

Chapter 5

THE FORESTS OF OUDH

*“God gave all men all earth to love,
But since all hearts are small,
Ordained for each one spot should prove
Beloved over all.”*

ALL lovers of the wild, no matter whether they be living in India or anywhere else, no matter whether they be rich or poor, young or old, have some favourite jungle or jheel, mountain or stream, moor or glen, which appeals to them more than any other place in the whole wide world, and to which they will return again and again, never failing to find happiness in their own chosen haunt. For myself, I must at least be able to see mountains, even if I am not actually among them, and no place, whatever its other attractions may be, can be quite perfect to my mind if the horizon be a monotonous straight line or if the ground be too flat. There is something inspiring about mountains, something which helps to lift one's thoughts to a higher level, something without which no scene seems to be quite complete; and for this reason the forests of Oudh just miss my ideal, for they are mostly on flat ground and the great snow mountains of Nepal, although not far away, are often invisible owing to the intervening haze. Yet on a clear morning after rain, when the unknown and uncharted peaks of Nepal and beyond stand out clear cut against the horizon, there can be few finer places on earth.

Let us take a glimpse at these forests. . . . It is the early morning, cool and crisp, and we are standing on the edge of one of the beautiful tal^s, as the lakes of Northern India are called, now fairly open, but covered with sacred pink lotus flowers later in the year. Behind us is a small area of cultivation belonging to a family of Tharus—aborigines of the jungle who are allowed to raise their crops in small clearings inside the government reserved forests. Few people could be happier than these simple honest jungle folk who want neither education nor riches, position nor power, but only rain in season for their crops, protection from the avaricious lawyer and money-lender, a little, or even a fair quantity of country liquor, ostensibly to keep away fever, a few simple medicines, tom-toms (drums) to bang all night, and numerous beads to hang round their necks. Truly at times I have envied the Tharu, envied him his simple home in the jungle, his contentment, his freedom from worry; I have thought how nice it would be to have been born a member of the tribe—until I have been kept awake all night after a long and tiring day by the barking of his dogs and the banging of his monotonous, never-ceasing drums! But perhaps if I were a Tharu I could sleep the sleep of the simple inhabitant of the wilds, despite the dogs, perhaps I could find music in the throbbing of a tom-tom if I knew no other.

In one corner near the tal stands, side by side, a pair of Sarus cranes, the largest birds of India, and a familiar and attractive feature of the landscape. These huge grey birds, with their long bright red legs and heads which look as if they were covered with close-fitting skull caps of ruby velvet ornamented with a few short tassels, are very devoted and close companions, that nearly always feed within a few yards of each other and keep very



A pair of Sarus Cranes—the Darby and Joan of the jungle

close together when flying, as though they could not bear to be parted even for a short time. Truly they are the Darbys and Joans of the avian world, setting a high standard of matrimonial bliss and forming an excellent example to those husbands and wives who are for ever bickering with each other. So obvious is their affection that the legend has arisen that if one of a pair is killed the other dies of a broken heart; and for this reason they are rarely molested by Indians, who do not wish to bring bad luck upon their own homes by injuring such creatures. Even the few tribes that will eat the flesh make a point of shooting the other, should they happen to shoot one, rather than leave the survivor to pine away in loneliness and sadness at the loss of its life-mate. And surely it is right that all who have any consideration for wild creatures should hesitate before lifting a weapon to destroy such interesting and beautiful birds, that harm nobody. Indeed Sarus cranes, which are known by naturalists under the name of *Megalornis antigone*, seem to be aware that the human race normally bears them little ill-will, for they are not very shy and will allow one to approach within thirty or forty yards before taking to wing with loud trumpet-like calls of protest at being disturbed—protests that are continued for some distance as the pair fly off in close company to some other feeding-ground. During the breeding season their mutual affection, at all times strong, reaches its climax, for so delighted do they become, both with each other and with life in general that they indulge in striking dances, spreading their wings and lowering their heads, and every now and then leaping into the air with a loud trumpet of glee.

But we are still standing on the edge of the lake, and, after watching the villagers and the cranes for some little time, we

turn our gaze to the front. Our eyes run over the placid waters, swarming with fish of numerous kinds, dotted with the many-shaped leaves of the water-loving plants, fringed with beautiful palm-like, grasses and reeds, teeming with water-fowl, among which we once saw several pink-headed ducks—perhaps the rarest of all the extensive sub-family *Anatinæ*. Our fascinated gaze passes on to the drier grass-land beyond, which, when burnt later in the year, will reveal the presence of large numbers of gond and hog-deer, now invisible, but probably watching closely to ascertain if our intentions be hostile or not; on to the great stretches of valuable sal forest which has covered these parts of Oudh for thousands of years, and which, properly managed, will continue to enrich the exchequers of whatever future Governments there may be in this changing land of Ind so long as sal timber remains an essential article to the inhabitants of the country; on once more to the dense and almost impenetrable foot-hill forests of Nepal, which successive wise rulers of that independent kingdom have carefully maintained as a natural barrier against the advance of any hostile army—a barrier which the invention of aircraft has rendered much less formidable than in the past; on again to the beautiful snow-capped mountains which always seem to beckon one on: to attract one's attention and imagination as surely as a magnet attracts steel. What more can we want to complete the perfect picture of India as she really is to those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to get away from the teeming cities, the depressing study of modern politics, the eternal fight with auditors, the red-tape rules of Government offices? What more can anyone to whom the lure of the jungle has any real meaning desire?

At one time these forests of Oudh must have been a veritable



An Oudh fox

paradise for wild animals, for even now, despite the efforts of the modern shikari who sometimes seems to see nothing unsportsman-like in shooting defenceless wild creatures day and night from a comfortable seat in a motor-car, they contain a great many representatives of the splendid, but alas, diminishing fauna of India. Rhinoceroses and elephants are no longer present except for very occasional stragglers from Nepal, although the former at least were at one time fairly numerous; the wild buffalo has entirely disappeared. Tigers and leopards are still common, although the former are largely immigrants from the over-stocked forests of Nepal, where there are many tigers and little for them to eat; sloth-bears are well represented, the dense patches of matted *retwa* grass forming ideal retreats where the bears hide themselves from the heat of the sun and from which they emerge after dusk on their nocturnal wanderings in search of well-stocked ant-hills. Hyenas—recently described to me by a certain aristocratic gentleman as being Nature's caricatures of Labour Members!—are legion, and perform silently and efficiently their job as general cleansers of the jungle. The deer tribe is very well represented by large numbers of sambar, generally with rather poor horns, as a result, possibly, of an excess of the fair sex; by great herds of the somewhat local and handsome swamp-deer which are found in the neighbourhood of most of the bigger tals; by considerable numbers of the beautiful cheetal; by numerous hog-deer, which appear to be satellites of the finer and more renowned gond; by kakar galore. Among antelopes and gazelles the incorrectly named nilgai is fairly common, and there are still a good many black-buck on the edges of the forest, although a twenty-inch head is a positive rarity; but the weird four-horned antelope is, as in most other places, inconspicuous and not often seen. Of

the smaller animals the ratel, falsely accused by people who do not know the animal of exhuming corpses, is abundant; the long-clawed, antediluvian-looking pangolin or scaly ant-eater is, as elsewhere, comparatively rare; the ferocious fishing-cat, a match for several dogs, is fairly common in the right places; and there are innumerable jungle-cats and civet-cats of the commoner species. Lastly there are, apart from other animals such as monkeys, porcupines, jackals and foxes, the curious hispid-hares, which have not been known to science for very many years and which are comparatively common in a few places.

One would have thought that this fine array of Nature's wild creatures would have been enough for one place, but it by no means exhausts the list. Crocodiles and gharials are common and there are a considerable number of pythons. And the birds! Wild duck of many species abound and there are occasional geese; jungle-fowl and black-partridges, pea-fowl and swamp-partridges, florican, quail, and snipe are all found in greater or lesser numbers; snow-white egrets—birds of a race so terribly persecuted by mankind for the sake of their plumes—black ibises, stately cranes, storks, and herons are to be found near every tal; many species of hornbills, woodpeckers and countless smaller but no less interesting feathered residents of jungle and jheel abound in this Nature's paradise, where the absence of the prefix "game" to animal or bird means a life of freedom and safety from man—the only hunter in the world who destroys other creatures for pleasure alone.

Let us now consider some of this fine array of animals in greater detail, and touch lightly upon a few points connected with their life-histories which have not already been discussed elsewhere in this book. Firstly there are the Oudh tigers. Owing partly to the keen hunting instincts of the Nepalese and partly to



Delightful Indian relatives of the English fox