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BENGAL DACOITS AND TIGERS

BY

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A MAHARAJAH'S ADVENTURES

A Maharajah of Bengal who became a noted sportsman shot his first tiger when he was quite a small boy. When about twelve years of age he went out on a shoot one cold weather on his estate. He was accompanied by some of his relatives, and they encamped in one of the forest bungalows. This bungalow was just an ordinary Assam house built on a *chang* or raised platform. It consisted of a large centre room with a bedroom on either side and a deep verandah in the front, where the servants slept at night. Under large trees, some little distance away, the elephants were chained, and not far off were stables for the horses.

The Maharajah shared his room with a friend, a lad about two years older than himself. One night between ten and eleven o'clock, when all were in bed and asleep after a tiring day and an early dinner, the near roaring of a tiger awakened the camp. In a twinkling the servants had transferred themselves and their bedding from the verandah into the centre room and securely bolted the door. Roar after roar sounded through the night, but the

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young Maharajah slept the healthful and deep sleep of tired childhood and the mighty voice of the lord of the jungle did not disturb him. His friend was awakened by the majestic sound and lay trembling with fear, envying his blissfully unconscious companion, until the nearness of the tiger broke down his self-control and, vigorously shaking his bed-fellow, he shouted in his ear: "Tiger, tiger!"

The young Maharajah awoke, yawned, stretched and listened. The roaring had ceased but under the bungalow they could hear the purring of a tiger as it rubbed itself against a post. The younger and fearless boy laughed with glee and assured his friend that there was no danger of the tiger getting into the bungalow, and that on the morrow they would be easily able to track and shoot it. Soon the sounds of purring and rubbing gave place to others, and the occupants of the bungalow realised that more than one tiger played beneath them. Next day in the jungle near the forest bungalow the party shot a couple of tigers, a tigress and her cubs.

In later years the Maharajah became famous for his shoots and many and varied were his adven-

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tures and experiences. One year he was in camp with a large party and they were out one afternoon after buffaloes. A fine bull was driven out of a patch of thick jungle and faced the guns with defiance in his eyes. He was a grand target and the Maharajah's finger ached to pull his trigger, but courtesy forbade him and he generously, as always, left the fine prize for his guests. But, one after another, each missed his shot and the noble bull charged past into thicker jungle. As the line of guns attempted to follow, one of them spied a leopard up on a tree looking thoroughly scared. This animal had evidently been disturbed by the commotion in the forest and had been so terrified that it had climbed into a tree for shelter ; and there, on a branch, poor "Spots" fell an easy prey to the sportsmen.

One of the strangest adventures that the Maharajah had was when, returning to camp one evening, he was informed that one of his largest and best elephants, "Kennedy", had got stuck in quicksand. In many parts of Assam there are quicksands and quagmires. This particular one chanced to be in a *nala* (stream). The elephant had refused to cross the partially dried-up stream.

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Instinct had warned him through the tip of his trunk that danger lurked there, but his *mahout* (driver), anxious to get into camp after a hard day and knowing that across this stream was a short cut, had forced him. They had advanced but a yard or two when the huge animal began to sink, and the more he struggled and strove to extricate himself the deeper he sank. The Maharajah hastened to the spot as soon as he heard of the catastrophe, for "Kennedy" was a fine and valuable elephant and a steady one for *shikar* (shooting). At the sound of his master's voice poor "Kennedy" looked towards the bank, and the Maharajah saw that great tears of anguish were rolling down the poor beast's face as he bellowed in an agony of fear. The Maharajah directed the men who had gathered around the scene to fell some saplings, which were conveyed to the *nala* by some smaller elephant and pushed into the quagmire towards "Kennedy". The poor entrapped animal seemed to understand that efforts were being made to rescue him, and he obeyed his driver's now soothing voice and held himself still. At last, the combined labours of men and brother-elephants provided a safe footing of submerged saplings and branches ; and "Kennedy" pulled himself out of the

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treacherous sand and was escorted back to the camp with great rejoicings.

Not long after this "Kennedy" distinguished himself in another way, but this time evoked the displeasure and not the pity of his good master. An engineer, named Ashton, had charge of the *feilkhana* (elephant stables) and had once severely punished "Kennedy". After the manner of his kind, the elephant bore the memory of the outrage in his heart and waited the opportunity to be revenged. One morning the camp was astir for a shoot. The guests stood ready outside their tents and the elephants were waiting to carry them into the forest. Suddenly "Kennedy" charged at Ashton, who stood a little apart from the group, and flinging him to the ground began to roll him under his feet. The Maharajah, with wonderful presence of mind, immediately ordered "Debraj", a larger and more powerful elephant than "Kennedy" and his rival in the *feilkhana*, to the rescue. "Debraj's" *mahout* ordered him to charge at "Kennedy", and, urged forward with voice and prong ; "Debraj" did so with a good will. When "Kennedy" saw his ancient enemy charging at him, he forgot his grudge against Ashton, and, considering that "he who

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fight and runs away lives to fight another day", he bolted, with his trunk in the air. Ashton was picked up from the dust very much shaken by his rolling and fright but, to the astonishment of every one, in no way injured.

During one of his shooting expeditions, the Maharajah and his companions decided one night that they would go out on foot at the very break of dawn and see the animal world in the jungle ; and they were well rewarded for their adventurous spirit. In a glade of the forest they had a magnificent sight of a large herd of bison peacefully grazing in the dewy grass. They could hear tigers and bears passing back through the jungles to their dens in the deeper forest, and as the men stood there admiring the grand heads of the bison a monstrous tiger passed along quite close to one of the party, the Maharajah's brother-in-law. On the bank of a river they came upon a nest of young pythons. The guests thought it was a curious mound ; but the Maharajah recognised the reared heads of the young snakes and told his friends what the heap was. When they came closer, they could see that the long slimy bodies were all twisted together ; and with an uncanny feeling, the sportsmen watched these

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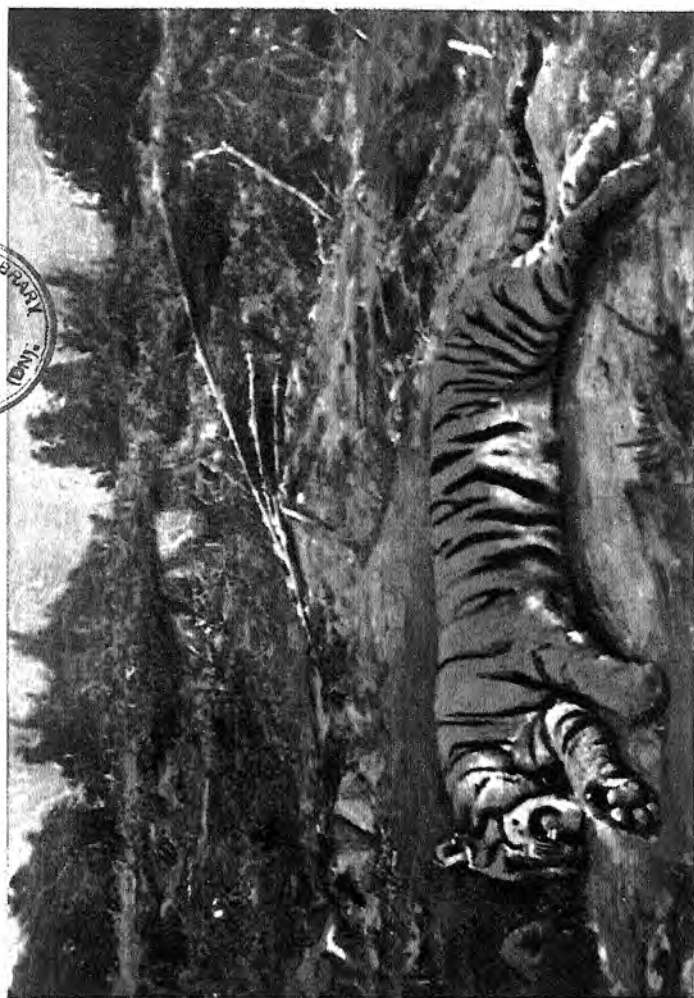
serpents uncoil themselves from each other and glide away and disappear through the grass.

Once, after a long and fruitless day in the jungles, the Maharajah decided he would try his luck stalking some deer that he spied on the opposite side of a narrow strip of jungle. He accordingly left his elephant and began to creep through the long dry bramble-choked grass with his rifle in his hand. As he pushed his way through the thick jungle he fancied he heard an animal breathing and then something crackled. Intent on the deer before him, he concluded that he had broken a twig or a branch with the end of his rifle and pushed on. As he emerged from the thicket on the opposite side from where he had entered, he came face to face with a group of shepherds. They stared at him in amazement and then, recognising him as their Maharajah, fell at his feet in rapturous joy. Accustomed as he was to demonstrations from his people, their abandon struck him as something unusual, and he was about to question them when they exclaimed: "*Hoozoor, Dharmabatar*, (Your Honor, Royal Master,) how did you come in safety through that jungle?" He smiled at their wonderment and was about to chide them gently when they

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continued : "An immense tiger has just slain one of our cows and dragged it into that very jungle from which Your Honor has emerged." The Maharajah now understood that the sound he had heard as he pushed his way through the jungle was the tiger enjoying a feed of his kill, and he felt thankful that he had not stumbled directly upon it. Like the keen sportsman he was, he signalled his elephant and, mounting it, secured the feasting tiger with an easy shot.

One cold season, the Viceroy was enjoying a shoot on the Maharajah's estates. One evening, as they were dressing for dinner, there came through the stillness of the restful air the "twitter" of a tiger. Do many of my readers know what the "twitter" of a tiger is? It is a sound the Monarch of the Jungle makes and it is just like the twitter of a bird ;—in fact, some declare it is only the twitter of a bird. Well, on this particular evening, the tiger must have been passing quite close to the camp, for his "twitter" was clear and unmistakable. The Maharajah, with his usual courtesy, immediately bethought himself of his guests, and invited Their Excellencies to come out into the open and listen to the novel sound. They did, and very



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pleased and proud they were when they heard the tiger's "twitter" clearly and distinctly through the gathering shade and stillness of the darkening night.

The shooting camps were invariably pitched on the bank of a river or stream. One evening, two of the servants crossed the shallow stream in front of the camp to enjoy some fishing. They found a suitable place behind a mound and here they sat quietly watching their lines. The afternoon hours passed swiftly and the sun was nearing the horizon when their attention was simultaneously drawn to a sound above their heads. Looking up, to their horror, they saw an immense tiger just above them. One of them shivered with terror and, clutching his companion, said in a hoarse whisper: "Our hour has come." The other whispered back: "Keep perfectly still and quiet." Breathless, the two watched the huge tiger descend the bank and pass majestically to the edge of the water where he stopped to quench his thirst. It seemed to the two trembling men that it took the Lord of the Jungle fully half an hour to drink his fill. Then, as slowly and impressively, the tiger turned from the stream and ascended the bank. When he reached the top

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he stood there, gazing before him either as if admiring the scenery or contemplating a meal off one of the men. The pair scarcely dared to breathe and wild schemes of taking to their heels to gain the centre of the stream and swim down the river shot through their brains. At last the tiger slowly turned away from the river and disappeared into the forest. Then, after some time, the frightened servants hurried across the stream back to camp, and told the Maharajah of their terrible experience. The footprints of the animal corroborated their story and their asseveration that they had seen a very very big tiger.

During one of the shoots, the *shikaris* (native sportsmen) brought news that a rhino had been seen in a certain jungle. The guests were much excited and a beat was organised for the next day. The morning dawned and all set out and were soon posted to their various positions. The front "stop" guns were on the bank of a river. The Maharajah was in the beating line. When about half way through the piece of jungle he noticed that one of his brother guns looked disappointed. He accordingly asked "What's up?" The guest answered that he thought that a large animal had broken back. However

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nothing was discovered and as it was mid-day a halt for lunch was considered desirable. A spot was soon selected and the signal given and the lines broke up. Just as the foremost elephants were about to kneel to permit their riders to dismount, there arose from the "stop" elephants a cry of "Tiger". In the jungle, quite close to one of the "stop" guns, a tiger was enjoying a feed of a wild pig ; and as the elephant turned to join the others, he almost trod on the tiger. In a moment the line was re-organised, but the surprised tiger, finding itself surrounded by foes, turned tail and ran down the bank of the river. The stream was nearly dry and the bed was very shingly, and as the startled tiger picked its way gingerly across the pebbles and pools of water it looked like a stranded cat. It had not progressed very far when a well-directed shot laid it low ; and with this unexpected prize the party sat down to lunch in excellent spirits. As rhino generally fight shy of elephants, they did not think there was much use continuing the beat after lunch. So they decided that they should make tracks for home and have general shooting. General shooting means that there is no beating line. A long

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straight line of march is formed, and each gun elephant is in between the pad or beating elephants. The Maharajah was almost the last gun in the line. Nearly all were out of the jungle when his keen and practised eye noticed a small pad elephant jib at something as they passed through a piece of jungle. "Did your elephant refuse to come through?" he questioned the *mahout* of the small elephant. "Yes, Maharajah, he smelt something in the jungle," the man replied. "Beat this piece of jungle", the Maharajah quickly ordered the pad elephants with him. They beat it and drove forth a rhino which fell dead to the Maharajah's gun. Before His Highness had time to take up his other rifle, a second galloped out of the jungle and charged straight at the Maharajah's elephant. The elephant spun round to avoid the furious onslaught and in the meantime the Maharajah managed to raise his gun and, getting in his shot in spite of the gyrations of the elephant, laid out rhino No. 2 in grand style to the applause of his companions.

Coming back to camp in the dusk one evening, the Maharajah, who had wonderful eyesight, thought he saw a tiger lying still in an open field.

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He raised his gun and whispered to his *mahout*. As they came nearer, the tiger—for tiger it was—raised itself to its feet and prepared to spring at the elephant. Too late! Snap went the Maharajah's trigger and the royal beast lay dead.

These are but a few of the shooting adventures of a sportsman-Maharajah who has gone on the long journey from life to the greater life beyond, but whose memory lives in the annals of Bengal as a keen and successful shot.



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