

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF AN  
INDIAN PRINCESS

By SUNITY DEVEE, MAHARANI OF  
COOCH BEHAR

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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## CHAPTER X

### HAPPY DAYS IN INDIA

My children led a simple life, and they look back upon it now with happy memories. They used to go out early in the morning for their walk, come back and have their baths, then their simple breakfast, then lessons, after which they dressed and went out for a drive. When they returned, they had a sing-song, supper, and bed. They were most cheerful children, and beautifully unselfish. I hope my readers won't think I say this because I am their mother, for one and all of my friends used to say, "What perfect manners these children have!" They were taught riding by an Australian, named Oakley, who was in charge of my husband's stables; he was very proud of their efforts.

Rajey was a beautiful boy, always a little reserved. He was very fond of horses, and was taught to drive when quite small. He learned high jumping and steeplechasing, and never minded the falls. He was so brave, and perhaps for that reason he was most admired. He thought a doctor could do so much good to poor people. Once he got a

Hermitage. When I went over to see the children, very often I would find Girlie and her brothers and some of the staff dressed up and ready to perform little plays and charades for my benefit. Girlie was quite clever at arranging these. She was musical, too, and the Maharajah used to say he sang best when Girlie played his accompaniments.

Sometimes we went to Simla; we had four houses there called Kennedy House, which was supposed to be the oldest house in Simla, and had been Government House. Kennedy House was situated on a ridge and had one of the finest views in the place. One of the houses, known as Rosebank, has been pulled down and the railway station now stands in its place. I do not know for what reason Lord Curzon, when Viceroy, insisted on my husband selling this property. It could not be because a Maharajah is not allowed to have property in Simla, as other Maharajahs have houses there. It will always be a problem to me and to others. This property was sold for so little money that it was almost given away. Also, when my husband was a minor, the Bengal Government bought from him the present Government House in Darjeeling, for a steam launch and a few thousand rupees. To this day we do not know why it was sold for so little money, especially considering the Maharajah was a minor.

My husband thought a great deal of the elephants, without which no Indian ruler's establishment is

complete. The Pilkhana at Cooch Behar is under the management of a State Superintendent, and in 1900 fifty-two elephants were installed there. I have known eighty to be used at a shoot. The huge animals are beautifully trained, and are so intelligent. The Maharajah always fed his own elephant with bananas and bread. The faithful animal knew his voice.

On days of rejoicing the elephants are much used, and their heads are painted in gay patterns. It is a strange sight to see them salute with their trunks. The Cooch Behar elephants are almost pets, if such a word can be used of such huge creatures, and we often used to give them fruit and rice when we met them in the palace grounds. We Indians think more of our elephants than of any other animal, and they have always played an important part in the pageants of our country.

My husband loved animals. I remember once how he tenderly comforted an unfortunate kitten whose plaintive cries could not at first be located. The Maharajah directed that the little animal was to be found, and after a long time it was discovered locked up in the high gallery round the dome of the Durbar Hall. When the frightened little thing was caught, it was half mad with terror. My husband took it into the billiard-room, and sat nursing it, until it quieted down and was able to lap the milk offered it. He kept the little animal until it was quite comforted, and then let it go.

mother, the first Maharani, must have died very young. "She was lucky, I envy her," said the Maharani. I was surprised at this. The Maharani went on, "How happy I would be if I could be like that, but there is no such luck for me—to leave the Maharajah, my husband, and to die a happy wife's death. Would I had such luck." Little did I then guess the sufferings of a widow. It was strange that this Maharani should die a few hours after her husband, and I was told they had the same funeral pyre.

Our shooting parties were the happiest, gayest affairs imaginable. We drove miles from the palace right into the jungle to the place where the shooting camp was pitched, usually on the bank of a river, and it used to be quite like a little town under canvas. We had dining- and drawing-room tents, a large number of tents for guests, and the State band sometimes came out to camp with us. Many guests came to our shooting camps in those happy years, among them Lord Frederick Hamilton, Colonel and Lady Florence Streatfeild, Colonel Frank and Lady Eva Dugdale, Colonel Lumsden, Colonel and Mrs. Baird, Colonel and the Hon. Mrs. Burn, Lady Hewitt, Lady Bayley, Lady Prinsep, the Duke of Sutherland and Lord Pembroke, Lord and Lady Minto, Lord and Lady Lansdowne, the Count of Turin, Lord and Lady Galloway, Sir Edward and Lady Sassoon, the present Lord Suffield, Lord Ilchester, Lord Hyde, Lord Jersey, Lord and Lady Lonsdale, Mr. Elphinstone, the Pelham Clintons,

the Derek Keppels, Prince and Princess Henry of Pless, the late Sir Henry Tichborne, and many others. All these friends invite me to parties when I am in London. Colonel Evan Gordon, who was our Superintendent for several years, used to get nougat and chocolate from Paris, and these we took in our howdahs and while we were waiting for the day's sport, enjoyed the sweets and read novels. I might just mention here that Mrs. Evan Gordon is a true friend of ours. She helped me much in my coming out in English society; her father, old Sir R. Garth, was the first man I went out for a drive with. Mrs. Gordon's sister, Mrs. Pemberton, sent my dear old nurse Mrs. Eldridge out from England, for which I shall ever be grateful to both sisters. Mrs. Gordon had built a little thatched-roof church, and every Sunday Colonel Gordon preached, and all my English staff, and the bandsman's family, which was a large one, joined. It was so nice; I like my staff to keep up their religion.

On one occasion when I was in camp and my husband was out with the shooters, it grew late and got quite dark, and I became very anxious, as there was no sign of the return of the Maharajah's elephants. It grew later and later—almost dinner time—and I asked the engineer who was in charge of the camp, Hari Mohum Chatterjee, to fire guns. After a short time came the welcome sound of their return. True enough they had lost their way; it was a pitch dark evening, and the poor mahouts did not know where they were going.

Those were happy times. We put the cares of State completely aside, and enjoyed every hour with light hearts. Everybody was full of fun and high spirits.

We were usually out eight or nine hours after big game and returned to camp about 6.30 p.m. Then came a refreshing hot bath, dressing for dinner, and a cheery meal partaken of by often no less than twenty shooters.

Later in the evening my husband talked to the "shikari," who told him where to look for big game. We settled the next day's programme, who was to go and with whom, and all was excitement. Outside was the lovely solemn Indian night; the sky of deep sapphire blue lit up with silver stars was like a canopy over our camp, and the soft winds lifted the tent openings as if curious to find out what it was we were seeking in the solitude of the jungle. These were nights of romance, and I always thought the music sounded more soothing than it did in our palace in the capital. In the camp everything was natural, and the best of every one seemed to come to the surface. We were a party of comrades in the truest sense of the word.

Sometimes, when all was still, we heard the tigers roar in the depths of the jungle. My husband's valet once saw a tiger coming down on the opposite side of the river to drink. He said it was a grand sight. The moon was at the full and the huge beast looked splendid as it stood by the swift river.

The tigers used to come so close to the camp in those days that once while the servants were washing the plates after dinner a big tiger passed by. I took my eldest girl when she was quite small to one of the camps, and about midnight we heard tigers roaring, it seemed as if they were just outside my tent. "Mummy," called Girlie, "I am so frightened, may I hold your finger?" and when she held it she was quite comforted; she thought her mother's weak finger was a protection from the tiger's roaring. I remember listening one night to tigers fighting, and very terrifying were the sounds. The roar of the tiger in his forest home is very different from his growl and snarl in captivity.

I was with my husband when I first saw a tiger shot. Just before we left the camp the Maharajah made me promise not to pull his arm nor touch his gun. I promised, but when I heard the tiger and saw our elephant moving his ears, my good resolutions fled, and I began to pull first my husband's arm and then his coat. Even now I can see his amused smile as he looked back at me.

The grass grows very high in the jungle, but it is burned down in patches, usually in February so that the young grass can grow. The jungle was always very fascinating to me; the trees covered with wild orchids, the sweet air, are lovely to look back upon; in those wilds we could read "the book of nature ever open."

We lunched at mid-day under the trees. One

day I got off my elephant to look at a little village. A crowd of the villagers had assembled, and one of them begged me, as the "Mother," to honour his cottage with the "dust of my feet." I complied at once, and as I was going in my host lifted the mantle from his shoulders and placed it on the ground, saying as he did so: "Will the 'Mother' stand on this?" When this ceremony was completed his family came to pay their respects. "My home is greatly honoured by the presence of Lakshmi," he said gravely. I was touched by this simple ceremony, and glad to find this village home so clean. There was a garden well stocked with fruit and vegetables. All was happiness and content, and as I looked at the clear flowing river and the background of forest, I felt as near Peace as I should ever be.

One evening I was returning to camp with a friend who had made a very unhappy marriage. He told me some of his troubles, and as the elephant made its way through the jungle we heard the thin, sad notes of a flute. The air was very still. Soon we saw the player, a shepherd, who was standing on a little hill, against the fading light. He looked so peaceful and happy.

As we listened and looked my friend sighed: "Oh, I'd give anything to be in his place."

One season Count Waldstein of Austria came out to see India and do a little shooting; we all liked him very much, he was a most charming boy. He did not seem very strong, but was very keen on shooting

tigers. He went out to camp, but came back with fever and the doctors ordered him up to Darjeeling, where the poor boy died. I have since met his mother; her affectionate heart has drawn me nearer to her than hundreds of the ladies I have met, and her love touched me. I prize her letters more than I can say.

Sir Benjamin Simpson, who was one of the guardians of the Maharajah, took many photographs of the shooting-parties at Cooch Behar. An English maid, after she left me, was staying in a house in Scotland and said she saw some of the pictures on the films, to her surprise. An Englishman has published a book about his shooting in India, and has put into it as illustrations many of the photographs of our shooting camps, calling them his own! The amusing part is that the Maharajah's guests, A.D.C.'s, and staff are in the groups, which the gentleman could not alter.

In our shoots tigers, rhinoceros, buffaloes, leopards, panthers, bears, bisons, boars, and deer of all kinds fell before the guns, and made a grand "bag" at the end of the day's sport. Once when I was out with my husband after rhinoceros, some wild orchids attracted my attention, and I cried out longingly, "Can't I have some of those orchids?" The Maharajah laughingly answered: "Rhino comes first, Sunity."

I must tell my readers an amusing story. A nobleman of high position often came to Cooch Behar

for shooting, and after one of his visits I received a large parcel from Japan containing some very expensive kimonos. I was delighted with them, and thought the parcel came from the earl and his wife, so I wrote to the lady and thanked them. In the meanwhile I got a letter from a friend of ours saying she had sent the kimonos. After some weeks the countess wrote saying she was so pleased I liked the kimonos her husband had chosen.

I am sure there can have been few sportsmen to equal my husband. He was a fine polo-player, good at tennis and rackets, and a wonderful shot; while riding, driving, wrestling, and dancing seemed to come naturally to him. His voice was sweet, and he looked his best in his national dress. I remember Lord Dufferin once remarking, when he saw him in full dress, "Maharajah, you do your country credit." My husband had a great desire to make Indian boys keen about sport, and started football for them at Cooch Behar. If he had a weakness, it was his kindness to others.

Although he was progressive in his ideas, the Maharajah never approved of our ladies coming out too freely. He disliked women who smoked and drank with men. He used to say: "India has not yet arrived at the stage when her women can mix freely with men." I have often heard him declare that unchecked Indian youth is far worse than that of any other country. If he saw a girl with rouged cheeks and reddened lips, he would say: "You must

never make yourselves look common by painting your faces. God gave women their good looks. Don't use Art."

This ruler, whom so many envied for his wealth and worldly state, was at heart the simplest soul. He was perfectly happy when we were alone in Cooch Behar. In the hills we often cooked together on Sundays in our special kitchen. My husband made vegetable curries, while I was busy with the sweets. My boys and girls also cooked. Sundays were eagerly looked forward to by all of us.

After dinner we had music and played cards. Had any one dropped in then they would have found our house was not that of a Royal Monarch, but of a happy father and husband surrounded by his loving wife and children.