assistance.

After a brief lull, Francis Scott and I, who were together on an elephant and had been spectators of this drama, saw a huge bull rhino slowly appearing from a different direction. He stood stationary for some time about eighty yards away, giving us a broadside view of his enormous body, a target almost impossible to miss. The self-restraint required to keep from firing was considerable, but we remained true to orders. Our loyalty, alas, was not rewarded, as Minto never had an opportunity of getting a shot at him, but we were praised for our honourable conduct.

The same day Victor Brooke had a different and very dangerous adventure. He was always casual as to personal safety, and when he saw a cow rhino and her calf emerge from the jungle he did not shoot but hurriedly grasped his kodak, being anxious to obtain a picture. On sighting the elephant the rhino charged, and these huge beasts met with a tremendous concussion, like two battleships ramming each other; the shock was terrific. Victor was hurled against the iron bar of the howdah, his rifle was flung to the ground, and his right arm severely damaged. Meanwhile the young rhino attacked the elephant from the rear. With his left hand Victor managed to cock his small Winchester rifle and fired three shots. After much trampling round and round, the rhino eventually made off with her calf. Francis, who had seen the encounter from the next howdah, attempted to come to Victor's rescue, but his elephant turned and careered away into the open.

On the third day I was the lucky one of the party, being fortunate in securing both a buffalo and a bison, a compensation for having sacrificed the wonderful opportunity of adding a rhino to my trophies, which, with my tiger, bison and buffalo, would surely have made a record for a three days' shoot.

Early next morning we left camp and returned to Calcutta. The Viceregal party, with the Maharajah and camp-followers, numbered in all 1006.