

*Forrest
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THE

HIGHLANDS OF CENTRAL INDIA:

NOTES ON THEIR FORESTS AND WILD TRIBES,
NATURAL HISTORY, AND SPORTS.

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WITH MAP AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

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Excerpts from the book

CLOSE

We were amply rewarded, however, for the climb by the magnificent prospect that awaited us when we gained the summit the finest by far in all this range of hills. The further slope of Dhupgarh was not nearly so precipitous as that we had come up, but fell, by steps as it were, to the bottom of a deep and extensive glen, which was the one we were about to beat. Beyond this again rose the mural cliff that buttresses the whole of this block to the south ; and far past this, to the left, stretched out below us the wilderness of forest-clad hills, that reaches with scarcely a break to the Tapti river a distance, as the crow flies, of sixty or seventy miles. All this immense waste is the chosen home of the bison ; and beyond it, on either side of the Tapti, on the elevated Chikalda range, and in the wild hills of Kalibhit, lies another tract of equally wide extent, where, too, the mountain bull roams, as yet scarcely troubled with the presence of man or cattle. This is the region of the Teak tree par excellence in this central range of mountains, to which I will have the pleasure of conducting the reader in a future chapter.

Terrible tales are told of the relentless ferocity of the bison by the class of writers who aim rather at sensational description than at sober truth. I have myself always found them to be extremely timid, and have never been charged by a bison, though frequently in a position where any animal at all ferocious would certainly have done so. In all my experience I have only heard of one or two cases of charging which I consider fully authentic, and in all these cases the animal had previously been attacked and wounded.

I followed the wounded bison bull for about a mile from where he was last seen ; but he was moving fast, and the blood had ceased to drop. He would never stop, the people said, till he got to a stronghold of the bison of these hills, about five miles off, a hill called the Buri-Ma (Old Mother) ; and so I reluctantly gave up the

pursuit. When I returned all the beaters were assembled ; and a

Excerpts from the book

CLOSE

scanty strip of cloth round the middle, there was no difficulty in detecting the points that mark the aborigine. They were all of low stature, the Korkus perhaps averaging an inch or two higher than the Gonds, who seldom exceed five feet two inches ; the colour generally a very dark brown, almost black in many individuals, though never reaching the sooty blackness of the negro- Among the Gonds a lighter-brown tint was not uncommon. In features both races are almost identical, the face being flat, forehead low, nose flat on the bridge, with open protuberant nostrils ; lips heavy and large, but the jaw usually well formed and not prominent like that of the negro ; the hair on the face generally very scanty, but made up for by a bushy shock of straight black hair. In form they are generally well made, muscular about the shoulders and thighs, with lean sinewy forearm and lower leg. The expression of face is rather stolid, though good humoured. Some of the younger men might almost be called handsome after their pattern ; but the elders have generally a coarse weather-beaten aspect which is not attractive. All the men present carried the little axe, without which they never stir into the forest, and many had spears besides. During the beat they had killed a good many peafowl and hares, and one little deer, by throwing their axes at them, in which they are very expert. The Korkus, I found, were prevented by prejudice acquired from the Hindus from eating the flesh of the slain bison ; so the Gonds from Almod, and a number of a tribe called Bharyas, who had come from the Motur hills, had him all to them- selves, while the Korkus set to work on the sambar with their sharp little axes, which are all that is wanted for skinning and cutting up the carcass of the largest animal. My servant secured the tongues and marrow-bones, and a steak out of the undercut of the bison all delicacies of the first water for the table of the forest sportsman ; and the remainder of the flesh

was given up to the hungry multitude. As night fell, they lit fires where the bison had fallen, and near the village where they had brought the deer; and for hours after continued carrying about gobbets of the raw meat, which they hung up on the surrounding trees, broiling and swallowing the titbits during leisure moments. This was only the preliminary to the great feast, however the dozen of oysters to whet the appetite for turtle and venison. Soon the trees were fully decorated with bloody festoons, and the savages set to work in earnest to gorge themselves with the half-cooked meat. The

Excerpts from the book

CLOSE

endless, and I sat outside my little tent for hours looking on in wonder at the bloody orgie. The bonfires they had lighted threw a ruddy glow over the open glade, and on the crimson junks of flesh hanging on the trees, bringing the dusky forms of the revellers into every variety of picturesque relief, and forming a wild and Rembrandt-like picture which I shall not soon forget. Till a late hour many new arrivals continued to add to their numbers, winding down the steep path that leads over the Rorighat, with lighted torches and loud shouts to show the way and scare wild beasts. All were welcome to a raw steak and a pull at the pot of Mhowa spirit that stood beside every group. Ere long they began to sing, and then to dance to a shrill music piped from half-a-dozen bamboo flutes. The scene was getting uproarious as I turned in ; and my slumber was broken through the greater part of the night by the noise and the glare of the great fires through the thin canvas of my tent.

Thus hill after hill, and ravine after ravine, are put between one and home in the excitement of the chase, till suddenly you pull up and realize what an immense distance you have come, and that you cannot possibly get back before the middle of the night. If you have anything to eat, the best course under such circumstances is to sleep where you are. I often used to bivouac thus when out after

bison ; and seldom found it much of a hardship. A good fire can always be lit in a few minutes, dry wood being never far off in an Indian jungle. An elevated place, at the same time sheltered from the wind, should be chosen for the purpose, as the valleys are more malarious at night. A shelter of boughs should always be knocked up, which your wild men will do handsomely in five minutes. I learned more of the simple nature of the forest people during the few hours' chat by the fire on these occasions than I believe I would have done otherwise in as many years. I think they got attached to me a good deal ; and, though they are not very demonstrative at any time, I was often touched by some simple act of thoughtfulness one would hardly have expected from their untutored natures.

Hares are very numerous. The Korkus have a curious way of killing them at night. I discovered it by observing a strange will-o'-the-wisp-like light flitting about the edges of the little eminences

Excerpts from the book

CLOSE

from the fore end of which is slung an earthen pan full of blazing faggots of the torch-wood tree,;]: arranged so as to throw the light ahead. The pan is made out of one of their ordinary earthen water-vessels, by knocking out the side. It is balanced at the other end by a basket of faggots. Another man carries a long iron rod, with a number of sliding rings, that jingle as he walks. Three or four lusty fellows follow, carrying bamboos fifteen or twenty feet in length ; and the party proceed to move about the edge of the thickets, where unsuspecting hares come out to feed after nightfall. As soon as one appears in the streak of bright light thrown across the ground by the fire-pan, the whole party rush towards her, jingling frantically at the bells, and keeping her terror-stricken form in the circle of light. Poor puss seldom attempts to escape, but sits stupefied by the glare and noise, till a bamboo brought down on her back ends her existence. A party generally gets five or six hares in this way in a few

hours. They sometimes come across small deer, and kill them in the same way ; and I have heard stories of panthers and even tigers being met with, and turning the tables on the fire-hunters in an unexpected fashion. I once took a gun out with one of these parties ; but found that it spoiled the whole affair, all the hares in the neighbourhood retreating to the cover at the first shot.

For the next few weeks my spare time, was pleasantly passed in exploring the neighbourhood of the hills and their productions. I visited the Sal forest in the Delakari valley, to the east of Puchmuree. It was one of the few forests in this part of the country which had till then escaped destruction at the hands of the timber-speculator or the dhya- cutting aborigine, being inaccessible to the former from want of roads, and unsuited from its level character and the size of the trees to the operations of the latter. It, however, affords an example of one of the great difficulties of growing large timber in the dry upland regions of Central India. Though the trees bore every appearance of being fully mature, their size was by no means first rate, the largest averaging no more than six or eight feet in girth, while most of them when subsequently cut down were found to be almost useless from heart-shake and dry rot. At this time there was a great outcry for sleepers to lay the Great Indian Peninsular Railway line ; and it was important to secure so

Excerpts from the book

CLOSE

the Thakur of Puchmuree and another Chief, and I soon after concluded a lease of it for Government with them, and laid out a road connecting it with the open country. The view looking upwards to the Puchmuree heights from the Denwa" valley, or across from the opposite Motur hills, is exceedingly fine, the rich reds of the sandstone scarp mellowing into an indescribable variety of delicate shades of purple and violet in the evening sun, while broad belts of shadow thrown across the green slopes at the foot, and gathering in

the recesses of the ravines, seem to project the glowing summits of the rocks to an unnatural height in the soft orange-tinted sky. Here I ascertained the existence of the Bara-Singha, or twelve-tined deer (*Rucervus Duvaucellii*), an animal which, like the Sal forest in which it lives, had been supposed not to extend to the west of the Sal belt in the Mandla district. I was not so fortunate as to shoot a stag myself in this place ; but I shot two does, and saw a frontlet of the male in the possession of a native shikari, with the unmistakable antlers attached. Since then, too, I have heard of a fine stag being shot there by a railway Engineer. I believe they are not very numerous here ; indeed, the Sal forest, to which I believe their range is confined, covers an area of only a few square miles. I also found that the red jungle-fowl of North-eastern India (*G. ferrugineus*) inhabits this Sal forest and the hills around it, although, so far as I am aware, it is not found anywhere else in these hills further west than the great Sal belt of Mandla. The other species of jungle-fowl, which properly belongs to Western and Southern India (*G. Sonneratii*), is also to be met with on the Puchmuree hills ; and I have shot both species in the same day in the ravine where the Mahadeo Cave is situated. The red fowl could hardly be distinguished from many a specimen of the domesticated race either in appearance or voice, while the grey fowl does not crow like a cock, and is, I think, a much handsomer bird than the red. His peculiar hackles, each feather tipped as with a drop of yellow sealing-wax, are much valued for fly-dressing. Jungle-fowl shooting with spaniels in these hills is capital fun. The cover they frequent is very thick, and they take a good hustling before they fly up and perch on the trees. When you approach they generally fly off, and are very clever at putting a thick cover between themselves and the gun, making the shooting by no means so easy as it looks,

Excerpts from the book

CLOSE

that either of them crosses with the domestic fowl of these hills. I have already remarked on the singularity of thus finding a patch of the forest peculiar to eastern India, together with its most characteristic mammals and birds, isolated among the vegetation and fauna of the west, at a distance of about one hundred and thirty miles from the nearest point of the main forest to which they belong.