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LETTERS TO NOBODY

1908-1913

BY THE

RT. HON. SIR GUY FLEETWOOD WILSON
G.C.I.E., K.C.B., K.C.M.G.

WITH PORTRAIT AND ILLUSTRATIONS

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LETTER XVI.—ASSAM AND RHINOCEROS

SIMLA, *April 30th, 1911.*

WHEN I left England I made up my mind to shoot at least one of every kind of the dangerous wild-beast family in India. I was warned by those who were conversant with India and its game that I should almost certainly fail to carry out my undertaking; but that there was every likelihood that I should get soaked with malaria, not improbably be hurt, and that I might, as a special favour, get killed.

My age and the great burden of my work, with its consequential difficulty of absence from the seat of government, added materially to the weight of my self-imposed task. None the less, in two years and a half I have managed to shoot, in some cases alone and on foot, at least one, and in some cases three or four specimens, of every kind of Indian big game with one exception, that exception being a rhinoceros.

Just as "everyone" had told me it was out of the question for a lame old man to get a bison, so "everyone" assured me that it was even more out of the question for the same to get a rhinoceros. Having got a bison, I discounted the "out of the question" contention and made up my mind to shoot a rhinoceros.

The said beast is getting very scarce in India.

Some are left in Burmah and a few are to be found in Assam, where efforts are being made to get them to multiply in sanctuaries.

There is difficulty in obtaining permission to shoot near the reserved forest, and everywhere it is very difficult to approach a rhinoceros in India.

So far as I can make out, it is ever a "stern chase." You get on the track of a rhino, follow the trail almost day and night *à la* "Trail of the Yellow-stone Stag," and if you can last as long as or longer than the rhino you may get a shot at him. He lives in swampy grass jungle, moving about not like an elephant on paths made by crushing down the reeds, but in tunnels bored through them.

The "grass" is from 12 to 20 feet high, and rhinos burrow through it as a mole does under the ground. These tunnels are very noticeable, but their ramifications render it impossible to follow them on foot. They form a labyrinth. Indeed, the daily occupation of a rhino seems to be to cross and twist and double in every direction except in a straight line towards the spot he is making for, generally a very muddy "wallow."

As a consequence tracking the Indian rhino is an excessively difficult operation, and even the best of trackers are constantly at fault and have to retrace their steps or "cast round" in the hope of restriking the trail.

Thanks to the kindness of the Provincial Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, and to the assistance rendered by the local Government officials, I was able to arrange a shoot in a pesti-

lentially malarial district of Assam in the hope of getting a rhino.

I left Calcutta on March 31st, 1911, and reached the Ganges ferry at Raita Ghat the same evening. Here I was held up for two days owing to delay in obtaining pad elephants.

I took the opportunity of looking at the Sara bridge works where a railway bridge is eventually to link up Bengal with Assam. It seemed to me to be a very arduous undertaking owing to the constantly changing nature of the river-bed, but no doubt the difficulty will be surmounted. The heat was intense.

Raita Ghat seemed to me very typical of the British occupation. Twice a day the mail (to and from Calcutta) arrives. The station-master fumes, the guard curses, the coolies groan or squabble, the passengers rush for the boat or train, and the luggage does its best to travel in the wrong direction. All is bustle and confusion, but some one English official (as often as not an ex-N.C.O.), by the plentiful use of the two words "carmine" and "blighter," evolves order out of chaos and all goes well.

The moment the boat and train are gone, all relapses into the typical India by the Ganges. A brown sad-faced woman fills a *garah* with water; just above her a buffalo wallows; just below her a man washes exceedingly foul linen. In mid-stream a native boat with a very white sail goes dreamily with the stream. A red mange-covered pye-dog licks a huge sore and a miserably thin calf eats sand, no doubt convinced that it is grass. All animals seem to be Christian Scientists in India.

Should we ever leave India *horresco referens*, would India relapse in one or two generations into the typical "India by the Ganges"?

And if the relapse came about, would the boatmen be less happy, and could the woman and the dog and the calf be more miserable, than at present? And would the strong but rare English official flourish elsewhere and stupidly, illogically, unimaginatively turn bad into good with the aid of "carmine" and "blighter"?

After crossing the Ganges I rejoined the train and at 10 next morning "descended" at a small station in a fever-stricken spot in the jungle. I was met by the Deputy-Commissioner, who drove me some twenty-six miles through wild, I might almost say savage, country to a forest bungalow (where I met the Deputy-Conservator), and which was to be my first camp. They were both most kind to me, and took an infinity of trouble to get me my rhinoceros.

Next day we moved some fifteen miles farther inland and camped almost at the foot of the Himalayas south-east of Bhootan, and, I fancy, not very many marches from where the Abors give trouble.

The next morning, April 8th, I was on my elephant, as usual, at 4 a.m. We got to our ground at dawn, but the trackers made a bad mistake. They "crossed" a fresh trail without detecting it. This resulted in six hours' hard work merely to get back to the very spot where we had "missed" and starting *de novo* on a six-hour-old trail. On the whole, however, the tracking was very, very good and intensely interesting. About

1 o'clock, after many disappointments, I was raced up a "very hot" trail, and I got a glimpse of a disappearing rhino-back 60 yards off in the grass. I put my bullet into the withers and the rhino fell, practically dead in his tracks.

The rhino stood 5 feet 6½ inches at the shoulder, but the horn was very much worn and consequently very short.

I returned to camp elated but worn out; too weary to eat, drink, smoke or sleep, with neuritis gnawing at me like a ravening wolf.

On the following day we returned to our first camp, avoiding a mud road where a rogue elephant was holding up all wayfarers.

During our rhino-tracking we came across a fine python, an amiable reptile who moved quietly out of our way.

On the 11th I started for the railway, which I reached after a fourteen hours' journey, slept that night in a rest bungalow, and next morning parted with the Deputy-Commissioner, to whom I was greatly indebted, and reached Gauhati on the 12th.

Whilst waiting at Gauhati I came across a belated vernacular paper which informed me that the Viceroy was going to Dehra Dun, "where there will be some cheerful talking." This sounded very much as though His Excellency proposed to read the Riot Act. I afterwards ascertained that "cheerful talking" was native printerese for "cheetal stalking."

Assam reminded me in part of the Nepal Terai and partly of Southern India. It is very green and should be very fertile, but it is horribly un-

healthy in parts, and the fever-stricken inhabitants reminded me of the Maremma folk of old days.

The population seems to be a collection of various races, chiefly Mongolian: the Mech, the Rabha, the Kachari, and the Garos—all very wild-looking and mostly somewhat yellow; but there are also considerable numbers of Santhals, who come from the Nagpur districts and who are quite black.

The province generally appeared to me to have been administratively neglected, and the executive staff seemed to be overworked and somewhat discouraged.

The weather on the whole was fair. Brilliant and intensely hot sun one day. Cloudy and almost chilly another day, with violent, pitiless hailstorms thrown in.

The Brahmaputra is a beautiful river, the banks where I was being rocky, often high, and covered with trees and shrubs of the brightest green. Some of the bends of the river are not unlike narrow bits of a Swiss lake. I have enjoyed it all intensely, but I have contracted a severe attack of malignant tertiary fever.