

MAINLY ABOUT LIONS

‘The *Rhinoceros sondaicus* keeps on cropping up, though only on paper. He is a very rare beast indeed, there being only half-a-dozen or so of his species left. He inhabits this province [Burma] and Mr. Verney, who is well known as a naturalist and explorer, has arrived and will attempt to shoot a specimen for the British Museum. Mr. Verney is a very painstaking naturalist of the new school and spares himself no effort in an endeavour to present his specimens to the public in their correct settings. He came out not many months ago to shoot Tapir.’

The gratifying tidings I have quoted from an Indian weekly are of a recurring kind. ‘A popular official’ is reported as having bagged eighteen panthers in three days or it may be forty black buck in one day. Some may feel dubious as to whether the surviving party in these meetings is the more ornamental denizen of Indian ways; but it is not often that a panther or a black buck bags a popular official. We must take the world as we find it. The reader will be glad to know that Mr. Verney’s mission was entirely successful.

Rhinoceros sondaicus, as the paragraphist points out,

MAINLY ABOUT LIONS

is a very rare beast indeed. As the train crossed the Indus at Attock it was hard to believe that the first Mogul invader killed it there. All three Indian rhinoceroses must, I suppose, be taken as doomed to extinction. The last traces in the Sanderbans, so a Commissioner of Fisheries, whose work had kept him constantly there, told me in pre-War days, were reported as seen in these marshy flats somewhere about 1887. There used to be, before that, not very convincing rumours of rhinoceroses in the Mahanadi delta, but I never heard that any European ever saw them there. 1885 or so (I write from memory of old conversations with all sorts of wanderers) saw their disappearance from the Sonthal Parganas. *Sondaicus indicus* will (just) survive a while longer in the Nepal Terai (and Kuch Behar?), and *sondaicus* in Assam and Burma, and *sumatrensis* in the Chittagong hinterland and where Burma runs into Malaya. But I should like to know more definitely, from men who have seen these animals.

The beasts that must vanish are those that breed slowly or are hard to hide or exist in isolated spots. The Nilgiri Ibex is being looked after by means of permits, but needs this close supervision. The Kashmir Stag, a magnificent creature, would have gone long since if the Maharaja's private preserves had

MAINLY ABOUT LIONS

not kept it; it is to be hoped that these preserves will not be flung open in the present discontents and confusions, as those where the European Bison survived in Poland were flung open during the Great War. The Indian Bison is safe in South India. Indore in Central India still has a tiny herd, which the Prince protects and told me he had every intention of continuing to protect. He had taken note of what happened in the neighbouring State of Gwalior, whose last bison, a herd of thirty, were surrounded and shot down fifteen years ago by 'temporary gentlemen' (I am quoting a redidious Englishman who lives in Gwalior) who had taken the trouble to come over twenty miles in order to achieve thisfeat. As regards the wild ass, I told His Highness of Bikaner, in London last autumn, that I wished to intercede with him 'on behalf of an oppressed minority resident in his dominions'; the official books allege that Bikaner has 'a herd of about a hundred wild asses'. He told me that the books were wrong, and that he himself had never seen one, but that very occasionally one strayed into his borders from Bhawalpur. They still exist in Cutch, however, or did until yesterday. These, too, are in an isolated area, where they cannot be replenished from outside.

MAINLY ABOUT LIONS

The fauna of India is so interesting because Malayan and African elements mingle, Central India being the actual meeting place. I was told that Princes and others who wanted cheetahs for hunting purposes now got them from Hyderabad. But the officer in charge of the Gwalior shikar department (who knew the whereabouts of everything shootable in his territory and kept a census) said that fifty or sixty survived in the State. They are found in Indore also. The hunting lynx, the caracal, is in both these States.

Everyone knows that the last lion in Central India was shot at Guna, in Gwalior, in 1873 (on Waterloo Day—too good a day for such a deed). Eleven years previously, one officer had shot eight at Guna; and late in the 'sixties, when the railway was being built, engineers shot two near Allahabad. A few months before the very last of all was killed, in 1873, four were shot in Jodhpur. The late Maharaja of Gwalior's praiseworthy effort to give his dominions lions again, nearly a quarter of a century ago, will be remembered. Unfortunately, tigers have increased in Gwalior, and they drove the lions (which in any case had been made too familiar with human beings before their enlargement) to the outskirts of the villages, whose inhabi-

MAINLY ABOUT LIONS

tants hunted them down. Nevertheless they managed to survive in the Shkopur jungles until two years ago. In 1930 the last isolated members were shot in several widely apart places, the very last of all near Jhansi. People still say they are there, but the Head of the Shikar Department says he knows that they are not. The Maharaja of Indore told me that one lion (whose lioness had been among the 1930 victims) was said to be hiding on the confines where Gwalior and Indore meet. 'I have been thinking of getting another lioness for him. I should like to entice him into my State and protect them.' 'If Your Highness will get him another lioness, that will be the best way of enticing him over.'

The lion seems certain to slip out of existence in Asia. During my Mesopotamian sojourn I kept a watchful mind open for news: a lioness and cubs were seen by an Indian trooper near Ahwaz in 1917 (reported in *The Times*), a lion cub was brought through Arab Village near Sannaiyat in 1916, one was shot in the Wadi marshes a year later, they lingered in the Pushtikuh and perhaps on the Khabur River, in pre-War days one had been shot at Sannaiyat by Commander Cowley (who perished in the *Julnar* attempt). These were the teasing stories I collected and kept against the background

MAINLY ABOUT LIONS

of such experiences as Englishmen had had not a century before (Layard, for example, reports in the most casual way seeing a flock of eight walking about on Tigris banks). Sir Arnold Wilson told me recently that the lion was now definitely extinct in Persia. He will be, or should be, glad to hear that this was undue pessimism. An official of the Bombay Natural History Society told me that they had received proof of lions still in Persia, in those Push-tikuh which we used to watch growing more deeply snowcapt, in the days of 1916; and also elsewhere.

Junagadh in Kathiawar, again as everyone knows, has the last Indian, and will keep the last Asiatic, lions. They once shrunk to about a dozen, and are now believed to be about a hundred. They have established themselves in several parts of adjoining Baroda, and the Diwan Sahib of Baroda assured me that the State intended to protect them. The Junagadh lions are reserved for distinguished executioners, Princes or Governors. It is the ritual for every Viceroy and Commander-in-Chief to shoot some before leaving India. They told me that Lord Reading came to do his duty with no great enthusiasm. A high Muslim official told off to attend him left off his jewelled slippers and climbed into the *machan* respectfully barefooted. Out of the jungle

MAINLY ABOUT LIONS

came a lioness and cubs, and the lioness proceeded to show her children, using the dead buffalo as a model, how to kill. Lord Reading proved a bad sportsman; instead of shooting them he looked on fascinated. Presently the cubs, their faces all gory, found the slippers and entered on a happy game, worrying them like kittens, and finally carried them off into the bush. Lord Reading came down from his *machan* and said, 'Drive me at once to the nearest telegraph office,' from which he sent a wire to Lady Reading saying that he had seen the greatest sight of his career, a wild lioness teaching her cubs to play. I shall be very sorry to hear that this story is not true.