

WILDERNESS TRAILS IN THREE CONTINENTS

AN ACCOUNT OF TRAVEL, BIG GAME HUNTING AND EXPLORATION IN INDIA, BURMA, CHINA, EAST AFRICA AND LABRADOR

BY

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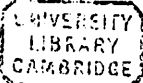
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The Labrador Wilderness.

Frontispiece



CHAPTER VI

THE SUNDERBUNDS

Big game facilities—Mangrove swamps—Cheetal stalking—
Enchanted glades—The King Cobra—Tiger carries off
wounded deer.

THE Sunderbunds is the outer portion of the great delta formed by the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. It consists of malarious, densely-wooded swamps and islands, intersected by a labyrinth of waterways, some narrow and some broad, and wild animals are the only living inhabitants. It is roughly a hundred and fifty miles in length along the coastline, with a depth of thirty to fifty miles inland.

Tigers are very numerous. The typical "Sunderbunds" tiger is a heavily built animal, but it does not stand quite so high at the shoulder as the average tiger in other parts of India. It appears to have developed a more thickset build; this is probably the effects of living in a different sort of jungle. It also has a bad reputation for man-eating.

The Sunderbunds is not, however, an ideal shooting place. Owing to its uninhabited state no *khabur* (news) is obtainable, and this is one of the most important factors in locating a beast. Also it is impossible to get any animals to tie up as baits, unless some cows are brought in a boat; so there

THE SUNDERBUNDS

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is not much chance of getting a "kill." The jungles are so extensive that beating is out of the question, and besides, there are no men to employ as beaters. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the Sunderbunds so few tigers are ever killed.

There is always the chance of a meeting on foot, or of seeing one standing or sleeping on the banks of a waterway, but these chances are very few. I have also heard of instances in which tigers have been seen swimming from island to island. A method which a Forest Officer of my acquaintance has tried with success consists of sitting up over the carcase of a dead crocodile. This brings to light another peculiar trait, for elsewhere tigers are not eaters of carrion.

The only other game animals found in the Sunderbunds are cheetal and wild boar. The cheetal here wander about in enormous herds, but they are small, underfed-looking creatures with insignificant horns. Crocodiles are abundant. Rhino, the smaller one-horned species, are still believed to exist, but I have never met any person who has ever seen one. Marchant once came across their tracks a number of years ago. There is one herd of wild buffaloes still left living on a certain island off the eastern coast. A friend of mine visited this place in 1925 and shot four bulls with magnificent heads in one day. They do not, it appears, afford much real sport, and they can be seen and approached in the open. The Crown Prince of Germany was taken on a shooting trip here during his visit to India. The name of this island, however, I will not divulge lest some American

and said: "This last remark, sir, I agree with entirely!"

The men employed in the Teak trade are usually of 'Varsity standing. They are taken on for a period of twenty years, but only about 50 per cent. of them manage to stand the whole time; the rest are invalided home owing to the effects of continuous fever. They lead very lonely lives, each man in a district by himself. Their job is to supervise the disposal of the timber. First the trees are killed by girdling, and then the logs are hauled by elephants to the forest streams and floated out during the rains. Finally they are lashed together in the form of rafts, and small huts constructed on them for the benefit of the natives who navigate them down the Irrawaddy for several hundred miles to Rangoon.

The game animals of the district which I had chosen consisted of tiger, leopard, sambar, barking deer and tsaine. The elephant and bison had during this time of the year, which was the dry season, withdrawn to the densest thickets of the hill-tops. It is only at the beginning of the rains when they come down to the more open jungle of the valleys and plains to feed on the succulent young shoots of the bamboo. Tiger shooting in this country is quite a different proposition from India, where hard and fast methods can be adopted. Here the tiger is almost entirely a forest feeder, living on game, and very seldom kills a tame cow or buffalo, even if the former is up for that express purpose. In this way their habits lead them to live a roving existence far removed from the habitations of man, and leaving little or no

traces of their killing by which they might be located.

There are no recognized shikaris, and so *khabur* (news) is very hard to obtain. Leopards are never seen during the daytime, but form a regular pest at night-time, prowling around the villages after dogs. There are still some rhino left in Burma, but they are now strictly preserved. Their horns form a very valuable commodity for which wealthy Chinamen are willing to pay fabulous sums. They powder them up for use as aphrodisiacs!

Big game hunting in Burma is usually rather a monotonous form of sport. The forests are so vast and the game is so scattered that it is not so accessible as in India; and besides, the graminivorous animals do not get enough ground feeding to multiply very rapidly. A dense canopy of vegetation overhead is not conducive to the growth of jungle grasses. During the rainy season when the ground is soft and there is a definitely marked line of spoor tracking is possible; otherwise the sport depends on pure luck, and finding an animal in this jungle is rather like the proverbial needle in the haystack. Sometimes during the hottest time of the year when all the streams are dried up, the animals may congregate in the vicinity of some drinking-pool; this forms the best opportunity. But during the cold season it is just a case of running into one's quarry by chance—wandering incessantly from daylight to dusk across the hills and through great *nullahs*. Sometimes the hunter may spend the day without seeing a single beast. It may most aptly be described as long periods of great boredom, alternated with spasms of intense

people presume. But they are dangerous when wounded. If one meets a pair it is safest to shoot the lioness, for if the male is killed first its mate will sometimes charge immediately. The habits of the lion render him a more worthy quarry than a tiger, for he may sometimes be encountered in the open when "walking up." Another method is to approach a lion's "kill" (zebras, etc.) at daylight and shoot him whilst still feeding. They can also be shot at night-time whilst sitting up over a "kill," either from a *machan* or from a *boma*. The latter consists of a small enclosure of thorny branches built on the ground.

> The rhino usually frequents fairly open Bush, where there is plenty of grass and not far from water. The African species carry two horns and weigh just over a ton. But the rhino is rather a misjudged animal, and its dangerous nature is often exaggerated. Its range of vision does not exceed thirty yards, and provided one is on the right side of the wind it is very easily approached. On getting the scent of a human being—even at distances of two or three hundred yards—a rhino sometimes charges straight towards him, but with no other object in view than in escaping. This animal likes to travel "up wind," and so this habit alone is responsible for much of its bad reputation. There are, however, some real rogues who mean harm; but rhinos, like other wild animals, differ individually.

My first experience with a lion came rather unexpectedly while I was still staying on the farm, as my game licence had not then arrived. I was awakened at daylight one morning by the young

assistant who was occupying the next tent, to say that there was a lion not far away, and sure enough we could still hear it roaring. I took up my rifle, a .404 Mauser, and my friend his shot-gun, and we started off just as we were, still in pyjamas.

On the way we stopped for a few minutes to secure a couple of young Masai to act as trackers. Then we pushed on into some fairly thick Bush consisting of thorn trees and high grasses, and before long they had picked up the spoor—to my eyes almost invisible, but forming faint marks in the dew. By this time, which was about a quarter of an hour later, the roaring had ceased and I began to feel a little doubtful of ever finding the beast when we came on the fresh imprint of a lion's paw in the bed of a stream. At that very moment the roaring started again, in increased intensity, and quite close to us.

We crept along in Indian file in the direction from whence the sound was arising, and the Masai pointed to a little hillock of an ant-heap which I climbed to get a better view into the Bush. Then I spotted him, still bellowing, and only thirty yards away. I didn't fire immediately as he was still moving and partly hidden from view in the undergrowth; but after ten to fifteen seconds he crossed our front and stopped dead, broadside on and only twenty yards from me. I took the neck shot and he tumbled. The Masai hurled their spears into him as a safeguard, but he was already dead.

These two boys were very excited and pleased with it all, for they had "blooded" their spears. "Ish . . . Ish . . . Ish . . ." they kept muttering through their teeth, which is their signification

an absolute dare-devil—he would gallop on horseback alongside a young giraffe and then throw himself from the saddle, landing upon his quarry's neck. It was very interesting to have come across these people, but they could not stop long; almost as soon as they had fed and watered they were off with their pet again, for they had another fifty miles to do that night.

The morning after we had reached the new camping grounds I received a visit from an old Boer hunter who happened to be in the neighbourhood. He was rather a fine-looking old fellow, dressed in a faded Bush shirt and untidy-looking leather leggings and corduroys. He was between sixty and seventy years old, but looked as hard as nails all over. His grey eyes were of the most wonderful clearness—the kind of eyes that seem to be always fixed, gazing out across vast spaces. He was a typical African of the old type, and had in his day hunted and wandered through most of the country from the Orange River to the Usambara Range. But he was not a pleasant old man to meet and was possessed of a blunt and surly manner—he spoke but little and then mostly in monosyllables and grunts.

When he heard that I was out for rhino he said that he would be willing to act as guide. I gladly availed myself of veteran assistance, and he on his part sensed the opportunity of being able to collect some rhino hide at the expense of another. He carried a magazine rifle of an early pattern, with a bore of something about .275, and with this apparently flimsy-looking weapon he was accustomed to tackling the largest game.

We started off together and he began by leading me into the thickest bush possible. It consisted of thorn trees and rank undergrowth; to add to which the coarse grass ("graaz" my companion called it with his Dutch accent) reached up to above one's waist. So thick were the thorns that in some places I was obliged to crawl. Before an hour had elapsed we struck fresh rhino tracks, the spoor being a very marked one and forming a definite pathway through the grass, and stamped here and there with the unmistakable three-toed footprint.

The old man hardly ever spoke except a whisper now and again to call my attention to some fresh mark on the ground. But once he paused to explain to me that when the rhino charged all I need do was to throw myself from the track into the grass by the side; for a rhino keeps to his old line of spoor. The actual habits and temperaments of rhinos in general he accentuated with the most horrible swear-words.

In another couple of hours we struck a line of spoor crossing the original and after a few seconds' study my companion picked out the best one. Soon afterwards we came upon absolutely fresh tracks and droppings, so we knew that our quarry was now quite close. We crept cautiously along, stopping now and again to test the wind, which unfortunately for us was not blowing in the right direction.

Suddenly he stopped and pointed, intimating to me that there were rhino only about forty yards ahead. How he sensed that they were there I don't know, for I could see or hear nothing; but a few moments afterwards there broke forth a most

tremendous crashing of branches and undergrowth. I didn't know whether they were coming for us or not so I stood with my safety catch released and my rifle at the ready, but as it turned out they were heading off in the opposite direction. The sport was now reaching its highest pitch for we expected almost any moment to come on them again. Twenty minutes later we both stopped dead for there in front of us, less than thirty yards ahead and half hidden by the foliage, was the grey bulk of a rhino's flank.

I paused to examine closer for I could not at the moment see either its horns or its head. Then it got our wind and wheeled round—for the next second it was hidden from view in the undergrowth, but the second after it was facing us twelve paces ahead. The inclination of its body was slightly at an angle, and without waiting another moment I put a bullet into the side of the shoulder, raking it right across. The forelegs doubled under and its head crashed to the ground. At the same instant that it fell the old hunter lodged a bullet near the brain. It was nearly finished but not quite, it still squirmed and squealed, so I put another two shots into the head. We heard the sound of its mate retreating, and then all was still.

That was the end of my first rhino hunt. Apart from the actual shooting, the experience of seeing that ungainly pachyderm in its native surroundings was the most impressive sight. The rhino is an animal which seems to have outlived its allotted span upon the earth; for it dates back to an earlier geological period. As it is it looks antediluvian—like some weird creature that has

been submerged for centuries in the great primeval slime.

During all this time my Masai had been the only other man with us, but now that whatever danger there might have been was over half a dozen boys, who had been following at a safe distance, arrived on the scene and started to assist in the skinning and to help themselves to the meat. The horns, which appear to be of bone, are not so really; they owe their formation to an intricate growth and development of hair and are easily severed at the roots with a hunting knife. Whilst these operations were going on there was suddenly a snort, as if from nowhere, and a crashing in the undergrowth—it was the mate returning. Quickly we jumped up and seized our rifles, and quicker still the boys scrambled up the nearest trees: all except the old Masai, who just stood there, calm as ever, leaning on his spear. But it turned out to be a false alarm. Finally, when all the cutting operations were finished and we were preparing to move off—the Boer in one direction and myself another—I ventured to thank him for his assistance and to say good-bye. The old man grunted, turned his back on me and walked off, and I have never set eyes on him since that day.

Afterwards I moved my camp on farther into the Bush, and the rest of my days were spent wandering at random. I derived great pleasure in observing the various kinds of animals: giraffe, gerenuk, impala and so on. A giraffe galloping is the most ludicrous sight, as the whole upper portion of the body sways backwards and forwards with each stride. The gerenuk is rather a rare