

# PULL DEVIL, PULL BAKER

THE STORY OF A CROCODILE HUNT

By LIONEL C. SMITH

FOR some days I had been hunting the Hooghly for a good specimen of the Indian crocodile, and though I had knocked over a couple that seemed a good size I found them both, on measurement, to be less than eighteen feet. As I wanted a really fine example for a large European museum I rejected both these unlucky fellows, and changed my ground.

The natives had told me of an old bull crocodile that had made a name for himself by his pranks in the mating season, roaring and fighting, and ruling the roost with a vengeance. He was a giant, they said, could seize the biggest animals that ventured down to drink at his haunts, and had even been known to attach small boats. He had long ago left the banks of the Hooghly and located himself in one of its many branches. My informants were so precise as to the locality, and so full of the beast's unusual size, that I determined to at least have a look for him.

A pair-oar with one man (Bishtu), my Remington, and a couple of coils of rope to tow the spoil, made my outfit; and after breakfast one morning, we dropped down the river, and soon came to the mouth of the branch, where my game was said to be. His favourite haunt was a small sandy bay on the left bank, where a backing eddy ran; and on each end of the crescent grew a knot of peepul or Indian fig-trees, which rose higher than the surrounding jungle, and made with their dark foliage two pillars that clearly marked the spot. Between these two green pillars was his favourite basking-place; Bishtu said he knew the spot well, though he had never seen King Crocodile himself. Keeping an eye for our landmarks, and scanning the banks on either hand, we ran down with the current, but a full hour passed, and no tall trees had we seen. I had begun to think my bay and big crocodile were all a fairy tale when my man, looking over his shoulder, sighted the signals. There they were sure enough, round a bend in the river, and about a quarter of a mile ahead. Both of us lay down in the boat, and with the tiller in my hand I guided her so that we should pass the cove at a distance of about eighty or a hundred yards out. Slowly we covered the distance, and every yard of sand and every stretch of grass near the water did I carefully search; but there was no sign of the giant, nor indeed of any other of his kind. "Crocodile asleep," grunted my man; "come out soon." On the hope that the brute might appear later I let the boat continue her silent way for half a mile past the bay; then drawing into the opposite bank we hitched her to an overhanging bough and I sought solace from my pipe.

After a couple of hours spent in our shady retreat, we pushed out, and began to make our way up stream as quietly as possible, my man using his oars with great skill. Just before we sighted the cove we both heard a splash, and a slow expectant smile broadened on Bishtu's face; his oars slipped in and out of the water as noiselessly as wings in air. Another fifty yards of silent creeping opened the bay, and there, sure enough, about two-thirds out of the water, lay a huge fellow, whose size fired my ambition; he was a big one and no mistake. Silently we backed to the far bank and took stock. The beast lay with his tail in the stream, and by its frequent motion showed that he was quite alert, perhaps hungry. To attempt to approach him from behind in the hope of an effective shoulder-shot was very risky; at the slightest alarm he might back into the water. I determined, therefore, to land some distance below him, and stalk him up the bank—not the safest of ventures by any means, for the dense jungle was rich in tigers, and the marshy banks teemed with snakes. We dropped down till out of sight, then crossed over, and I landed about a couple of hundred yards below the bay. With wary steps I drew up-stream, an occasional splash telling me my game was still there. When I got close up I found that the jungle-grass so completely hid the cove that even from my full height I could not see its sandy banks. Looking round for a handy tree, I soon drew myself to a level where I could command the beast's position. Great was my disappointment to find that he had drawn back into the water, and now only his huge head and shoulders were uncovered. But what a huge brute it was! Never had I seen so fine a specimen; he was worth any amount of trouble, and if only he would come out and

offer me a fair shot I would send home to England such a crocodile as had very rarely, if ever, been seen. But even as I measured and measured again the length of his ugly snout I distinctly saw his nostrils unclose, and a suspicious sniff told him apparently of my proximity. Slowly the great jaws sank out of sight, and only the water now shone where he had been; then a slight ripple, and a line of air bubbles led away to an overhanging mass of bush under which they continued to rise and break on the surface. He had scented me, and was gone; but there was an hour of daylight still, and I would wait, or I would come back and wait for him next day.

I was just preparing to change my position for an easier one when a startling thing happened. There was the slightest possible rustle of the fringe of grass, and a huge tiger stepped out on the sand, and crouched with his nose to the water. He was a splendid animal, a male of unusual size, and in fine condition. His tawny coat and black stripes were in striking contrast, and his tail rings were very finely marked. He had passed within thirty yards of me, but luckily the wind was down stream, and he had not nosed me. In a moment I had trained my rifle on him, but on second thoughts I determined to wait events.

He was thirsty and lapped from the stream with every sign of enjoyment. His tail lay spread out on the slope, his front paws under him formed a rest for his jaws that he lowered again and again to the water. No suspicions of my presence disturbed him, and soft purring sounds told how completely he was at his ease, and unsuspecting of any danger by water or land.

Meanwhile, what was the crocodile doing? That he was moving the frequent bubbles showed me, and soon I could see that he was moving across the mouth of the cove; at its extreme end he paused, and after a minute or so turned inwards towards the recumbent tiger. Surely he was not going to attack such a tremendous enemy. For a few yards the rising bubbles would move forwards, then cease to rise, move forward again, and again cease; and each time that cunning reptile crept nearer and nearer to his prey. I had been following his movements with the keenest attention, but now a low suspicious growl drew my eyes to the threatened tiger. There was a significant change in his pose; his barred tail commenced to sweep the sand, his short mane was bristling, his head raised. Evidently he scented an enemy; but whether it was the reptile in the water or the man in the tree, was not certain.

Again the bubbles rose. The crocodile had drawn nearer till his head had passed within a couple of yards of the tiger. Why had he not seized him? Had he thought better of it, and sheered off? Not he! For a moment he lay still; then the surface of the water was violently broken, and the powerful tail struck the tiger a tremendous blow on the head and shoulders. With a roar that shook the woods, the tiger threw up its head; but before he could leap back two great gaping jaws were thrust above the water, and clashed together where the tiger's nose had been a moment before. The crocodile had missed his aim, but his great teeth closed upon the tiger's left cheek, and on the tough hide of his neck and held him as in a vice. Then followed a terrible struggle, the crocodile trying to drag the tiger into the river, and the tiger, with his claws thrust deep into the sandy bank, resisting with all his might. With all his weight, and with forward sweeps of his powerful tail, the crocodile dragged at the agonised brute, whose roars of rage and pain were terrible to hear. My nerves quivered and my rifle shook in my hand, though my experiences with big game had not been devoid of thrilling moments; but the battle was so near and terrific.

The unequal struggle had moved me, and I found myself eagerly watching to give aid; but a shot to be effective must be planted behind the shoulder, and that was under water. I could only bide my time and watch the tug-of-war. Sometimes one beast, sometimes the other, flagged in his efforts. Slowly, inch by inch, the tiger was dragged from his haunches; then realising his danger, a herculean effort would throw him back to his former position. Then the crocodile would drag and tear and sweep his great tail, and the unlucky victim, torn and mutilated, would growl his agony with terri-

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