

TIGERLAND

REMINISCENCES OF FORTY YEARS' SPORT
AND ADVENTURE IN BENGAL

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THE DANGERS OF "RHINO" SHOOTING

runs away, rather than on one that stops to fight, for in the latter case the occupant of the howdah is pretty sure to be thrown out—sooner or later—perhaps into the tiger's very jaws, or at any rate close enough to make his position an extremely perilous one.

But it is not only in combats with tigers and leopards that the element of danger is present when shooting off elephants, such encounters being equally perilous with the rhinoceros and buffalo—especially the former, for the Indian "rhino," as it is familiarly called, is truly a most formidable animal.

In weight and bulk, almost equal to an elephant, its short, stumpy legs give it a stability not possessed by the latter, and the shortness of its legs in no way interferes with its speed which, when charging, is tremendous; its charge is practically irresistible—cases, indeed, being known of elephants, caught broadside on, being knocked completely over.

The injuries, too, which it can inflict with its sharp-pointed, powerful horn, sometimes a foot in length, and its strong teeth, sharp at the edge as a razor, makes the animal a most dangerous foe. Hence it is little wonder that—with very rare exceptions—the stanchest elephants cannot be induced to face a "rhino," much less stand and await its charge. Under these circumstances, to shoot a charging "rhino" is no easy matter, and the sportsman who has been fortunate enough to bag one, under these conditions, has much to be thankful for.

In the huge, and practically impenetrable jungles of Eastern Bengal and Assam, where these animals are to be found, they can only be hunted on elephants, either by beating in the ordinary way should the jungle be negotiable, or by going after them quietly on a pad elephant, a more certain, though no less dangerous plan, as will be seen hereafter.

If the first-mentioned method be adopted, the animal must be beaten out of its lair to howdahs, posted at convenient places, and it may easily be conceived that a naturally slothful, but short-tempered beast like a "rhino" suddenly aroused, perhaps from its siesta, by an advancing crowd of elephants crashing through the jungle, with their

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mahouts yelling and shouting, would not be likely to take their intrusion in very good part.

Still, the natural instinct, common to all savage creatures, will probably prompt it, in the first instance, to seek safety in flight, and it may therefore try to escape, but only to find its retreat cut off by the howdahs posted in its line of flight, while the noisy beating line behind it still continues to advance.

Rendered desperate, therefore, by its perilous position and trusting to its weight and speed to clear the obstruction to its front, it rushes headlong at the nearest howdah with a velocity almost impossible to calculate, making it most difficult for the sportsman to stop it, which he could only hope to do by a bullet through the centre of the forehead or behind the shoulder.

To hit it in any other part of the body would be worse than useless, as the animal—so far only actuated by fear—might still, if unmolested, swerve and pass on, but if wounded in addition, would most assuredly attack the elephant and possibly overturn it, or if it bolted, pursue it with a persistency for which they are notorious, inflicting wounds, perhaps, which may eventually prove fatal. True a “rhino” thus charging has occasionally been dropped by a well-directed bullet, but taking all things into consideration the odds are much against such accurate shooting under the circumstances described.

Should the sportsman, however, select the other plan referred to, he must first obtain the services of a tracker who is thoroughly acquainted with the habits of this animal, and ascertain through him which of the many tunnel-like tracks, made by the “rhino” through the grass on their way to the feeding ground outside, is the most recent one. Having discovered this, he must then be on the ground a couple of hours before daylight, mounted on his staunchest elephant and armed with the largest-bore rifle he possesses, taking care to approach the place unseen and with as little noise as possible.

The elephant must then be carefully concealed within the high grass, just off the track so that the sportsman may command some twenty to thirty yards from the entrance and then wait patiently and, above all, noiselessly

"ACCURATE SHOOTING VERY NECESSARY"

till daybreak, when he may expect the animal's return, for it is a common fact that, unless in any way disturbed or alarmed, a "rhino" will invariably return to its lair within the forest by the path it made on last going out.

Hence, if the sportsman is successful in concealing his elephant completely and keeping it, and himself, quite still, he has every chance of obtaining an easy shot as the animal comes back, which it generally does at a walk or, at worst, a lumbering trot.

Great care, however, must be taken that no shot is fired until the beast is well in front of the position taken up, for this not only ensures a more certain and fatal shot but also considerably lessens the danger of the animal charging, which it most certainly would do should the shot be fired from any position in front of it and not prove immediately fatal.

If, however, in spite of all precautions taken, the animal, after receiving the shot, does not continue in the direction it was going, but stops or turns round, this may be taken as an indication that hostilities are about to commence and the sportsman must then prepare for a desperate encounter, for its marvellously keen sense of scent and hearing will soon enable the now infuriated beast to discover whence the shot was fired, and it will charge immediately in that direction. Meanwhile, the elephant, unlikely to await such an attack, will probably have turned and fled as soon as it had heard or seen its enemy approaching. The situation now will not be difficult to imagine: on the one hand, a large and powerful animal, maddened with pain and rage, thirsting to revenge itself upon its foe, while, on the other, the elephant, equally mad with fear, flying helter-skelter through the jungle, its riders liable at any moment to be brushed off the pad and hurled into the path of the pursuing beast or precipitated, together with their mount, into some yawning chasm, such as a dry river-bed or quicksand, of which there are many in such jungles.

Such then are some of the perils to which the Indian sportsman hunting dangerous game on elephants is liable, and to which must be added perils issuing from causes quite unconnected with the animal he is hunting, as for

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instance, any of the tusker elephants amongst the line of howdahs going suddenly mad or "must"—as this condition in a male elephant is called—which occasionally happens during a shoot.

Again, there is always the possible danger of an encounter with wild elephants or, worse still, a solitary bull or "rogue elephant," than which there is no more dangerous animal in nature's great menagerie—the forests of Bengal.

Driven out of a band by the other bulls for misconduct, it roams about alone, brooding over its expulsion and, if encountered in the jungle, will attack any male elephant there may be in the line or amongst the "howdahs," and being generally a powerful beast with tusks can do considerable damage before it is driven off or shot.

On the whole, therefore, the pursuit of big game in India would, as a matter of fact, be far safer on foot. Unfortunately the Indian jungles do not as a rule lend themselves to this form of sport, being generally too dense and high. It is true the "guns" are sometimes placed on trees or platforms, called "maichans," but the immobility of such a position is a serious drawback, as a wounded animal cannot then be followed up at once and thus is occasionally lost.

Hence, such a position, though practically quite safe, does not commend itself to true sportsmen, the majority of whom would prefer to encounter any of the possible risks described than run any chance of losing an animal they have wounded.

CHAPTER IV

PROMOTION—though generally only temporary—was very rapid in the new Police Service during the earlier years of its creation, owing to the fact that most of the senior officers were military men who had had no leave since the Mutiny broke out. Hence as the juniors gradually gained experience in their duties and became fit to take charge of districts, many superintendents took advantage of the leave which was now being freely granted.

Thus it came about that shortly after Major C—— had come back and resumed charge I was appointed to act as Superintendent of J——, a small district in the northern portion of the province, and ordered to join immediately as the permanent incumbent had been granted leave, and was waiting to be released.

The District was one I had often heard spoken of as the wildest and best shooting district in Lower Bengal—being off the beaten track and thinly populated, with miles of dense jungle extending along its northern border, said to be infested with every variety of big game, including elephants and rhinoceros.

I was naturally much pleased at my good fortune, for had I been given my choice of districts, I could not have selected one more to my taste; consequently within three days of receiving the order, I was on my way to join, and forty-eight hours later, was duly installed as acting-superintendent of the district, and thenceforth known to its inhabitants as the “Nya Cuptane Sahib,” or the “New Captain.”

But as this seemingly easy method of acquiring military rank may puzzle non-Anglo-Indians, I must arrest my narrative a moment to explain the curious process by which I obtained it. As already stated, when the constabulary was raised most of the superintendents

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we encountered, for as we penetrated deeper into the forest we found the trees not only larger but standing too close to each other to leave sufficient space for our elephants to pass, consequently we had to make long detours—often of several hundred yards—before we came upon a navigable passage and even then had to cut away the creepers to get through.

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To those who have never journeyed through the heart of an Indian forest it would be difficult to convey in ordinary language anything approaching an accurate idea of the situation or of the feelings of the traveller who has ventured to undertake the journey, when he finds himself suddenly cut off from the world and surrounded by a seemingly impenetrable wall of trees and undergrowth so dense as to conceal all but the higher branches of the latter.

But this is not all, for to these conditions must be added the gloomy, death-like silence which pervades all Indian jungles in the daytime, when even the beasts that prowl by night are hushed in tired sleep, and lastly, but no less awe-inspiring, an almost night-like darkness, for the sun, however brightly shining, can barely pierce the canopy of foliage overhead.

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Such, then, was the position we had been in for six long weary hours of arduous travel when we suddenly emerged into the light and found ourselves on the verge of a savanna extending for several hundred yards in front of us and to the distant line of trees where the forest recommenced.

The savannas, as they are termed, are usually below the level of the forest, hence during the rains resemble swampy, marsh land, producing a luxuriant growth of a reedy kind of grass often twelve to fifteen feet in height, and a favourite resort for the larger beasts of the forest, such as the rhinoceros, sambbur, and other kind of deer, which during the cold, dry season lie up there in the daytime probably because they find it warmer than in the heavier jungle.

In most of the large forests, there are usually two or

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three such savannas to be found at long intervals and varying in size, but the one now before us was exceptionally large, about three-quarters of a mile in breadth by possibly half as long again in length and, according to our knowledgeable old shikari, contained the highest and densest growth of any in that forest.

In these circumstances, added to the fact that our elephants had been having a very strenuous time, we decided to halt for an hour or so to rest them whilst their drivers and ourselves, not to waste this precious time, took this opportunity of making a midday meal, which, in the case of the former, consisted of parched rice and "goor," a species of dried molasses, made up into lumps.

We ate our respective luncheons seated on our elephants, the latter the while making a more substantial meal off the branches of some trees which they had discovered and seemed to find most appetising judging from the quantity they devoured, as wandering at will, they moved amongst the trees selecting those they preferred. But the Forest Officer, under whose orders we had placed ourselves while in his domains, soon had us on the move again, and rightly, for the sun had already passed the meridian, and it was necessary that we should reach a halting-place and prepare our night's encampment before it was absolutely dark.

The order of our march was now, however, changed from Indian file to line so as to cover as much of the grass jungle as we could in the hope of arousing some slumbering beast within its depths—the rogue elephant itself, perhaps, as was not unlikely—in which case a better chance of obtaining a shot at it was scarcely likely to be afforded us, though we realized that if only wounded we should be exposed to the full fury of its attack, for in the grass there were no trees or creepers to obstruct it and thus give us time to fire again before it charged home.

However, as the sole object of the expedition was the destruction of this beast, we were prepared to take all risks, so marshalling the elephants into line with one of us in the centre and one on either flank, we advanced slowly through the grass, every eye and ear on the alert to detect

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the slightest movement or catch the faintest sound of any animal in front.

But alas ! though perhaps fortunately for us, there were no signs of the rogue, nor till we were more than half-way through, of anything endowed with life, when suddenly up rose some monstrous beast almost under my feet ! A rhinoceros, we concluded, from its size and headlong flight, but could not be sure, for nothing smaller than an elephant was to be distinguished in that grass.

A minute or two later there was another disturbance of the grass, further to our front, a slow, sinuous kind of movement as of some animal moving stealthily away. At the same moment I heard the old "shikari" call out "bagh," then two shots fired in quick succession followed by a roar proving the old man to be right ; half threatening, half defiant and wholly terrifying in its volume and ferocity, there was no mistaking that awe-inspiring sound.

For it was in truth a tiger we had roused, and from its speaking to the shots we hoped that it was hit. Advancing the two flanks to form a semicircle, we pressed forward as rapidy as the jungle would permit, with a view to surrounding the beast, if wounded, and cutting it off from the forest beyond ; but, alas, we were again to be disappointed, for as we came upon the track it had made we could find no trace of blood on the grass.

We now learnt that it was the Forest Officer who had fired, but, as he admitted, merely at a venture, seeing the top of the grass shaking with the movement of the animal some twelve feet below, he had guessed at its position and fired on the chance of his shots taking effect, but, as might be expected, had evidently missed. However, we followed up the trail to where it entered the forest ; then, most reluctantly, abandoned the pursuit.

Resuming our original formation, we now proceeded on our way, and boring through the forest for some hours as before, finally reached a comparatively treeless little glade, where, as the light was now diminishing, we decided to halt for the night. The preparation of our camp we entrusted to Dhundhos, whom we knew from past experience to be an adept at this business, and he proved so again.

No sooner were the elephants unloaded and divested

CHAPTER XVII

INDIA might well be described as a land of continual surprises and excitement, for events do certainly seem to succeed each other there with marvellous rapidity, and sometimes with a suddenness more startling than agreeable. Still on the particular morning I am referring to, we had gone through so many exciting moments, chasing—and being chased by—a rhinoceros we had been hunting, that we scarcely expected—nor did we wish for—any further excitement that day.

Nevertheless on our return to camp about midday, we had hardly reached the tents when we were greeted with the startling information that of the two elephants sent to fetch “chárá,” or green food for the rest, one of them had blundered into a quicksand, and was stuck hard and fast. To add to the calamity, the elephant in question turned out to be the most valuable animal of the lot—a huge, tuskless male, belonging to the Forest Department, and worth about three thousand rupees.

The scene of the disaster was an open piece of marsh-land, surrounded by a belt of cane jungle, over two miles from the camp, and hearing that the other elephants, with their mahouts and grass-cutters, were all there, we hurried to the spot to render what aid we could.

We found the poor beast—already buried nearly up to its belly in the bog—trumpeting with terror and swaying from side to side in its frantic efforts to get free, but only to sink deeper with each attempt it made.

The mahouts had divested it of its heavy load of branches, some of which—with the instinct of self-preservation—it had evidently dragged under its feet—while the men had pushed others under its stomach—hoping they would prevent the animal sinking deeper.