Out in the Mid-day Sun

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CHAPTER 13

"Johnnie"

In the northern limits of the Province of Bihar lie the lands of the Bettiah Raj. Although these estates are not so extensive as those of the great princes, they are still large. The northern boundary slopes in a slanting line from northwest to southeast and for a distance of about two hundred miles touches the southern borders of the frontier of Nepal. Although cultivated lands and villages cover the southern part, the northwest corner is jungle similar to that of the Nepal Terai. The forest varies from deep shady glades of mature sal and sissoo trees, carpeted below with soft green ferns, to tracts of coarse terai grass thirty feet high, dense and impenetrable, unless a person chose to slide through on his stomach, following the tracks of the animals. A variety of big game lives and breeds in these forests and occasionally a rhinoceros lumbers across from Nepal. Out on the plains herds of black buck, the beautiful Indian antelope, graze.

Cash revenues alone, of the Bettiah Raj, were about $1,260,-000 a year. The Rajah died in the early part of this century, leaving no children. He had neither brothers nor uncles, and the Rani, his widow, was mentally unfit. Because there were no direct heirs, the estate came under the Court of Wards. Appointments to all posts of administration from that time onward

were made by the Provincial Government. The post of general manager was always held by a member of the Indian civil service, loaned for that purpose for three years. Under him were the assistant manager, legal adviser, estate engineer, several zemindari managers, forest officer, medical officer, veterinary surgeon and many other minor officials.

With the exception of the post of general manager, all of them were long-term appointments. A man retired when he reached the age of sixty.

The jungles were rich in timber, and produced good revenues, so the post of forest officer was an important one. The present incumbent had reached retiring age. Peter applied for the post and was selected. But he must first take a course in forestry at Dehra Dun, the central college of forestry and research.

When Peter had taken care of all his commitments, we were ready to go to Bettiah. Once again we packed. This time bullock carts were needed only to take us to the railway, seventy-five miles from our Sagrampur house. We were going to live at Bagaha, the terminus for a railroad which ran two trains a day.

We sent off the luggage, furniture, servants, and the dogs and cats. The two horses, Haddock and Pandora, went by road. We were always cluttered up with animals, neither of us having the strength of mind to get rid of the extra ones that had adopted us.

For the two months before his retirement, we were to live with the outgoing forest officer, Mr. Cameron. From him Peter was to gain a thorough knowledge of what is termed in forestry the Working Plan of the area. Since there were villages in the forests and cultivated land for six miles around the borders, the post also included that of zemindari manager.

From now on Peter was to be known as the Jungli Sahib.

"*Johnnie*"

The word jungle in India is always taken to mean a wild forest and a jungli is someone or something of the wild forest. Villagers, and even your own servants, seldom use your name, because to them it is often unpronounceable. They speak of you by the work you do. There is the Police Sahib, the Magistrate Sahib, the Capt-ah-n Sahib (army captain) and so on. A man's wife is the Police Sahib ke Mem-Sahib, or whatever the husband's work may be, with the word mem-sahib added.

I was now, in all brevity, the Jungli Mem-Sahib. But the word "jungli" has another meaning. Someone wild, or uncouth, is also described as a jungli. Because of this entertaining secondary meaning, our friends always applied our titles with gusto. I became a jungli mem-sahib and loved it.

The railway was the biggest customer for timber, and sleepers (crossties) for the track were sawed at the mill near our house. In 1934 it was the only sawmill in the country that was operated by a forest officer.

Upcountry your address is always that of the nearest post office. Our postal address was Bagaha, a village about five miles from our new home. The forest officer's house was the only thing near the railway terminus, so we enjoyed a railway station practically all to ourselves. Actually, it was misleading to say of anyone that he arrived at Bagaha. It depended on which one, the railway station, or the village five miles farther away.

Mr. Cameron had sent his auto to meet us at the station. It was late May and the hot weather was nearing its peak, but to us the heat seemed to burn less because at last we were going to a position with a future. As the driver turned a bend in the road, the house came into view. It could not have appeared worse. In front of us a dirty, depressing slab of brick and cement towered like a wedding cake pierced by windows and doors. Elderly plaster peeled off the outer walls. The house had

been red and white, but the red was now a dyspeptic pink and the white had flaked off, giving a leprous effect. Undergrowth and coarse grass were knee-high all round except for the space in front of the house.

Peter, after one look, said, "You'll never be able to do anything with that."

But I did not mind. Peter sometimes enjoyed an inverted form of pleasure from being gloomy. To me the peeling house was more than a building covered with streaks of dirty whitewash. It was a place where, for the first time, I could look ahead and say, "We will do this, and that, next year. We will plant trees and grow fruit and flowers. We will make green lawns and it will be Home." I had never once called any of the other places home. The word had always stuck in my throat, unspoken.

The car pulled up in front of the house, at the foot of a flight of steps leading to a verandah. The private road ended about thirty yards short of this. The auto had covered the remaining distance over coarse, stubby grass. Later we learned that Mr. Cameron did not care to have a drive right up to the house. He preferred grass. This was one of his several small peculiarities which we encountered.

Although we pulled up at the main frontage, this was obviously not the entrance in use. If we had been alone, we should not have known at which door to stop. An orderly conducted us on foot around a corner of the building. We stepped on to a side verandah stacked with crates, odd pieces of furniture, and moth-eaten trophies. The grass mat curtains which were to keep the heat out also kept out the light. In the gloom I nearly fell over an enormous rhinoceros head on the ground outside the door. We entered a corner room furnished as an office.

"Johnnie"

Johnnie Cameron at sixty was still a fine looking Scot. His light sandy hair was scarcely gray. His skin, though tanned and lined, had a healthy outdoor look about it. His gray-blue eyes were set under brows like a couple of crags. He showed us to our rooms with a take-it-or-leave-it look. We felt he resented us.

With misgivings I thought of our dogs and cats in the house of a complete stranger who might dislike animals. Happily there are always outhouses in the compounds somewhere, and our servants had been given strict orders to keep the three dogs leashed and the two cats in their traveling cages.

After settling in, we found Johnnie had three dogs of his own. Although this cheered me a little, we still kept ours tied and I apologized for bringing them. His eyes under their craggy brows ceased to glower, and he said he liked animals. He suggested that we let our dogs go free. He was not so sure about the cats. His dogs were not accustomed to cats. If we liked, we could chance it. Our three terriers were released and soon the whole pack was quite friendly.

The cats stayed in their traveling cages a few days longer, until the dogs became accustomed to each other. When the cats were let out, the black Persian immediately leaped onto Johnnie's knee and went to sleep. That cat always was an insolent creature. He liked bullock carts, probably as a result of spending so much of his short life traveling on one. If a cart was being loaded, he would stroll out and rub himself against the bullock's legs. He feared nothing and soon was among the dogs as if he had known them all his life.

Johnnie Cameron was very fit for a man of his years who had lived so long in the tropics. He played tennis and polo whenever his work permitted and it was possible to make the forty-two mile trip to our estate headquarters at Bettiah. He had built his

There was always the possibility of a bird or two for dinner, or of the odd leopard slipping through the forest. People laughed at me because I kept the shotgun loaded with lethal in the choke (left barrel), and with bird shot in the right barrel. I found that the most comfortable way to be prepared for anything.

As I passed a large banyan tree, I turned to admire the immense girth which had resulted from its hundreds of aerial roots finding contact with the soil. They now massed around the main bole of the tree like a miniature forest. It was well that tree had attracted my notice, for my head was turned in the right direction. Coiled among its knotted roots was a big snake. I saw the movement as it reared up, and shot it. I did not recognize the type, but the snake was so big that I tied it on the elephant and took it back to camp. It turned out to be a king cobra, and measured eleven feet ten inches. We cured the skin and later I took it to London to show to the Natural History Museum. They did not require the specimen, so on my return to Bagaha, we mounted it stretched on a backing of three-ply wood cut to the exact length and width. This trophy we set on the wall above the main staircase which led to the bedrooms. The immense king cobra sometimes had a startling effect on convivial guests, who approached it unexpectedly as they went unstairs to bed.

When there was a trip to Narshai, I took care not to be left behind. The unusual beauty of the place and the variety of transport attracted me. The heavily wooded island of about eleven square miles was intersected by many waterways that issued from Nepal. The wild life found all it wanted there in abundance, both of food and drink. On its western flank the island touched the boundary of the United Provinces. The boundary line had been demarcated down the middle of the

that can safely shoot the shallow rapids. The canoes are a real necessity in the semi-amphibious existence of a people whose staple diet is fish. At intervals Peter gave the little men a tree free of charge, with a paternal warning that the canoe made from it must be watertight, even if no other was. It would ostensibly be for the use of the forest officer and the rangers, but considerable fishing was done with it at other times.

Two passengers could be carried in one canoe and to "dress ship" they were obliged to sit back to back in the center. Baggage must travel separately, because a dugout when laden was only about six inches out of the water.

The little men waited for us to step into the canoes, and then pushed off with long poles. Once in deep water, the crew of one used a short paddle. Sometimes he slung his leg over the side as a rudder. In that part of the river, a series of shallow rapids flow over a broken stony bed. Even if its under part is scraped, the dugout comes to little harm because of its flat bottom. The rapids looked much worse than they really were, but Peter sometimes wickedly suggested to a nervous guest that before he shot over them it would be as well to part his hair in the middle. Once over the rapids, we were in the broad river again where the water ran clear as crystal. It would have been a lovely place for a swim, but we never got around to fencing off the crocodiles.

When we finally touched the opposite bank, we were on the island of Narshai, and could walk dead straight ahead for eleven miles if so we felt inclined, and were prepared to wade the streams and all the marshy ground. Along the sandy river bank and in the soft earth beyond there were always marks of recent jungle visitors. The prints of a big bird, with behind them a faint trail in the sand, meant that the peacocks had been out for a stroll trailing their trains behind them. Deer had come

recently to drink if their cleft prints were not yet dry. Wild boar, bear and leopard had frequently crossed in the night. There were no hyenas in our jungles, and I never saw one north of the Ganges.

I never lost the thrill of finding fresh pug marks of tiger. New marks would be sharp as a sculptor's mold, not roughened or smoothed. Sometimes they were so recent that tiny grains of sand were still falling from the edges. Then I knew the king was near.

Sometimes I found the big three-toed print of a rhinoceros that had strayed across from Nepal. It was forbidden to shoot a rhinoceros, and there was a fine for this of one thousand rupees, imposed to avoid extinction of these rare animals. The horn of rhinoceros is much in demand in Asia. From the borders of India to farthest China it is sold for immense sums. Rhinoceros horn is credited with magical properties. Indian princes once coveted them. To set one under the gadi (throne) is believed to assure security, since it is the symbol of fecundity. Today, in any Indian bazaar, powdered rhinoceros horn sells for a high price as an aphrodisiac.

The day's work over, we returned to the riverbank. The empty lunch basket was put in a dugout. Sometimes beside it would be peacock, or wild hare, or a delicate fleshed wild chicken for the pot. The little men would not be forgotten, and with a happy smile would tuck away some of our game for a feast that night. In the cool of evening we slipped downstream to a new camping ground. This was easier for the boatmen than to haul against the current fully loaded.

As darkness fell, myriads of insects set up their tiny orchestras. Male cicadas rubbed their wings chirruping harsh messages. In the jungles, males have it all their own way right down

to the insects. "Happy the cicada's life, because he has a silent wife."

There was no scenery in the jungles to compare with that picture slipping downstream, sometimes by the light of a monster moon. On either bank dense trees crowded to the water's edge, and a drowned forest was reflected in the river. Across from the shadows would come the belling note of a deer. Thin and clear came the cry of a night bird as it sailed overhead. Slowly I drifted down the river, with the wild life symphony swelling and falling around me, until I myself became merged in it and was one with the night.