

PUNDITS AND ELEPHANTS

Being the Experiences of Five Years
as Governor of an Indian Province

by

THE EARL OF LYTTON

With Illustrations

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CHAPTER VIII

SPORT

Tiger Shooting

BESIDES our annual holiday tour in the hills in the autumn, we had many short expeditions for shooting and fishing, which we greatly enjoyed. The best of these were two visits to Nepal, which we spent in camp as the guests of Colonel (later Sir Frederick) O'Connor, the Resident. Nepal is a big-game hunters' paradise, but the Maharajah was rightly anxious to keep his State as a close preserve, and we felt it a great privilege to be allowed by His Highness to visit this wonderful sporting country.

Tiger shooting can be obtained in all parts of India, and the technique employed in circumventing the tiger varies in every part of the country. In all cases it is first located by tying up a young buffalo calf, or other animal, in an area where tiger are known to be present. If this is killed during the night, the tiger is always expected to lie up during the day in the vicinity of the kill. The simplest method when beaters are not available is then to build a platform (called a machan) in a tree overlooking the kill. The hunter climbs into the machan and waits for the tiger to return to its prey. This method is practised by the tea-planters on their gardens for the purpose of killing the tigers or leopards which occasionally frequent their neighbourhood. We also used it to secure a stray tiger on some of our fishing expeditions.

In the large organised shoots which were arranged for our benefit when visiting the State of some ruling Prince the tiger was driven to the guns by beaters as in a covert shoot in England, the procedure varying according to the configuration of the ground and to local custom. In Cooch-Behar, where the forest was thick and flat, the guns were placed in howdahs on the backs of elephants in broad rides cut in the jungle and the tiger was driven towards them by beaters on foot. In Alwar, where the forests covered the sides of steep hills, the rides were cut at intervals down the sides of the hills. The upper parts of these rides were filled with dummy figures in white which acted as stops; the guns were placed on foot at intervals at the bottom end of the line and the game was driven towards them by beaters

also on foot. In these drives a variety of game might emerge—either sambuhr, leopard or tiger. In Kotah, where the forest covered slopes along the course of a river, the guns were placed in boats opposite clearings in the jungle, and the game was driven by a line of beaters stretching up the hillside and following the course of the river.

In Jaipur the procedure was somewhat different from that employed anywhere else. The characteristic feature of this part of Rajputana was a succession of separate conical hills, which rose at intervals out of the surrounding plain. These hills were thickly covered with trees and bushes, and were full of tiger, panther and deer. On the first of our shoots there a tiger had been located on one of these hills the day before, and had been kept there during the night by a ring of flares. The guns were posted under an awning on the flat roof of a small disused building on the side of the hill. A line of coolies was placed across the top of the hill to act as stops and prevent the tiger from breaking up in that direction, and an army of beaters with drums and tin cans and hand grenades then drove it towards the guns. When the tiger emerged it was killed by a volley from several rifles and it was difficult to say to which gun it should be ascribed. On the second day the same procedure was followed on another hill, but the guns were then placed in a machan raised upon high stakes and covered with an awning.

In Nepal, where the hospitality of the Maharajah provided a large number of elephants and two highly skilled and experienced *shikaris*, the procedure was more elaborate. The shooting party in the camp waited in the morning for *khubba* (news) of the overnight kill. Often there would be news of tigers in more than one direction, and, after consultation with the *shikaris*, the day's programme was decided upon. The party would then leave camp mounted on pad elephants for the scene of operations. On approaching the spot of the overnight kill, the line of elephants would divide, some going to the right and some to the left, and proceeding in a semi-circle until they met again. In this way a complete circle was made round the spot where the tiger was believed to be lying up. The guns would then be transferred from their pad elephants to other elephants with howdahs, which were placed at regular intervals round the circle. The whole line would then close in, reducing the size of the circle, until the *shikaris* decided that the enveloping formation was

sufficiently close and the guns so placed as to cover the whole ring. Then the elephants proceeded to clear a space in front of each of the howdahs, trampling down the grass and pushing down with their foreheads and fore-feet any trees that might intercept the clear view of the guns. When this process was complete and a considerable open space in the high grass had been cleared in front of each howdah, the elephants resumed their places in the line and the hunt began. An old experienced tusker elephant was sent into the high grass in the centre of the ring, and was ridden backwards and forwards until the tiger was bolted. Once aroused, it might emerge at any point in the circle and would be shot by any of the guns that caught sight of it.

This method had many advantages over any other form of driving. In the first place every member of the party, guns and beaters alike, took part in the proceedings from start to finish; there was never a dull moment, no waiting in a forest ride for something that might or might not emerge. Every incident in the operation was interesting, and it was a delight to watch the skill with which it was directed and carried out. The silence with which the elephants moved, the quiet deliberate way in which they pushed over quite sizable trees, the skill with which they were manoeuvred by their mahouts—all these were a joy to behold. Nothing was hurried, everything was efficient. In the second place, every position in the line was as good as another and each gun had an equal chance of securing the game. When the final stage began, the excitement was intense and shared by everyone. Generally the whole circle was visible from each point; sometimes the movement of the tiger could be followed by the waving grass, and, whoever secured it in the end, all had shared in the excitement of the chase.

Usually the tiger would show for a moment in one of the open spaces which had been cleared in front of the guns and was then secured, but sometimes it would break through the ring between the howdahs. Then the line immediately broke into movement; the elephants charged (never seeming to hurry, however fast they moved) to right and to left, and the circle was re-formed round the escaping tiger.

It may sound as if shooting with powerful rifles into a ring so close that you could see across it was a dangerous operation, but it must be remembered that in a howdah on the top of an elephant one is so high up that the rifle is always directed

downwards, and the grass of the jungle, which is sometimes as high as the heads of the pad elephants, effectively prevents any possible ricochet.

Our first experience of this sport was in March, 1923, when our camp was at Jogbani. We left Calcutta in the afternoon, and after a night in the train we reached Jogbani at seven the next morning. Colonel O'Connor met us there, and after breakfasting in the train we drove out in two small cars to the site of our camp. On this occasion I only took with me my youngest son John and three members of my staff. Lady Lytton was to have accompanied me, but as Hermione fell ill at the last moment she had to stay behind to look after her. There was no regular road and we drove straight across country for thirty miles in and out of river-beds, over rice fields, through jungles and villages, where we were the objects of much interest and wonder to the inhabitants, till we reached our camp, which was situated on the edge of a wood near a stream.

We were told that there had been two kills in the night and that the elephants had gone out to ring round the nearer of the two. We had luncheon while we waited for news that the operation had been completed, and then set out on our pad elephants for the scene of the shoot. On this occasion the operation of forming the ring which I have described had already been performed, and when we arrived we found a circle of well trampled grass already formed. We transferred to howdahs and took up our allotted stations in the ring.

As this was my first experience of a tiger shoot, I was much excited, and when, as soon as the beat began, I saw the grass moving immediately in front of me, my heart thumped loudly against my side. The movement in the grass passed slowly to my left and presently the tiger emerged and stood still. On my immediate left was Colonel O'Connor, with John in his howdah. The tiger was actually nearer to him than to me and more visible to him, as there was a tree between it and me which hid from me all except its head. Colonel O'Connor had lent John his rifle, but told him not to shoot as he wanted me to have the first shot. He shouted to me to shoot, but I did not hear him as the elephants were trumpeting, the mahouts were shouting and the din was terrific. The tiger seemed bewildered by the noise and remained rooted to the spot.

The suspense was great; there was no one in my howdah to

advise me, and I could not think what they were waiting for. At last Colonel O'Connor said, "Your father isn't going to shoot, so you had better take it, John." The boy, who was still within a few days of his 13th birthday, and had never had a rifle in his hand before, then took aim quite deliberately and fired. The tiger fell dead, shot through the head.

It was a great moment. Many men have spent years in the pursuit of tiger and never secured such an opportunity, but this twelve-year-old boy in his very first hunt found himself faced by a tiger which waited stock-still to be shot. That he should have remained cool in such a moment of excitement and made such good use of this unique opportunity was a most creditable performance.

The ring then closed in, and when it was clearly established that there was no other animal left in it, we dismounted from our howdahs and gathered round the dead beast, which proved to be a large tigress measuring 9 ft. 2 in. John was duly "blooded" on both cheeks and congratulated by each in turn. We then remounted our pad elephants and returned to camp, very well pleased with the result of our first day.

The next day we started in pursuit of the more distant tiger which had been reported the day before. We had a ride through the jungle for about five miles to the spot where the tiger was believed to be lying up. The country was much the same as on the first day, namely, open plain, with tall dried grass interspersed with the bare stems of trees that had been burnt in a fire. It looked like some of the battle areas in France. On this occasion we all took part in forming the ring in the manner I have described, instead of finding it ready made on our arrival. John was in the howdah with me this time, and we had many exciting moments as a tigress rushed about from one point in the ring to another, but the grass being very high and thick it was difficult to see her. She eventually emerged opposite Colonel O'Connor and was killed by him.

The next day we had two hunts in similar conditions. In the first another tigress was shot by Colonel Hunter (an I.M.S. Surgeon stationed in Nepal. He and his wife were also the guests of Colonel O'Connor in this camp). In the second we drew blank.

The fourth day was the most picturesque, exciting and enjoyable of all our days. The country of our previous shoots

with the gaunt charred tree-stems, the only survivors of a burnt-out forest, and a monstrous growth of dry grass all round them had been ugly and uninteresting. On this occasion we were in real thick jungle with big trees, a tangle of green undergrowth and luxuriant vegetation, exactly like a picture which hung in my mother's sitting-room and had fascinated me from childhood. Also it was much warmer than on the previous days and the sunlight played with the shadows among the trees.

The first ring proved a blank, and we moved on to another after luncheon. The site of this ring was a marvellous natural amphitheatre in the centre of the thickest forest. In the centre was a deep dell, with clear short grass, and the elephants were drawn up in a circle round the rim. For a long time they were kept busy tearing down trees, and there was such a hullabaloo that I could not believe there could be any tiger inside and I thought we were going to have another blank drive. But at last everything was ready and the two beater elephants went down into the dell. A tiger was almost immediately bolted, and gave us the maximum of excitement as it charged backwards and forwards and was fired at and missed by almost all the guns in turn. Finally it broke through the ring right under my elephant and I shot it with a lethal bullet from a twelve-bore gun. This was the first tiger we had secured. It was larger than the tigresses, measuring 9 ft. 6 in., with a fine winter coat. As it had no other wound, it was awarded to me, and I was glad to have got one without any element of doubt.

The next day we killed two, a tiger and a tigress, after they had broken through the ring and were then surrounded a second time in the way I have described. The tiger fell to Colonel Hunter and the tigress to Major Willoughby (one of my staff).

The sixth day (John's thirteenth birthday) was our only blank day, and on the last day another tigress was shot by Colonel Mackenzie (my Military Secretary). Captain Horn also shot a well-grown tiger cub. When our camp came to an end, therefore, every member of the party had bagged a tiger, and Captain Horn, who had only shot a cub, stayed on for a few days after our departure, and secured one two days later.

The following year we were again invited by our kind friend to join him in a shooting camp in Nepal, and our second visit was even more wonderful than the first. Nothing could exceed the kindness and charm of our host on both occasions, but two facts



BUNGALOW AT CHILKA



MY RHINO

made this second visit specially memorable. In the first place we were more of a family party, as Lady Lytton and both our girls accompanied me. We also took with us our friend, Lady Phyllis Windsor-Clive, who was staying with us. The only member of my staff to accompany us was Major Benton, who later became her husband. In the second place the site of our camp was at Bikna Thoree, which is the best area for game in Nepal. We were therefore in quite new country, with an unfamiliar range of snow mountains far to the west even of Mount Everest, and the variety of game we met was greater. It was earlier in the year than on the last occasion—mid-January instead of March. The air was crisp and cold, but the sun shone in a blue sky throughout our week's holiday, tingeing the distant snows pink in the evening and followed by a lovely full moon at night. The only other guest besides ourselves this year was Captain Harvey, a young Gurkha officer, who proved a most delightful companion to the girls.

The tiger shoots were much the same as those I have already described, but the tigers in this part of the country were more knowing than elsewhere and often evaded us. Instead of lying up near their kill as they were expected to do, they often went away to the hills and only came back in the evenings, so that some of our rings were blank. With the ringing procedure, however, even a blank drive is exciting, the tension being kept up till the last moment, and there was such a variety of other game—rhino, bear, panther, pig, deer, peacocks, jungle fowl, partridges, even snipe! that every day brought some new and thrilling experience. I got a tiger on the first day, and two rhino and a bear in the course of the week.

One day only can be described in full. It began with a blank morning and ended in a perfect orgy of game. We had news in the morning of a tiger in one direction and a rhino in another. We decided to go after the tiger first, but it proved to be one of the knowing ones and our drive was a blank. After luncheon we went in search of the rhino, which was reported to be lying in a swamp and was being watched by men posted in the surrounding trees.

After a ride on our pad elephants across country, we entered another jungle and were told to go very quietly as the rhino was located in a swamp near by. We got into our howdahs again and Lady Lytton came with me. Presently we reached the swamp

and a man in a tree signalled that the rhino was lying behind some high grass just in front of us. We advanced cautiously at the head of the line along the edge of the swamp and I held my rifle ready. It was desperately exciting. Suddenly there was a movement in the reeds just ahead of me and I could hear a heavy beast squelching in the mud, and as I thought, moving away, but I could still see nothing but moving grass. Another step forward and I was able to see over the top of the high grass into a small clearing.

I was confronted with a most astonishing sight. Instead of the dark retreating figure which I had expected, I saw a round pool of grey mud much trampled, and on the far side of it, standing still facing me—not more than about 30 yards away—a great grey monster caked with mud and looking like a white ghost! I raised my rifle and fired at the centre of its forehead between the eyes. The rhino fell forward with a heavy squelch into the mud. As he continued to kick, I feared he might be only stunned and would get up again, so I moved my elephant forward a couple of paces and fired again into the heavy wrinkled folds of his neck. Then "he heaved a last sigh and forever lay still."

Everyone crowded up and there was much questioning and congratulating. When I went up and examined the rhino, its hide was so tough that it looked like an armour-plated tank, and my two solid .450 bullets had only made tiny holes as if they had been drilled neatly by a gimlet. He seemed a very Goliath slain by the small stone of a David. His horn measured 13½ inches.

It was now 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and we decided to form a line and beat the jungle towards home in the hope of finding deer or other small game. For some time we saw nothing and began to think the jungle was devoid of game. Presently, however, we saw some deer just ahead and my elephant hurried forward in pursuit. We got buffeted about in our howdah like peas in a barrel and laughed much at the absurdity of it. Then we emerged from the thick forest into a clearing of low scrub, and we both cried out simultaneously at the beauty of the scene. Immediately in front of us was a stretch of rough grass with half a dozen cheetal—all does—strung out in a line, cantering across it; beyond that, rough low scrub and small trees, then a stretch of misty grey plain bounded by forest-clad hills, and beyond that again a line of high mountains, all dyed a deep rose-pink in the setting sun!

When we got into the thick scrub our line became broken and the elephants seemed to be all round us, some in front, some behind. Then the place suddenly became alive with game, and I kept changing my gun and rifle, picking out one kind of ammunition and putting in another. I saw deer, partridges, peacocks, jungle fowl, and heard shots all round me. I had just shot two peacocks and was loading again, when suddenly there was a great crash in the undergrowth and shouts of "Rhino!" The elephants snorted and stampeded, and I saw some great beast crashing about in front of me, first in one direction, then in another. I hastily exchanged my gun for a rifle and jammed two solid bullets into it, when a rhino broke cover on my right and charged back, giving me a clear view at about 40 yards. I fired point blank and hit the rhino somewhere in the head. It fell over into a ditch and lashed its head from side to side as it spun round. Then it managed to scramble out on the other side and made off through the scrub. I fired again, but it was like shooting from a boat in a rough sea. We turned back to follow it. Then a peacock flew over on my right. Picking up a gun, I was about to shoot, when it fell to a shot from Colonel O'Connor, who was with Hermione just beyond some trees. Then Davina arrived with Captain Harvey in a great state of excitement. A deer had run into their elephant, which had bolted; on their way back they had encountered a second rhino, which had been put up at the same time as mine, and Captain Harvey had wounded it! There was a babel of excited narrative as one experience after another was related. Mcn came back from pursuing the two wounded rhinos and reported that much blood had been tracked from both of them, but as it was now nearly dark they had had to give up the chase.

We had three more days after this, each of which provided some fresh excitement and a great deal of sport. Besides tigers we killed two bears, a leopard and plenty of smaller game. It was an unforgettable holiday, and we had aching hearts when it came to an end and we had to come down with a bump from our elephants to our marble floors again!

We had many other tiger shoots in Bengal, in Cooch-Bchar, Alwar, Jaipur and Kotah, but none of them quite equalled the excitement and interest of our two camps in Nepal.