

THE
HEART OF NATURE

OR

THE QUEST FOR NATURAL BEAUTY

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CHAPTER I

THE SIKKIM HIMALAYA

THE Sikkim Himalaya is a region first brought prominently into notice by the writings of Sir Joseph Hooker, the great naturalist, who visited it in 1848. It lies immediately to the east of Nepal, and can now be reached by a railway which ascends the outer range to Darjiling. It is drained by the Teesta River, up the main valley of which a railway runs for a short distance. The region is therefore easily accessible. For the purposes of this book it may be taken to include the flat open forest and grass-covered tract known as the Terai, immediately at the base of the mountain. This is only a few hundreds of feet above sea-level, so that from there to the summit of the Himalaya there is a rise of nearly 28,000 feet in about seventy miles. The lower part is in the 26th degree of latitude, so that the heat is tropical. And as the region comes within the sweep of the monsoon from the Bay of Bengal, there is not only great heat in the plains and lower valleys, but great moisture as well. The mountain-sides are in consequence clothed with a luxuriant vegetation.

To enter this wonderful region the traveller has first to cross the Ganges—the sacred river of the

the open air, and in a climate of perpetual summer.

Beyond this highly cultivated and thickly populated part, and still in the plains, we come to a wild jungle country which stretches up to the foothills, and is swampy, pestilential, and swarming with every kind of biting insect. It is a nasty country to travel through. But it has its interests. There grow here remarkable grasses, with tall straight shoots gracefully bending over at the top from the weight of their feathery heads; and so high are these gigantic grasses that they often reach above the head of a man on an elephant. The areas covered by them are practically impenetrable to men on foot, and there is a mysterious feel about this region, for it is the haunt of rhinoceros, tigers, and boars. In passing through it we have an uneasy feeling that almost anything may appear on the instant, and that once we were on foot and away from the path we would be irretrievably lost—drowned in a sea of waving grass.

From this sea of grass rise patches of forest and single trees. The most prevalent is the Sál tree (*Shorea robusta*), a magnificent gregarious tree with a tall straight stem and thick glossy foliage. But the most conspicuous in March and April is the Dák tree (*Butea frondosa*), an ungainly tree, but remarkable for its deep rich scarlet flowers, like gigantic sweet-peas but of a thick velvety texture. These flowers blossom before the leaves appear, and when the tree is in full bloom it looks like a veritable flame in the forest.

Another beautiful tree which is found in this lower part is the *Acacia catechu*, known in Northern India as the Khair tree, and found all about the foothills of the Himalaya. Not tall and stately, but rather contorted and ample like the oak, it has a graceful feathery foliage and a kindly inviting nature.

Proceeding over these level plains, which as we approach the mountains are covered with dense forest, stagnant morasses, and trim tea-gardens, we one morning awake to find that over the horizon to the north hangs a long cloud-like strip, white suffused with pink—level on its lower edge but with the upper edge irregular in outline. No one who had not seen snow mountains before would suppose for a moment that that strip could be a line of mountain summits. For there is not a trace of any connection with the earth. Between it and the earth is nothing but blue haze. And it is so high above the horizon that it seems incredible that any such connection could exist. Yet no one who *had* seen snow mountains could doubt for an instant that that rose-flushed strip of white was the Himalaya. For it possesses two unmistakable characteristics which distinguish it from any cloud. Firstly, the lower edge is absolutely straight and horizontal: it is exactly parallel with the horizon. Secondly, the upper edge is jagged, and the outline of the jaggedness cuts clean and perfectly defined against the intense blue of the sky.

No one who knows mountains could doubt that this line was the Himalaya, yet every time we see it

afresh we marvel more. We know for certain that those sharp edges *are* the summits of mountains whose base is on this solid earth. Yet, however sure we may be of that fact, we do not cease to wonder. And as we gaze upon that line of snowy summits no more—indeed, less—intrinsically beautiful than many a cloud, yet unspeakably more significant, we are curiously elated. Something in us leaps to meet the mountains. And we cannot keep our eyes away. We seem lifted up, and feel higher possibilities within ourselves and within the world than we had ever known before. As we travel onward we strain to keep the mountains continually in sight, for we cannot bear to leave them. We feel better men for having seen them, and for the remainder of our days we would keep them in continuing remembrance.

As we come closer under the mountains the base emerges from the haze and the line of snowy peaks disappears behind the nearer outer ranges. Then we come to these ranges themselves, which rise with considerable abruptness out of the level plains with very little intermediate modulation of form, and we find them densely clothed in forest—true, rich, luxuriant, tropical forest with all the delights of glistening foliage, graceful ferns and palms, glorious orchids, and brilliant butterflies.

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that family. And a beautiful grass-snake, which, as it is limbless, is often mistaken for a tree-snake, is also of the lizard genus.

Of frogs and toads there are about sixteen species. Among them are several prettily-coloured tree-frogs. Several of the species are recognised by their call.

Of mammals about eighty-one species are found. They include three monkeys, eight of the cat tribe, two civet cats, one tree cat, two mongooses, two of the dog tribe, five pole-cats and weasels, one ferret-badger, three otters, one cat-bear, two bears, one tree-shrew, one mole, six shrews, two water-shrews, twelve bats, four squirrels, two marmots, eight rats and mice, one vole, one porcupine, four deer, two forest-goats, one goat, one sheep, and one ant-eater.

The common monkey of India, the Bengal monkey, is found in large companies at low elevations. The Himalayan monkey is abundant from 3,000 to 6,000 feet; and the Himalayan langur frequents the zone from 7,000 to 12,000 feet.

The tiger inhabits the Terai at the foot of the mountains, but is only an occasional visitor to Sikkim proper. But the leopard and the clouded leopard are permanent residents and fairly common. This last is of a most beautiful mottled colouring. Another leopard is the snow-leopard, which inhabits high altitudes only. The marbled-cat is a miniature edition of the clouded leopard, and the leopard-cat of the common leopard. The large Indian civet-cat is not uncommon, but the spotted tiger-civet, a very beautiful and active creature, is

rare. The jackal is not uncommon, and there is at least one species of wild-dog. These dogs hunt in packs and kill wild-pig, deer, goats, etc. A very peculiar and interesting animal is the cat-bear, which has the head and arms of a minute bear and the tail of a cat. The brown bear occurs at high altitudes, and the Himalayan black bear is common lower down. The black hill squirrel is a large handsome animal of the lower forests, and a very handsome flying squirrel inhabits the forests between 5,000 and 10,000 feet.

The great Sikkim stag is not found in Sikkim proper, but inhabits the Chumbi Valley. The sambhar stag is abundant. The commonest of the deer tribe is the khakar, or barking deer. It is, says Hodgson, unmatched for flexibility and power of creeping through tangled underwood. The musk deer remains at high elevations.

In addition to the above, elephants come up from the forests in the plains, and in these plain forests are found (besides tigers and boars) rhinoceros, bison, and buffalo.

This has been a long enumeration of the animal life, in its many branches, which is found in the forest. The mere cataloguing of it is sufficient to show the extent and variety of insect, bird, reptile, and mammal life which the forest contains. But it is with the beauty of this animal life, rather than with its extent and variety, that we are concerned. And if the Artist is to see its full beauty, he must see it with the eyes of the naturalist and sportsman—men whose eyes are trained to observe in minutest detail

the form and colour and character of each animal, bird, or insect, and who know something of the life each has to lead, and the conditions in which it is placed. More sportsmen than naturalists, and more naturalists than artists, observe these and other animals in their natural surroundings. But, nowadays, at least photographers and cinematographers are going into the wilds to portray them. And perhaps naturalist-artists will arise who, every bit as keen as sportsmen now are to get to close quarters with game animals, will want to get into positions from which they will be able carefully to observe animals of all kinds and take note of every characteristic. These artists will have to be fully as alert as the sportsmen, and be able on the instant, and from a fleeting glimpse, to note the lines and shades and character of the animal. But, if they do this, they will, in all probability, bring back more lasting and deeper impressions of the animals than the sportsman with all his keen observation ever receives—and they will enjoy a greater pleasure. An artist, who from observing an animal in its own haunts, and from the sketches and notes he made there, could paint a picture of it in its own surroundings, would assuredly derive more pleasure from his enterprise than the sportsman who simply brought back the animal's head. In addition he would have enabled others to share his enjoyment with him. There is a great field here for the painter; and many would welcome a change from the same old cows and sheep tamely grazing in a meadow, which is all that artists usually present to us of animal life.

Among the most conspicuous animals met with

are the elephant, the bison, the buffalo, and the rhinoceros. And it would be hard to discover beauty in any of these. As we see the rhinoceros, for example, in the Zoological Gardens nothing could be more ugly. Yet we should not despair of finding beauty even in a rhinoceros if we could study him in his natural surroundings and understand all the circumstances of his life. If we observed him and his habits and habitat with the knowledge of the naturalist and the keenness of the sportsman, we might find that in his form and colour he does in his own peculiar fashion fitly express the purpose of his being. And whatever adequately expresses a definite purpose *is* beautiful. Where a dainty antelope would be altogether out of place, the ponderous rhinoceros may be completely in his element. Where a tender-skinned horse would be driven mad by insects, the thick-skinned beast passes the time untroubled. In a drawing-room a daintily-dressed lady is a vision of loveliness. In a ploughed field she would look ridiculous. In a drawing-room a peasant would look uncouth. In a field, as Millet has shown us, he possesses a beauty, dignified and touching. It is not impossible, therefore, that an artist who had the opportunity of entering into the life of a rhinoceros, as Millet had of entering into the life of a peasant, might discover beauty even in that monstrosity. This, however, I allow is an extreme case.

In a less extreme case beauty has already been discovered. The bison does not at first sight strike us as a beautiful animal. Yet Mr. Stebbing, the naturalist-sportsman, says that, as he caught sight of one after

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a long stalk, and watched it with palpitating heart, he was fascinated by the grand sight—18 hands of coal-black beauty shining like satin in the light filtering through the branches of the trees.

When we move on from the bison to the stag the beauty is evident enough. A stag carries himself right royally, and has a rugged, majestic beauty all his own. There are few more beautiful sights in the animal world than that of a lordly stag standing tense with preparedness to turn swiftly, and, on the instant, bound away in any direction.

Not majestic like the great deer; but of a more airy grace and daintiness, are the smaller deer and antelope. The lightness of their tread, their suppleness of movement, and their spring and litheness, fill us with delight.

We now come to the crown of the animal kingdom—man. And in the Sikkim Himalaya are to be found men of all the stages of civilisation from the most primitive to the most advanced. Inhabiting the forests at the foot of the mountains are certain jungle peoples of extreme interest simply by reason of their primitiveness. They represent the very early stages of man, and in observing them in their own haunts, we shall understand something of the immensity and the delicacy of man's task in gaining his ascendancy in the animal world and acquiring a greater mastery over his surroundings.

In these forests teeming with animal life of all kinds man had to hold his own against dangerous and stronger animals, and to supply himself with food in the face of many rivals. He had to be as