HUNTER'S MOON

BY

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Long after midnight I miscalculated a flight of steps leading down to my bedroom. Port and pork I fear will prove a heady diet. I climbed sadly into bed to find it already occupied by Chinami (my host's second concubine) and child. . . . Could this have been a port-induced error of judgment, or possibly true Maliwun hospitality? . . . A problem I was too weary to elucidate.

With a burning desire to repair the ravages of last night's debauch, I awoke at dawn, and sent far and wide for reliable trackers. Each and every villager was skilled in jungle knowledge, but had his own affairs to attend to—his crops and cattle. At last I found one of S.'s maistris or foremen: a Gurkha from the Chittagong hill tracts, who before his present employment had for twenty years been a shikari, and professed to know the surrounding jungles intimately.

He had also been in the Army and carried a wound from the Chitral campaign; also a finger short—the legacy from a wounded tiger. The main advantage was his knowledge of Hindustani—our common language. Hard bitten and hard drinking, he seemed a useful enough "tough"; and all I wanted were a knowledge of the jungles—rhino wallows and elephant tracks—and a go-between with Siamese and Malays, whose language was to me so much "mumbo-jumbo."

We decided on a general look round the vicinity to get an idea of the habitat of rhinoceros—an animal quite unknown to me—before going farther afield on any more serious exhibition.

This first day's experience of Tenasserim jungles almost finished me. From dawn until dusk, with the exception of an hour's halt—or rather collapse—at midday, we kept up a steady two to two and a half

learnt the bitter news that morning, when he had seen the lean form of Tanoy leave the hut and start out along the trail. It was then too late to stop my coming, and, fearing my wrath, Oriental-like, he had tantalised me with all the prospects of a record tusker—only to dash my hopes utterly to the ground.

It certainly fanned my smouldering indignation against Tanoy and all poachers into a flame. Too often had all my intensest efforts been frustrated by this illicit band. Maliwun and the surrounding forests had been swept clear of rhinoceros by this Siamese renegade, and now he was on the trail of ivory; and I could find no corner of this great lonely land which had not felt the weight of his pestilential hand.

Tanoy was on the tusker's trail, and we would never set eyes on either of them again. Little did I realise that Fate had linked our lives, and that day of supreme disappointment would see the first meshes woven of the web with which I eventually encompassed his untimely death.

Consumed with an unholy hatred of Tanoy, I stalked the hut, finger on trigger, and it would have boded ill for him had I caught his illicit band red-handed.

The hut lay roofless and unoccupied; in one corner smouldered the ashes of a small fire, and a smear of tobacco juice, recently expectorated, showed recent occupation—but the birds had flown. As we climbed disconsolately down the bamboo ladder, the distant report of a gun rang a final knell to any remnants of hope we may have harboured. . . . From that moment I vowed vengeance on Tanoy—Siamese.

In bitter silence we retraced our steps through the

CHAPTER VI

TANOY, SIAMESE

" These are my people, and this is my land.
I hear the pulse of her secret soul.
This is the life that I understand,
Savage and simple and sane and whole."

Laurence Hope.

AT evening, in the smoke of the camp-fire—in the fullness of the moon, silent on a lonely machan—in the hush before a jungle dawn—down the corridors of memory come stalking ghosts of past tragedies that one can never entirely disperse.

There is for me one aspect of a sunset jungle which will ever conjure up such memories: an evening zephyr, herald of the wind which seems to rise always at the dying of the day, ruffling the surface of a swamp; the hoarse, insistent creak of bamboos fringing a lonely pool; the suck and gurgle of the waters round the twisted mangrove roots—such sounds, touching the chords of memory, will always find me straining my ears across the water to catch the last imagined, dying gasp of Tanoy, prince of poachers.

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He had come from far across the Pakchan River—from the distant jungles in the southern Siamese Peninsula. Years later I discovered the village of his birth, whence he had set out on the expedition from which there was no return. It lay astride the tracks

leading northwards to Bangkok, and eastwards to where the sea laps the shores of the Gulf of Tongking. From early youth he was a mighty hunter—before his cupidity for the closed rhinoceros lands urged him to lead his trained band of poachers into British India, across the distant Pakchan.

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The late spring found me installed in a Malay hut on the outskirts of Maliwun, at the junction of the Maliwun creek and the Pakchan River, which meandered sluggishly westward on its eighty-mile course to the Gulf of Martaban. I had a licence to shoot two male elephant and, most coveted of all, a permit for one rhinoceros—the single-horned variety—as rare in British India as the white rhino in the West Nile province of Africa. Apart from the Nepal Terai (an independent Native State), Southern Tenasserim was the sole habitat of this rare species in the whole vast continent of India. The few which had existed south of the Pakchan River in Siam proper had long since disappeared at the hands of poachers. There remained the few in Southern Tenasserim, between the river and the sea, which owed their immunity to the forest laws and the density of the untravelled jungles. Up to date no expedition to exploit these virgin gamelands had been organised from Siam. But at last there were universal signs that a master hand was combing out the jungle for the ultimate extinction of the species.

The forest authorities at Victoria Point, fully aware of this menace, had drawn a net tightly round the authorised firearms in the preserved area. Villages had been limited to one gun only per loogi (or head-man)—all other guns became illegal. Special forest guards and patrols had been appointed, and tempting

rewards had been offered for the apprehension of all poachers.

Yet in our daily wanderings in search of my one legitimate rhinoceros the jungles cried out the fact that Tanoy was afoot. Although no one had ever set eyes on him this side of the Pakchan, his presence made itself felt at every turn. The trees bore the impress of his axe. Too often we saw the blaze of two vertical and four horizontal cuts—indicating a party of four with two guns (both illegal). The swamps cried out the testimony of his passing. The very torch that he had used for night fishing lay beside a charred heap of sticks where he had eaten his midday meal.

But the most damning testimony to his unlawful depredations was vouchsafed us one evening, after an all-day stalk knee-deep in bog combing out a mid-jungle morass where there were unmistakable signs of rhinoceros. We had been visiting one pool after another, ever hoping to find our quarry ruminating muddily in the midday heat. Alongside one such wallow—the mud piled high upon the undergrowth, where he had been dragged from his midday siesta—lay the fresh carcase, stripped bare as the hulk of a derelict ship.

The marauders' tracks led away to the remains of a fire, where, from the débris of bamboo-stems and the charred embers of a gigantic wooden spit, it was obvious that the meat had been boiled down to extract the essential blood and juices.

Herein lies the intrinsic value of the rhinoceros. Peddled in far-away Rangoon to the Chinaman, it is worth almost its weight in gold. Every square inch and fluid ounce spells potency and increased vigour to the sexually debilitated. It is the King of Aphrodisiacs

—the very Elixir of Life—compared to which Nervinus and the host of well-advertised restoratives of lost manhood are mere dilutions ! Thus thinks the Chinaman. So, to pander to his Faustian beliefs, no portion of the unfortunate beast is ignored save the bones. Every atom of meat is boiled down to fat to massage his flagging muscles. Each bristle is chopped up and compounded as a love philtre, those of the tail fetching the most exorbitant price. The blood is drained off into hollow bamboos and drunk as a most cherished aphrodisiac. Even the urine and droppings are not excepted, and are despatched to the Rangoon markets for the ultimate exhilaration of devitalised mandarins. The carcass can be sold on the spot for a thousand rupees ; so it needs no great imagination to visualise its enormous value in the far-distant markets of Rangoon and Mandalay. . . . Such is the lure of rhino-hunting ; and as long as there remains a Chinaman in Burma prepared to pay the price for his libidinous rejuvenation, so long will poaching flourish on the banks of the far-distant Pakchan.

Day after day followed blank. Within a week of my leave terminating I recognised the utter futility of sharing the jungles with Tanoy, and of pitting local Malay wits against all the organisation and untiring energy of his Siamese hunters. He had, moreover, established a reign of terror, and the trackers who had proved invaluable in elephant jungles now showed reluctance in even entering the rhinoceros area which this prince of poachers had claimed for his own.

It was while I was bargaining one evening in the Maliwun bazaar—trading good jungle pork for a bottle of indifferent port (the only obtainable intoxicant)—that a friendly Chinaman broached a course of action

which had repeatedly suggested itself to my mind during my last few fruitless wanderings. . . . If competition with Tanoy and his gang merely induced non-co-operation from all the local trackers and villagers, surely the only alternative was to throw in one's lot with the poachers. Rhinoceros spelt to me a veritable El Dorado, and the weeks spent in constant disappointment and unfulfilled hopes had driven me to a total disregard of all moral considerations. I had come over a thousand miles for one of the species—vouchsafed me legitimately by a benevolent Government—what mattered the means by which I attained my desire?

I played with the idea throughout the long hours of the night, and at dawn, after troubled dreams of flight, arrest, gaol and subsequent extradition, I sought out Kai-Loon, my Chinese tempter.

Over a bottle of port—produce of Maliwun—in the chill of a Malayan dawn we came to the following agreement. That night if possible (as time was short) he would try to induce Tanoy—whose confidence he shared; also his ill-gotten gains—to meet me by the river. In exchange for my influence with the authorities to legalise Tanoy's bastard rifle, he would propose his co-operation to procure my much-coveted rhino. It would be represented that my influence with the powers that be was inestimable.

When dealing with a poacher who had terrorised the district and practically destroyed all game, and was proscribed as a definite outlaw, I decided to play his game—unmoral and unscrupulous though it may have seemed. I hoped to be well out of the country, many leagues distant, ere he realised the futility of my promises. The risk of being placed in the same category as the gang and caught red-handed added

relish to the project. Since when I have never ceased to shudder at the sight of the Forest official stamp on my occasional Burmese mail. But I reiterate I had travelled a thousand miles and within a few days must perforce return the way I came.

That night, long after the last twinkle of light had been extinguished in the Maliwun bazaar, I passed through the sleeping village, threading my way between the myriad corpse-like sleepers spread-eagled on the ground. It was a breathless night. A grey veil of evil mist from the swamp was creeping up to take possession of the slumbering village. It was as though a pestilence had passed its hand over the face of the sleepers. They were so quiet, so grave-like, so utterly unconscious of the creeping miasma.

Down by the river's edge there was the hush of death, disturbed now and again by the ripple of some night saurian in the depths of the creek, or the plop of a fish as it struggled to escape a vicious death. All the world seemed sleeping, yet the jungles were alive with beast hunting beast, and the myriad night prowlers seeking their meat or grazing grounds after the brazen heat of the day. The mangroves crawled with nocturnal-feeding crabs killing among the slime and ooze of the twisted roots.

The trees alone were silent, awaiting the coming of the day, their branches an asylum for countless families of slumbering apes and birds of every hue. . . . It was all primitive—lonely and utterly desirable ; so far from any organised hive of industry and modern civilisation spelling activity, efficiency, and all its attendant horrors of noise, bustle, people.

Here one would never hear in the silence the exhortation to " Come on—we must get to bed, or you'll never

be up in the morning; breakfast's at nine, and you can't disorganise things" !

Law and Order ! . . . Here, God be praised ! was the emptiness of a non-organised existence, where clocks meant nothing, and one was not haunted by the thought of time ticking ever onward to ultimate extinction at one's very wrist. The movement of the sun and stars told me of the peaceful passage of the blissful hours. The murmur of the stream flowing to the sea beneath the remote Malayan sky emphasised the distance from the nearest port—the focus of civilisation !

Down the misty waters of the Pakchan came the distant sound of paddles. The wavelets rippled at our feet among the decaying mangroves, heralding the approach of our fellow-conspirators. . . .

Tanoy stepped from out his sampan and stood eyeing us distrustfully, with no apparent desire for more intimate acquaintance. In the background hovered his four most trusted hunters, and each was armed with an illegitimate rifle. In the ghostly swamp-light they seemed naught but grey wraiths lurking in deeper velvet shadow, reluctant to disclose their identity to any stranger . . . as wild as the animals they hunted.

I was outwardly unarmed (to establish confidence), but secretly invested with a Colt automatic—as I was not taking too many risks. There was a lengthy conversation between the poacher and Kai-Loon, watched curiously by the sinister shadows in the background. Over these negotiations hung an atmosphere of extreme distrust, reminiscent of the attitude of a herd of sambhur drinking in tiger-frequented waters. One poacher stood gazing intently into the farthest jungle, the sampan rope in hand ready for instant flight.

The moments slipped by. Calm as a Mahatma in suspended animation, I sat gazing across the sleeping river. Really caring little for Tanoy's co-operation or hostility so long as the peace of the jungles—passing all understanding—still vouchsafed me an æon of such lonely, lovely nights. . . . Time flowed as heedlessly as the drifting stream. . . . The strangers vanished into the gloom, and the sound of their paddles was swallowed up in the immensity of the jungle silence.

If Tanoy—chewing the cud of deliberation overnight—regarded my promises favourably, we were to meet the following day and start our nefarious operations. We returned through the glory of the night to bed.

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The afternoon of the following day news came to pack sufficient kit for at least two nights in the open, and to be prepared to meet Tanoy in a hut some ten miles away—below the workings of a long-disused Chinese tin mine. So he had accepted our proposal, and I was to be associated with as disreputable a gang of poachers as ever came out of far Siam. I knew that he would definitely resent any hint of even comfort in one's impedimenta, and would refuse the inclusion of any outside tracker in the party.

I decided to take my Mussulman orderly—both travelling light. We were prepared to carry our own comforts, packed in one large haversack, and sacrificed extravagance of bedding and change of clothing to our stomachs, which bitter experience taught must be adequately filled.

Into the haversack we crammed to repletion kettle and cup for the inevitable milkless tea, bread, potted

meat, tinned fish, bovril and bully beef ; also an electric torch, matches and one blanket. This we took in turns to carry, and with a rifle apiece (·470 and ·318), my automatic and spare ammunition, we were self-contained for several days. Independent of aught save water and a jungle branch for fire.

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At the foot of the steep ascent to the old tin mines Tanoy and one of his fellow-trackers awaited us. He certainly looked every inch a hunter. Bare, but for a wisp of cloth about his waist enfolding the inevitable leather box for the twist of tobacco, betel nut and some old fish-hooks. Over this hung a cartridge belt for the most evil slugs ; also a powder horn from which he occasionally refreshed his fowling-piece. This latter never left his hand, waking or sleeping. I evinced no desire for a closer acquaintance, as a more evil, dangerous matlock—bound with brass wire where the barrel bulged—it would be hard to imagine.

To my intense relief, during the next few days he had no occasion to discharge this perambulating nightmare. But the knowledge that I was walking within a few yards of a hideous death (if the hammer fell) gave my over-developed imagination many an uneasy moment. Like the poor, it was ever with me. My only hope was that the bullet—as generous as as plover's egg in dimensions—would seek the line of least resistance, and escape sideways and upwards through a rift in the barrel. And that at the moment of release I should be in line with the muzzle—in comparative safety.

Yet the owner, entirely trustful of the vagaries of this super-culverin, constantly faced death from wild elephant and crusty rhinoceros with complete equa-

nimity. A charging elephant ahead, and the assistance of Tanoy and his blunderbuss behind as one's alternative to a sticky end, would have seemed the choice of two evils. A fitting subject for a more than usually vivid nightmare.

Tanoy's face and lean figure were as gnarled as a twisted briar root. He had an extraordinary jutting chin, far-seeing hunter's eyes, and a strange way of setting his nutcracker jaw and talking through the gaps in his betel-stained teeth. During the next few days he spoke hardly half a dozen words—or rather commands—and they were in guttural Siamese and wholly unintelligible. Swift and unerring in sight and movement, the jungle was obviously his home and the forest ways his second nature.

There were no preliminary peace overtures. He gave our haversack one searching glance of disapproval, indicative of extravagance. Followed by his henchman carrying an equally defunct fowling-piece, he turned to climb the precipitous slopes above the old tin mines. We followed submissively in single file.

Just as I had reached the conclusion that compared to this the task of Sisyphus was a mere bagatelle, we reached a deserted hut, well over a thousand feet above our starting-point in the steaming jungles below. Tanoy motioned to us to rest or sleep while he looked for tracks.

At our feet lay a vast amphitheatre of virgin forest, uninhabited and untraversed. Through it meandered the feeders of the Pakchan River, and in its pools and swamps we trusted to Tanoy to find us our El Dorado. . . . We were optimists.

We cooked some tea and lay down for an hour or two. From far below came the crashing of bamboo and the

organ-like rumble of wild elephant, interspersed with the scream of some truculent tusker.

Our first disappointment was soon forthcoming. The trackers returned with news of no fresh trails. The hands outspread palms uppermost and the click of the tongue conveyed this gloomy fact. So we decided to have a look at the herd in the valley below.

We soon came on the tracks of a large tusker apart from the herd. As darkness was coming on, and the last flush of sunlight already drenched the tips of the feathery bamboo, we pushed on apace.

From our left, close at hand, came the crack of a breaking bamboo. Tanoy crept into the gathering shadows towards the sound. It was full evening, and amongst the giant clumps it was practically night. By crawling down an ever-darkening tunnel of under-growth we came to within a few yards of where our quarry was standing. He loomed magnificently in the sombre aisle of bamboo—black as ebony. A dull gleam of ivory as he raised his trunk to strip the tender young shoots of their succulent leaves : ivory almost to the ground—a king of tuskers. All my heart cried out for sufficient light to pick out a vulnerable spot. It was far too risky, so we crept away, and stumbled uphill in the pitch darkness to the doubtful comfort of our evil hut. We arranged everything for an early start at dawn—convinced that a big tusker in the hand (or so we hoped) was worth many a rhino in the mythical wallow.

We left the hut before dawn, and with the first light were on the tracks of over-night. These led us through the thickest bamboo and undergrowth, and had we kept to the tracks conscientiously we would have progressed only some half a mile an hour. Tanoy,