

SPORT AND TRAVEL PAPERS

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Sport

II

A SKETCH IN AN INDIAN JUNGLE

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EIGHTEEN years ago, just before sunrise, and not a thousand miles from Calcutta: in the immediate foreground a swiftly rushing and beautifully clear mountain stream, noisily splashing here and there against an immense boulder, and lashing itself into foam and spray on its well-worn surface, as if in anger at the obstacle which it itself had brought there during its fiercer moods when, swollen by the rains into a powerful torrent, it had swept everything before it—rocks, trees, and whole clumps of bamboo, anything and everything in the greatest confusion, down through the narrow valleys and mountain gorges on its way to the great rivers of the plains. Only a small stream now remains in place of the raging torrent of the days when it had cut the high bank on this side so sharply, and hollowed it out so deeply; and when it ran its mad course over that wide expanse of rock and stone-covered sand which now stretches away dry on the other side as far as the edge of the forest—that long dense belt of high tree jungle opposite, which gradually rises to clothe the lofty mountains of the lower ranges of the Himalaya.

Now, in the early morn a whitish mist still covers the valley as with a shroud, and heavy clouds rest upon the higher peaks; soon these begin to lift, and the mist to disperse with the first rays of the rising sun. The effect is almost magical as the sun god appears; the damp mist, highly suggestive of malaria, rheumatism, and other unsatisfactory ailments, is gone at once; the heavy clouds speedily retire to the higher ranges; the sunny line creeps downward steadily, and widens quickly, covering with its golden light a sea of jungle of infinitely varied green.

The hills facing west are still dark and gloomy, while everything opposite is already bright and sparkling in a flood of light, under a sky of the deepest blue. Even the stream appears to rejoice at the return of day; it seems to splash more noisily, and is as clear as crystal down to its stony bed; the surface glassy, except where the wavelets rush round a rock or boulder, which still throws a deep shadow across its pellucid depths.

As fair a landscape as one could wish to see was spread out before the two tents pitched upon the bank in a small clearing, closely hemmed in on all sides but that of the river by dense forest—forest which stretches almost uninterruptedly to the Bay of Bengal and Burma on the one hand, and to the Persian Gulf on the other. Gloomy, but exceedingly grand, it hides in its recesses everything that hunter could desire; but, thanks to its almost trackless solitude, it is all against him and in favour of the game; besides the danger from elephant, tiger, or rhinoceros, another awaits him here in a very deadly garb—the subtle and treacherous poison of malaria. With the first rays of the warm morning light all nature seems to awake; the prowlers of the night are already far from the river, where, during the dark hours, they had come to drink, feeding their way slowly back along the narrow paths made by themselves to their silent jungle homes far away; the cicadæ cease their monotonous clicking, the barking deer's hoarse cry becomes less frequent and more distant, jungle cocks crow everywhere like their tame brothers at home, to welcome the new day; the cooing of doves and pigeons now come, from almost every bush; parrakeets rush about once more in their rapid flight, screeching with refreshed energy; squirrels run about and jump from branch to branch, and at last there is some movement among the corpse-like bodies stretched out at full length and covered from head to foot with a white cotton sheet or dirty blanket, very much like a shroud, ranged parallel to each other, and closely packed on some matting and leaves under a bamboo shed near the tents. Presently a very dirty face appears, and then another, followed by a still more dirty body clothed very scantily in, if possible, still more filthy rags. Shivering and yawning the men at last turn out—coolies who had been hired as baggage carriers, messengers, and trackers. Some of these are inhabitants of the swampy plains at the foot of the hills—deadly to other people; tall,

well-built men, very dark in colour, closely allied to the Bengalee whom they greatly resemble; their only garment is a cotton cloth round the loins; their hair is everywhere shaved except on the very top of the head, where the few remaining locks are tied in a knot. Some of these men had but yesterday arrived, each bringing two large black earthenware jars, filled with dhey—curdled buffalo milk—suspended from the end of a long bamboo balanced across the shoulders.

Then there are some Nepaulese—Ghoorkas—those broad-shouldered, sturdy little hill men, sallow complexioned, with their flat faces and noses and small eyes, always ready to do hard work, especially when there is also sport to be had; splendid trackers, untiring as they are brave and fearless, every one of them armed with the national weapon, carried in its leathern scabbard in the waistcloth, the heavy, curved, broad-bladed kookrie.

The Mongolian type of countenance is, however, still more apparent in some of their neighbours, men from Sikkim, a Himalayan province bordering on Thibet. There stands our head-man in that dark blue thick woollen sort of loose coat, reaching from the shoulder to the knees, and fastened round the waist by a cord. Not only has he the oblique eyes and high cheekbones of the Chinaman, but a long pigtail descends from the back of his head, carefully plaited and embellished with a red tassel at the end. His head is covered by a porkpie hat with a black velvet rim, a yellow headpiece, in the centre of which is a bright crimson knot. His naked legs, and the one shoulder and arm withdrawn from the sleeve, display his massive form; a long sword-like knife, protected by a bamboo sheath, hangs from the belt; in his hand he carries a large crimson umbrella, and he is further adorned by a necklet of beads and charms. A picturesque garb, which all the richer men affect such as this one who is put in authority over a gang of his poorer brethren, whose powerful frames thoroughly fit them for the hard work asked of porters in a mountainous country like their own. The garb of these coolies consists of the thickest layer of dirt, carefully nursed since birth, for they never wash—a layer which is guarded from external injury by a coarse woollen coat with wide sleeves, one side overlapping the other in front over the waist, where it is retained by a rope. The coat opens over the neck

and chest, and the pouches formed by its loose folds and the man's skin contain all the coolie's worldly goods—tobacco, meat (cooked or uncooked), and any other thing to eat good or bad, money (if he has it), a bottle of spirits (if he has been abstemious enough to keep any in it even for a moment, which is very rare), his pipe—in fact, everything which he can possibly beg or steal—rests snugly in that warm corner against his brawny bosom. The scenery around is certainly magnificent, and fresh and beautiful during the young hours of the day. The ever-present, beautifully shaded green is only broken and set off by the silvery stream and its yellow shore, now sparkling in the morning sun, as its rays catch the sand and broken quartz still wet with dew. The larger trees are teak and sâl chiefly, with here and there a silvery barked gigantic cotton-tree, its leafless branches now one mass of bright crimson flowers, the resort of countless long-tailed, noisy parrakeets. The graceful tree fern with its delicately cut dark green leaves, and the fresher coloured plantain with heavy bunches of green fruit, raise themselves proudly above the dense underwood—an impenetrable interwoven network of canes, rattan, and creepers of every description.

How peacefully, almost noiselessly, the water glides past us as we walk up the rough bed of one of the smaller streams; so tiny is the rivulet now that it is difficult indeed to imagine how ever it could have been the mighty torrent which but lately had the strength to move those enormous boulders scattered about everywhere, when, all powerful, it had swept them down in its mad course like so many pebbles, far away from down the mountains, swept them down with resistless force, and then, by constant friction as it rushed past, had gradually smoothed their rough edges and polished them and even hollowed them out. There is a patch of giant "elephant" grass, 12 feet high and more, now dry and yellow, so thick that only the heaviest animals can force their way through. Then the mountains on either side approach each other more, and the valley contracts rapidly into a narrow gorge, into which the sun, except at noon, cannot send its warming rays. The air here is laden with moisture, there is a chilliness about, and, as a fit guardian to such a place, an immense snake slowly glides away at our approach. The vegetation is more luxuriant, and those shrubs and trees which rejoice in

swampy ground, and ferns, from the lovely tree fern to the delicate maidenhair, are very frequent. Instead of the bright yellow bed of sand, we now tread on soft, wet black mud, into which the foot sinks deeply. But ours are not the only feet which have left their mark here; every inch of the black mud is trodden over in every direction by apparently every kind of animal which roams about in these vast forests. Here are the deep oval impressions of the mighty elephant's foot, there those of the three-toed rhinoceros; here the cleft hoof of the buffalo, there the soft paw of the tiger; pig had wallowed here, deer of every species, pea and every other fowl and bird had found their way to this bog and trampled it into deep holes half filled with black ooze. So very recent seemed all these marks that we looked around in expectation of seeing some of the giants of the forest standing around angry at our intrusion and determined to resent it; but none were visible, and we were allowed to examine into the reason why this spot, so forbidding to us, should have such very great attractions for the beasts of the jungle. The reason was soon found. The black water and mud were strongly impregnated with salt, the springs which here issued from the soil brought with them that condiment which is as necessary to animals as it is to man, and, with their usual sagacity, here they had discovered it, and to it they no doubt came for miles and miles around, to lick the mud and wallow in the bog.

What a place for a hunter to watch at—to wait, well hidden in the bushes around, the advent of the quarry he was especially anxious to secure! The thorough hiding seemed the only difficulty to overcome, for, radiating in every direction from the salt-lick, were the hard-trodden paths made and used for generations probably by the beasts of the forest, having only thin strips of bush and jungle between them, where, but partially concealed, the hunter would have only a very poor chance of remaining undetected by the sharp sight and acute smell of the animal he wished to slay. Thus the chance which promised best was to follow the freshest spoor, until pursuer and pursued met face to face, generally in the deepest part of the forest, where during the heat of the day the latter either fed its way slowly along or was enjoying its siesta.

Unfortunately at the time I am speaking of circumstances had

prevented our being provided with such weapons as would have given us a chance against the largest game; yet a particularly fresh rhinoceros spoor, promising an early opportunity of seeing the ponderous beast at home, was too tempting to pass by, so with a gun only, and on no deadly thoughts intent, we followed it in single file.

The spoor was deeply sunk at first in the deep mud, the holes half filled with water; then the horny toes had sharply cut the smoothly-stamped oval footmarks of an elephant, crossed and recrossed here and there by those of many a deer species, before it had entered the forest on one of the many hard-trodden narrow paths. Soon a coolie called attention to the very recent spoor of three other rhinoceros which here had joined our path from another direction, followed it for a short distance, and then had left it again to seek other pastures.

On we went, sometimes having to stoop and sometimes almost to creep under the thick tangled bushes through which the animal had forced its way, scratching and scraping its back against the woven mass, leaving every branch covered with the mud which, when rolling in the morass, had adhered to the ponderous creature's back and sides. A little further on it had had another roll in a puddle by the way, the benefit of which we soon got when following it, sometimes on our hands and knees, and pushing our way through the jungle until the clothes were covered with mud. Suddenly, when turning the corner of a thick bush, without the slightest warning we came upon and almost slipped down the greasy bank into a small round pool, in which no less than four immense rhinoceros were lying, showing only their heads and backs. There they were, within two yards of us; but there they did not long remain, for apparently, as startled as we by the sudden *rencontre*, out they rushed with a snort like that of a wheezy steam engine and any amount of splashing, and up the bank they bounded with a speed which would have seemed impossible to an animal apparently so unwieldy. There was only just time to jump aside, during which decidedly hasty retreat I caught my foot in a root and fell headlong behind a tree luckily beyond the path, my gun being projected some distance further. Up rushed one rhinoceros along the path we had just quitted, snorting furiously, the others going in different directions, but all passing

some of us almost within touching distance. A startled rhinoceros will nearly always rush along a path in preference to crashing straight through the thick jungle, differing thus from the elephant, and will seldom turn except when wounded, so once out of the path one is generally safe. The whole affair was but of a moment, and when we had scrambled out of our several hasty retreats, a hearty laugh finished the adventure, in which it would have been difficult to say whether we or the rhinoceros had been startled the most. From all directions paths opened on to this favourite bathing resort; the ground around was as hard as iron, and the banks clean cut, and polished almost where the bathers had rested and rubbed their horny hides against it.

Having thoroughly disturbed the family party at its siesta in the cool water, we started back to the tent to have our mid-day rest and a bath in the little stream, taking as usual one of the paths made by some of our four-footed friends. A gloomy damp forest it was, with thick underwood and high trees excluding the sun's cheering and drying influence; immense, apparently endless, rope-like rattans and creepers hung in festoons everywhere, long beard-like silvery grey lichen, and here and there brilliantly coloured and fantastically shaped orchids adorned the giant stems, the only bright colour in the monotony of shades of green, except when a gorgeously coloured parrakeet flashed past screeching, or a more sober-coloured tree dove flew startled from its hiding-place. Sometimes we met a party of laughing thrushes, chuckling to themselves as if over some very good joke, never quiet for one moment, perpetually bustling about from branch to branch. They nearly always attend a large company of jungle fowl, the ancestors of our domestic bird, under the leadership of that most magnificent potentate, the jungle cock, who struts about in his brilliant plumage armed with his long spurs, and makes the forest echo with his defiant crow. Startled by our approach, with a crowing and a cackling off they go, making for the nearest bush or tree, upon the branches of which they settle, but not before they have contributed their share to our larder. The young birds are very good eating, the old ones will only just do for soup of the thinnest nature. But we have also paid toll to the inhabitants of the forest—a toll collected in nothing less precious than in our own life-blood, inexorably exacted, in spite

of all precaution and care. The curse of these damp forests—the leech—is the tax-gatherer, and, do what one will, there is no escaping him. Tiny little corkscrew-like creatures wait for the traveller everywhere, standing up erect and twisting their attenuated head extremity about, constantly feeling about for something to fasten upon. Almost thread-like, half-starved, and hideous, they dispute the passage through the jungle paths, and cling to any living thing that may pass. Nothing will keep them out with their needle-like head; they work their way through any stocking, through the smallest opening in boot, gaiter, or garment, and very soon they are hard at work gorging themselves until they drop from sheer repletion and weight, leaving, however, the wound still bleeding. The leeches are horrid creatures; and not only is the attack made from below, but they find their way down the nape of one's neck brushed from the leaves and branches on the road. The natives, who generally go about bare-legged, discover the bloodsucker before he has done much damage; but the European, with his more elaborate clothing, has to wait patiently and suffer until he can remove it and wreak his vengeance on these pests of the jungle.

In that same year two powerful stimulants were administered to me, and having proved the efficacy of both I can strongly recommend their trial in cases of a similar urgent nature. An expedition from our fort was suddenly ordered into the hills beyond to disperse a gathering of hostile natives, a trip which entailed much severe climbing and heavy work generally, at a time when long-continued semi-starvation rations of generally mouldy food had reduced us all to a condition least able to stand much exertion. Owing to bad health and consequent great fatigue, I one day collapsed altogether on the march, fully convinced that my last hour had struck and anxious only to be left alone to die. Instead of bidding a long farewell, the commanding officer asked me as a last and personal favour to take his pipe and smoke it. Now tobacco had never agreed with me, to say the least of it, and the sight and smell of that black pipe seemed to rob me of the little remaining strength. However, what did it matter?—to die that way was probably easier than to be slowly drained by leeches and mosquitoes or made a meal of by some jungle beast, so orders as usual were

obeyed, and that reeking pipe found its way to my lips. After the first valorous draw a feeling altogether indescribable passed through me, through every part of my body, an intensely vivifying current, the late horrible sense of utter exhaustion changing swiftly to a most exhilarating sense of returning strength and spirits. The time—but a few moments—seemed to me like a beautiful dream during which new life had been given me. I was a man once more, well able to share the fatigues and discomforts of my fellow-soldiers. An extraordinary case, difficult to believe, of nerve stimulation and responsive muscular system. No doubt it was fortunate that I had not been a smoker.

Not very long after this dysentery and a severe attack of jungle fever brought me into the 'officers' hospital in Fort William, where I was taken from an hotel in a state of coma. After a long illness, and as a last chance when almost given up, they carried me on board a steamer bound for England. Far too weak to do anything for myself, I was at once put into a bunk and found myself alone in the cabin. My attention was presently called to a conversation evidently between a passenger and the chief steward in the saloon. The former had not a berth apparently, but reiterated the remark that he must have one, while the latter assured him that there was not one vacant, the ship being absolutely full. The passenger still insisting, the steward at last said—I felt convinced pointing to my door—"Well, then, you can have that in a day or two, for the present inmate cannot last much longer." I there and then made up my mind to keep that passenger out, and selfishly did so, very thankful to him and to my friend the steward for the stimulant administered and given in a full dose.