

TALES OF
OUR GRANDFATHER

OR

INDIA SINCE 1856

EDITED BY

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WITH A FRONTISPIECE

LONDON

SMITH, ELDER & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE

1912

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CHAPTER VII

WILD LIFE IN ASSAM

Forest Leeches—Elephants—A wild Bull—Buffalo—
Hooked out by a Tiger

THE Bhutias were, of course, well trounced eventually—not only in my district, but at Dewangiri. For storming the latter strong mountain position, British and Punjab regiments were employed; the defeats at first had been due to Assam possessing only regiments of local material. Finally, a treaty was made in 1865, with the nominal rulers of Bhutan, for surrender of the prisoners and guns which we had lost at Dewangiri, as mentioned in my last letter. But the Tongso Penlo, who had them, preferred that we should come and take them; so, as my district faced his country, I was constantly on the move. My wife insisted on accompanying me, and we had various troubles. For instance, I fell desperately ill of jungle fever in the Dooars, far away from anywhere, in the wildest foothills and jungles. She nursed me through, and then went down herself, and I, a tottering ghost, nursed her. How we lived in those days, and on what, I cannot recall, but it was rough work. You would think we had game, but who was to find game in solid grass ten feet high! Even in lower stuff once we could only see

the tips of the horns of a herd of buffaloes from the back of our elephant! I remember chasing an elephant in a patch of forest (which, of course, is comparatively open); I was running hard, when I weakened and felt all wet. It was leeches! They dropped down from the trees, they climbed up from the grass, they were all over me—long thin creatures, active as cats, fierce as wolves. Fortunately, they are only in the forest. I have read that, in the late Tibet expedition, a coolie, left behind in the Sikkim forests with a broken leg, was found dead, killed by the leeches, when assistance came back for him.

I had a fine Australian horse; sometimes my wife rode it and I walked; sometimes, when there were streams to cross, she was on the elephant, with me behind on the horse; and the elephant (they dread horses behind them) would get over the ground at a great pace, twisting about to keep an eye back on me. Elephants are wretched beasts, timid, obstinate, and of uncertain temper. I remember one being utterly routed by a charging buffalo. I was on a pad, and could barely hold on and stick to my rifle as my elephant fled; of course, one only uses an elephant where foot-work is impossible. Once, in 1869, in the Rajmahal hills, I was a whole afternoon with four elephants after a tiger. H.R.H the Duke of Edinburgh had taken the pick of the Nawab of Murshidabad's stable, and I with these four refuse could not manage the tiger. Each time the drivers forced them up to him and the tiger charged, they scattered; and one

cannot shoot, but only hold on, when that happens. Before that a bear sent my elephant bolting up a slope which ended in a cliff. I and a cousin then with me were preparing to jump, when it stopped just in time. Another awkward tempered elephant took a friend of mine into a great tank till the water was over the pad, and there they stayed till the brute got over his sulks.

A female which we had, in Assam, for the tent and baggage, picked up a deserted calf in the jungle. The little brute would play about on the march, and the foster-mother would not move without it, so we used to remain tentless and hungry for hours. That would not do, so I harnessed the calf to an old tusker and started it off, but our female, do what we would, charged after it each time and rescued it. Then I borrowed a trained fighter from a neighbouring planter and started the calf again. She charged, but the fighter stopped her every time ; finally he lost patience, butted her round with her head to camp, and then fairly pushed her all the way to her pickets and stood guard till she gave in. Thus we were rid of the calf and went on our way after three days' delay.

Another planter had a sad experience. He hired a female elephant for work at plucking time. A wild bull came and carried her off. He took all his hired labour from their work—at a time when every moment is precious, followed up with drums and torches, and rescued her. Twice again this happened, and he was desperate. He put the driver on the elephant to run her round and round the house, while he bombarded

the bull from the verandahs. At last the bull, full of lead, went off and destroyed his coolie huts. That my friend endured, but when it took to trampling down his tea, he sallied forth. By dodging across deep drains, on planks, which the elephant had to cross laboriously in pursuit, he succeeded in bringing it down at the thirty-sixth shot (he was no artist evidently), and then the job was to get rid of it! It was in the midst of the tea and he declared that he lost half an acre in undermining the brute and letting it down into the bowels of the earth. And he had lost four days' work at plucking-time, which meant hundreds of rupees!

There was real danger from wild beasts in those days; and the mischief was that one could not get them. A bear once killed my post-runner, when he had almost reached my tent. They attack without provocation; a staff officer with the force rode past two and thought nothing of it till he found them following. His wretched pony would only amble and they were gaining; at last he drew his sword and so tickled his mount's ribs with the point that, when it could not kick him off, it boiled up a gallop. Even at Mangaldai once, my wife was coming from the house to meet me, and I saw her from a distance start and run back. I flew. Then I learned that a leopard had jumped out of a bush at a cur gambolling in front of her! A tiger took a cow on the opposite bank of the stream in front of the house, but before I could get there he had disappeared in the solid jungle. Buffa-

loes were troublesome, too, and very hard to kill. A friend of mine, a pensioned native soldier, stiffened himself out on the ground before a charging buffalo. It rolled him over and over with its nose, but do what it would it could not apply its horn. Those of an old bull branch out sideways—I have heard of eight feet stretch!—and therefore, they cannot be applied to a thin object on the ground. I used to practise on buffalo and elephant skulls, which abounded, in order to try and reach the brain cavity; that needs fine shooting against a charging beast. I put three bullets once into a buffalo's head but could only daze and stop him; I finally killed him with a shot behind the shoulder. Another time I ran alongside one trying to bring it down, behind the shoulder, but failed; they are tough beasts. The fact was that I could not afford suitable weapons.

In December 1865, I was sent up to Dewangiri to take political charge; the force was still sitting there, four native regiments (the British regiment had been sent back); and the negotiations carried on at the other end of the frontier, two hundred miles off, were evidently going to remain fruitless. But before I return to the Bhutias, I must tell you more of our troubles. I had occasion to go to a place where, as I was told, my predecessor had received rather a shock. On our way there a rhinoceros stopped our following baggage; that was trouble number one. There was a low pass a little short of my camp, which spot rhino selected for his siesta, and our servants feared him

more than the prospect of my wrath, so they waited till the rhino left. Meanwhile, we starved and were regaled with my predecessor's story. It used to be the Assam practice to rig up huts for the official's stay. It is done by the expert villagers with bamboos and grass in a very few hours ; a row of small huts for the clerks and servants, and a larger one for the white man some way off. In the night a tiger came to investigate. According to custom, the natives in their block trimmed their lamps and shouted. Tigers are timid, so he sheered off to the big hut, where my predecessor lay too paralysed, they said, to get out of bed, turn up his lamp, and handle his gun. It sniffed around, and in time it would certainly have pushed in the grass screen and hooked him out, but for his little dog, which ran and barked furiously wherever the tiger sniffed. And so, we were told, they went on till morning ; of course no native would move, either from the servants' block or from the more distant village. The magistrate's escape was wonderful, for in a similar case, in my time, the tiger at last mustered courage to push in the screen at the end of a coolie barrack, where a man and wife lay cowering, without courage to shout and make light as the others were doing, and it hooked the man out from his wife's side. Well, by nightfall, this story, and the rhino story related by the servants when they arrived, had made my wife a little nervous. I was a very hard-worked man, and she never liked to disturb me (after our earlier Assam days, when I used to be hauled out many

times in a night), so she endured in silence till a wild cat jumped on her bed. This was trouble number two; she thought that the expected tiger of many months (ever since we came to Durrung) had indeed arrived, and I had no more sleep that night.