

THE
HIGHLANDS OF INDIA

VOL. II.,

BEING A CHRONICLE OF

FIELD SPORTS AND TRAVEL

IN INDIA,

WITH

NUMEROUS FULL-PAGE

AND TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS, DIAGRAMS, &c.

BY

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- General James Abbott, C.B., for kindly allowing access to his valuable notes and “Ballads and Legends of the Punjaub,” (Section II.);
- Colonel F. R. DeBudé, R.A., “Note on Ooryal Shooting,” page 193;
- Colonel E. A. Hardy, late 21st Hussars, “Notes on the Indian Lion and Cheetah,” page 446;
- Major-General George Maister, R.A., “Note on Hawking in India,” page 215;
- Captain J. T. Newall, late Asst. G.G.’s Agent Rajpootana States, “A Trip to the Concan by Raighur” (page 394), and “Note on Sport in Rajpootana” (page 425), and several illustrations in Section XV.;
- Major-General Sir Campbell C. Ross, K.C.B., “Notes on Sport in Kumäon” (page 301), and Illustrations XVIII. and XIX.;
- Lieut.-General H. A. Sarel, C.B. (the late), “Note on Rhinosceros Shooting in Assam,” page 328. He is the “S.” alluded to as the author’s fellow traveller in Section I., “Cashmere;”
- Colonel Edmund Smyth, B.S.C., for access to journals “Gurhwâl and Thibet,” page 284.*

The above list contains the names of several old Rugbæans: the author, therefore—himself an old Rugbæan of Arnold’s time—has ventured to inscribe the following little chronicle of Field Sports and Travel in India to Rugbæans generally, amongst other old comrades of Camp and Field.

* To the above must be added the journals and sketches of the author’s lamented brother, the late Adam G. Newall, of the Bombay Artillery, in whose company occurred many of the adventures narrated in Section I., “Cashmere.” Several of the illustrations also in the same section are by the same accomplished young soldier and sportsman, who, alas! died in the prime of life and manhood, to the author’s inexpressible sorrow and regret. He, also, was a Rugbæan.

ANNEXE TO SECTION VIII.

ASSAM.

A PROFILE of the *Térai* subtending the Himalayas north of the ceded Bhootia Döars is given, and may serve to connect and lead up to the hill regions treated of in Section IX.—the next step of the “Highlands of India.”

Intermediate between Sikhim, Bhootan, and the Khásia Hills we find *Assam*, in the valley of the Bráhmápootrâ, that mysterious river, whose source and upper course is even yet a subject of controversy amongst geographers. In the Himalayan highlands, which bound Assam on the north, are found Bhootias, Abors, Duphlas, Looshais, etc., and other cognate tribes, mostly of *Shán* or Indo-Chinese origin, which—under pressure of the conquests of Kublai-Khan, in the twelfth century, or his successor, Genghis-Khan—gravitated into the south-east Himalayas, and chiefly form its present population.

The reader is referred to Vol. I., “Highlands of India,” for some historical notice of this subject; in the present volume it can scarcely be further pursued; but as regards the vast area alluded to as *Assam*, in which big game such as rhinoceros, buffaloes, elephants, etc., abound, it may interest the reader who has thus far followed this little chronicle to hear something of field sports, which—owing to causes mentioned at page 333—the author was himself prevented from following. “A Note on Rhinoceros Shooting in Assam” is accordingly here introduced, kindly placed at his disposal by a former school-fellow and fellow-traveller*—a distinguished old soldier and

* Lieut.-General H. A. Sarel, C.B., &c.

sportsman—which tells its own story, and gives some idea of the game to be found in the wild grassy reaches of the Brâhmâpootrâ valley, commonly called *Assam*.

NOTE ON

RHINOSCEROS SHOOTING IN ASSAM.

IN May, 1865, my staff service in India came to an end, my regiment was ordered to England, and, as there was not much probability of my returning to India, I determined to have one more expedition in search of big game before leaving for ever those happy hunting grounds. I could not have obtained sufficient leave to enable me to revisit the Himalayas and Thibet, so I decided to go to Assam in search of rhinoceros; I had hunted nearly all the big game of India, but had not seen a rhinoceros, and had killed buffalo and elephants only in Ceylon.

I obtained leave to remain behind my regiment, and started for Assam on the first of April with a friend recently arrived from England in search of sport; what used to be known as a T.G. Neither I nor my companion knew anything of the country we were about to visit, and it was, in fact, very little known except to a few tea planters. Fortunately for us the Bhootia campaign was in progress, our force being under the command of that good and gallant officer, the late Sir Harry Tombs, V.C., one of the many good officers trained in that splendid corps, the Bengal Artillery. General Tombs had promised to supply me with elephants, without which shooting in Assam is an impossibility.

Had I known more of the country, or of the habits of rhinoceros, I should not have chosen the month of April for my expedition: the best season for sport in Assam is, I believe, about the end of January or February, when the grass has been burnt, and when one is able to see an animal before coming right on top of him. However, we started from the Sealdah station by rail, and, after a hot and dusty journey, reached Kooshtea, on the

Brâhmâpootrâ, in about seven hours. There was only a dirty room at the terminus in which dinner was to be obtained from what was called an hotel; neither ice nor soda water was procurable; the ghât, or landing place, was about three miles off, and we lost no time in sending our baggage to the steamer, which was to start early the next morning. On our arrival on board, everyone was asleep, and we lay down on our rugs on deck without disturbing a soul.

Our steamer—the Pioneer—was only seventy horse power, and, as we had two flats in tow, with coolies on board for the tea plantations, our progress against a strong stream was of the slowest; sometimes we had a fine breeze, when our sails helped us. About once an hour we ran on a sandbank, and carried away a few timbers and hawsers, but the river boats being trimmed by the head, a little shifting of ballast soon floated us off. The weather was fearfully hot, and, as cholera broke out amongst the coolies, our voyage was not so pleasant as it might have been. Fortunately the nights were cool, so that we could enjoy a good sleep. Our chief amusement was shooting at alligators, of which we saw a considerable number: one day we killed ten, some of which were brought on board; these are the long nosed, or fish alligators (*gurreeal*), and are quite distinct from the man-eaters (*muggers*). Numbers of porpoises were rolling about, but gave no chance for a shot.

The river is, generally, a broad strong stream, with low sandy banks; on the "churs," or low sandy islands, the buffalo and pig were numerous, but we could not stop for shooting. In sleeping on deck care should be taken to have a blanket handy, as a cold wind often springs up, which strikes a deadly chill after the heat of the day.

On the ninth of April we reached Goalpara, where we bought a couple of very common howdahs; perhaps such things may now be procurable in Assam, but we should have brought them from Calcutta. On the 13th we arrived at Gowhatty, and put up with the 43rd N.I.: the baboo in charge of the post office denied having any letters for us, but allowed us to ransack his boxes, where we found several. We crossed the river and marched to General Tomb's camp on the 14th, leaving again on the 16th. On the march we shot a few deer and bustard-floriken. General

Tombs gave us eight elephants, or we could have seen nothing in the high grass.

My battery consisted of a No. 8 double rifle and a smooth bore of the same calibre, besides a single hexagonal bore Whitworth rifle, which threw shells; these, however, proved useless against large game, as the explosion was so instantaneous that the fragments of lead acted only as a charge of shot. My companion's battery consisted of a double breech-loading 16-bore rifle, and two 14-bore muzzle-loading smooth-bores, carrying ball; with the exception of one breech-loading rifle, all the guns were muzzle-loaders.

Our first day's rhinoceros hunting was on the 20th. We beat for some hours without finding, but came at length on some deer and buffalo in a swamp: we wounded a few, but lost them in the high grass. A tea planter joined us, saying that he could show us the best sport in Assam; but as he proved to be an impostor, and to be careless in handling his rifle, we were not sorry when he took his departure. Soon after he left we came across a rhinoceros feeding. My rifle missed fire both barrels—I suppose from the excessive damp. My companion gave him two barrels, but after tracking him a long way, we lost him. We then followed the spoor of two rhinoceros for about three miles into a dense patch of high grass, beyond which no tracks were to be seen, so we formed six elephants in line, with the howdahs at the far end. Almost as soon as the beat commenced, a rhinoceros broke within twenty yards of my elephant. I gave him both barrels in the shoulder, and two more as he went away, and dropped him; the mahout said another had broken back through the line of beaters. We beat back again, and my friend wounded another badly, which we killed after an exciting chase: he measured 14ft.2½in. from the nose to the tail; his horn was 11½in. long, and 22in. round the base. We soon found another, which my companion hit in the ribs, and I hit him with both barrels and brought him down, but he got up again, and came at my elephant open-mouthed. I hit him on the top of the head as he came on, and turned his charge, but the ball did not penetrate: we had a long chase after him, and eventually killed him with two long shots. On our way to camp we killed a couple of horse deer; these are nearly as large as red deer, with more and flatter tines; at this season the horns are in velvet.

We were well pleased with this our first day's shooting, and the succeeding days were much like it; though full of excitement for us, they would be tedious to others in the description.

The most objectionable part of the sport consisted in cutting off the horns: these had to be chopped off the bone of the nose with an axe, a process which splashed the operator with blood; on reaching camp the horn and thick skin attached had to be boiled, when the skin became loose, and was easily detached from the base of the horn; the horn itself looks like a conglomeration of coarse hair, with the tip rounded and polished by digging for roots. I may mention here that this appears to be the only use to which the animal puts this appendage, as will be seen further on. I learnt from experience that he uses his mouth only in attack; this disproves the fact (?) which I learnt in the days of my youth, that when the elephant and rhinoceros engage in mortal combat, the rhinoceros—though smaller—almost always gains the victory by goring his enemy in the stomach, carrying him about on the end of his nose till rendered blind by the blood running into his eyes. Many of our youthful lessons in natural history do not stand the test of experience.

On dismounting from the elephant to cut off the horn, we were often unable to find the rhinoceros till guided by the mahout, on account of the height and dense growth of the grass, the stems being usually thicker than a man's finger, and as difficult to penetrate as brushwood; even a native would probably be lost if set on foot where there was no footpath.

Two days after our first hunt we had a day after a herd of buffalo which had been seen in the neighbourhood of our camp. We found them after some beating: each bagged one, and I wounded a young bull with a remarkably fine head, which was marked into a patch of high grass, and followed the herd, out of which we killed two more cows, one of them in milk; at another time I should have thought the milk undrinkable, but in such heat as we were experiencing it was simply delicious. We went to look for the young bull which I had wounded, and after some beating heard a tremendous noise, and saw one of the pad elephants coming out of the patch at his best pace, with the mahout driving him with the "ankoos," and calling out that a tiger had sprung on to the pad and carried off the "jemadar," or man who

had charge of the elephants. We put our elephants in at once to the rescue, and soon came on the jemadar, who told us that the buffalo had suddenly jumped up and frightened the elephant, which spun round and shot him overboard. On coming on the buffalo he charged at once, and two bullets on the top of the shoulder did not even make him flinch, but a third dropped him. It took us some time to secure the horns, as a buffalo's head is heavy, and the vertebræ of his neck are not easily separated.

I have always looked on a buffalo as the most dangerous animal of the jungle to follow on foot: he is excessively cunning, and when wounded will hide in a pool of water with nothing above but his nose, or will come round on his old track and lie in wait for the hunter, and charge suddenly out on him. If he knocks a man down he will not leave him till he has trampled him, and licked him with his rough tongue out of all shape. A rogue elephant is bad enough, but his charge is more easily stopped. It is next to impossible to stop a charging buffalo, as he carries his nose so high that a bullet will glance off his forehead. I once killed a buffalo in Ceylon, which seemed to be preparing for a charge, by a shot at the tip of the nose; he dropped dead, and I could find no mark of a wound till his head was taken off, when the bullet was found at the back of the brain pan, having passed up his nostril.

The natives hereabouts were shy of us, and pretended to know nothing of the country or of the game; they had seen but few Europeans—except the scattered tea planters; as soon, however, as they found that they were regularly paid for their day's work, and that they were allowed to cut off and take home as much rhinoceros or buffalo meat as they wished, and especially when they found that we had physic for their sick, they came in larger numbers than we wanted. They are ingenious in forming a camp: they cut down some of the grass to lie on, and tie the tops of the surrounding jungle together, making a shelter impervious to rain; and, though living in the midst of swamps, did not seem to suffer from fever.

As it was difficult to find out anything about the country or the game, we marched to "Kummergong," where Kurruch Singh, a small landowner and noted hunter—known as the "Hathi-Raja," or elephant king—lived. On the march we passed some

buffalo and antelope on the open plain, but could find no covert for a stalk. We found his majesty absent on a shooting excursion; the headman of the village declined to provide supplies, so we made him over to our guard to be kept a prisoner till supplies were forthcoming, the result of which was that men were sent off on the instant, and in about two hours we had ten days' supplies for ourselves, servants, and elephants, and milch goats to take with us till we reached the next village, for which we paid liberally, though I doubt if much of the money reached those for whom it was intended.

At Dukwagong we found the Hathi-Raja, who volunteered to accompany us and show us the shooting ground near Bagh Döar, and a practicable ford across the Monass by Sidlee, so as to avoid returning the way we had come,—by Roha Thanna and Bijuee. The Raja had a small elephant. He told me a great deal about the rivers of Assam, and assigned the sources of most of them to the Manasarowar Lake in Thibet, but seemed a trifle mixed in his ideas of geography, though not more so than the compilers of the only government map we could procure, who had placed rivers and villages wide of their true location.

Towards the end of April storms of rain were frequent, and interfered with our sport, as the tracks of game were washed out, and rivers and nullahs became swollen.

We were fairly fortunate in our rhinosceros hunting under the Hathi-Raja's guidance, and were more successful in killing them when he explained the vital spot for a bullet, which is about half-way up the fold in the skin behind the shoulder. On receiving a shot there the animal at once begins to whistle from the escape of air from the lungs, and he cannot go many yards after such a wound. The Raja described three kinds of rhinosceros, of which the smallest has the longest horn, but it seemed to us that the largest and oldest animals had the shortest horns only from more wear in digging for roots.

On the islands in the Monass we saw a few tigers, but the grass was too high to allow of any sport with them; they are wonderful swimmers, and go through the water with a rush like a sailing boat. Near Bagh Döar the Monass is full of fish, probably mahaseer, but we had no tackle.

Some of the villages had been burnt by the Bhootias, and the

cattle carried off. The men reminded me of the "Moantse"—the wild tribes in the hills to the west of China, whose country cannot be very distant from this. They value highly the nails and horns of the rhinoceros. The price of the latter at this time is forty rupees the seer—about £2 for one pound in weight.

From Bagh Dōar we went to Peerudgong, and hunted the Raec Moollah district. We had been warned of a fly in this district,—a mosquito with "a bill like a snipe." These were the most fearful blood-suckers I ever encountered. Fortunately they did not trouble men, but attacked the elephants without mercy, and it was common to see a row of these flies on the edge of the pad so gorged that they could not move, and *squashing* them was a most objectionable process. We had here fair sport with rhinoceros and buffalo. There were so many of their tracks that it was difficult to follow a wounded animal. Tracking is the most exciting part of rhinoceros hunting; sometimes the spoor took us three or four miles up to a thick patch of reeds, which we had to "ring" to see if the animal had gone through; if he had, the spoor had again to be followed; if not, the pad elephants were formed in line as beaters, while we took post at the far end. At first the beaters had drums and all appliances for making a noise—in which Indian no less than English beaters delight—only instead of the "hi! cock, cock!" of the Englishman, the native showers vituperation on all rhinoceros and buffaloes to remote generations. We found that noise almost invariably made these animals break back through the line of beaters, so that the strictest silence had to be enjoined.

On one occasion, when moving camp, we crossed the tracks of a herd of wild elephants, which had crossed the road during the night; their track led straight to the hills, but, as it would most likely have led us for several miles through thick jungle, we did not follow it.

One day we saw the tracks of two rhinoceros, which had crossed the road that morning. My companion and the pad elephants kept the road to camp: I followed the track for some miles, till I came on four rhinoceros wallowing like great pigs in a mud hole. I had to wait till they got up, then I singled out the one with the best horn. He was hit too far forward, and I gave him the second barrel in the ribs. His track led into

some thorn jungle—very thick and dark—at the bottom of a deep and narrow nullah. I was stooping to avoid a jungle vine, which was hanging down, when out came the brute open-mouthed; my elephant wheeled round like a top, and before I could get my rifle up, I felt the elephant being shoved up the bank as if there was a locomotive behind, and we went up that bank considerably faster than we came down. I had to hold on to the howdah, and even if I could have turned round I could not have got a shot, as the rhinoceros was too close under the elephant's stern; so he had it all his own way for over a hundred yards, when my shikari—who was in the back seat—let fall my large leaf umbrella on to the animal's back. This seemed to frighten him, or perhaps he was blown, but he sheered off, so I got a snap shot at him. The elephant continued to urge on her wild career at her best pace for about a mile, fortunately through open and level ground, and was at last stopped with difficulty. After pacifying her with biscuits, and letting her gather wind, we took the back track to where we had been driven out. The elephant shied at everything she passed till she came to my umbrella, when round she spun, and away we went again. When again stopped, she would not retrace her steps, but had to be brought round by a circuit. I dismounted some distance from the jungle and went in on foot, as the elephant would have no more of it. I followed the spoor, and found the rhinoceros dead: the last shot had hit him through the lungs.

On reaching camp—where the elephant was examined—it was found that the rhinoceros had bitten her severely behind; the skin was badly bruised, and the wound was evidently tender: next morning there was a lump like a large sirloin of beef, and the elephant had to be put in the sick report, and I had to take another which was not nearly so steady.

We marched through thick jungle with varying success, killing a few rhinoceros, buffalo, and horse deer; but there were too many trees for shooting from elephants.

At Buxa we found an outpost of the 31st N.I., and some Goorkhas. I went up the hill to look at their pickets, but found that six weeks in a howdah had not improved my walking powers.

Towards the end of May the weather began to break, and the sun, when out, was very hot, and our people began to be sickly.

The doctors had recommended a lot of rum in the early morning, and a dose of quinine in the evening; treatment to which our servants—though Mussulmans—made no objection. At Malinga, where were some of the Bahar Raja's sepoy, the duffadar said that out of eight men taken ill six had died.

One of our elephants was girth-galled, and mine was still hors-de-combat; the unsteady one I had to use lost me in one day a rhinosceros and two buffaloes.

On the 1st June I had a last try for rhinosceros, as the rains were evidently near, and it was time to be out of the jungle. The snows were melting in the hills, the rivers thereby becoming unfordable. I thought my last day would be a blank, but at last made out at some distance the end of a horn moving through the jungle grass; waited till it disappeared, and then followed, and found him and another lying in a water-hole; they both rose, and I dropped one with the first barrel, and hit the other as he rushed up the bank. I heard him whistling, so knew he was shot through the lungs, and found him dead about a couple of hundred yards off. This was the heaviest right and left shot I had ever made, peafowl being the heaviest game I had hitherto killed in this way. On the way to camp I had to cross the Toorsa, which was too high to be forded, and there was but one small canoe for the baggage. My shikari found another, belonging to some fishermen, and with these we made a raft, the elephants swimming. Fortunately there was a good moon and no rain, and I reached camp at Falakota at midnight, where I found my friend wondering what had become of me.

We made the best of our way to Caragola-Ghat, having left the natives with the largest stock of meat they had had for years—probably they never had so much before.

We found the country, in places, flooded, and the march in consequence difficult. At Caragola we embarked for Sahibgunge, and took the first P. and O. steamer for England.

I had a bad attack of jungle fever, which sadly interfered with the partridge shooting, and I was not able to join my regiment at Colchester till November. I cannot say that I found English hunting and shooting so much to my taste as the wild life in the jungles.

In conclusion, I would recommend anyone who may be desirous

to hunt rhinoceros in Assam not to select the season at which I went, as he would probably suffer, as I did, from fever and ague, which I did not shake off for nearly three years.

I may mention that the commonly conceived idea that the skin of the rhinoceros is impenetrable is a mistake; it is very hard when dry, and makes excellent shields and whips, but, when green, it is easily cut with a knife.

The Assam *térai* is alluvial, and, for the most part, level; but no extensive view can be obtained, except from the foot of the Himalayas on the north, on account of the dense grass jungle, which grows to the height of twenty feet or so. The soil is, probably, fertile; but, as water is so near the surface, I should consider that much draining would be required to make agriculture remunerative, except in certain spots: rice might be cultivated, though I saw none of really good quality.

I saw no sheep nor cattle, nor buffaloes, domesticated.

There were in 1865 a few scattered tea plantations, but the men in charge seemed all to have suffered from fever.

I am speaking only of Western Assam; in the country to the east—higher up the river—very superior tea is extensively cultivated.

There are some scrubby trees, principally *bhâr* and *sâl*, and the bamboo grows luxuriantly, and is used almost entirely for building purposes, even to the flooring.

Towards the foot of the Himalayas there is some dense forest, with open grassy glades, and in these there were some signs of cattle having been grazed; possibly the reason I saw none was that the Bhootias had, at the time I was there, made plundering excursions into our territories, and they would have carried off what cattle they could lay hands on.

In the forest are many tree orchids; if I had known that they would live after the boughs on which they grew were cut off, I should have tried to bring some home. We saw scarcely any animals in the forest, but I one day shot a beautiful jet black marten cat, the skin of which I was unable to preserve, as, on account of the great heat, decomposition set in before I could reach camp.

The soil of this part of the *térai* is formed from the decayed vegetation which has accumulated for ages. Water is generally procurable within three or four feet from the surface, but this

water is unfit for drinking purposes. In the streams running from the hills the water is clear, but is tainted by the decayed vegetation over which it flows. The sand, if rubbed in the hands feels greasy, and has not the cleansing properties of ordinary river sand.

The climate, except during the winter months, is unhealthy for Europeans, and our mahouts and Bengal servants suffered from attacks of fever. The malaria is considered by the natives not to rise more than fifteen feet, and the police stations of the native kings are built on bamboos at that height from the ground. When our troops were cantoned in this part of Assam in 1865 the barracks were not raised more than about three feet, and the troops suffered severely from fever.

The natives we found at first rather shy of Europeans, as they had an idea that we wanted to press them to work at the new cantonments, but as soon as they found that we wanted them only to beat the jungle, and that whenever an animal was killed they were at liberty to take what meat they could carry—besides being paid for their day's work—they came with us readily. The neighbourhood of our camp was made unpleasant by long strips of meat hung to dry in the sun, and when the drying was completed the men made the dried meat into bundles and took themselves off to their villages most independently, but as fresh relays were constantly arriving in the hope of a supply of meat, we were not inconvenienced; indeed, it was a satisfaction to find that the meat was not wasted. I have always thought that the chief drawback to one's pleasure in salmon fishing in an out of the way river is the difficulty in getting rid of one's fish.

I know nothing as to the tribal designation of these people, nor could I learn much about them, as only a few spoke Hindustani, and that indifferently. They are generally slightly built, but are wiry, and most excellent trackers. Like most natives who have seen but little of Europeans, they think every Englishman is a doctor, and were all eager for physic; a dose of quinine being by far the favourite remedy for all complaints, and it certainly seemed to have a highly beneficial effect.

