

Two Easily Gained Reputations

A STORY OF BRITISH LIFE IN INDIA

By DEKOW

WHETHER I deserved the reputation I gained during a three months' leave, I shall allow the readers of the following lines to judge. About fifteen years ago, as a subaltern in India, I obtained three months' leave with the object of spending it in Kashmere shooting Big Game. I took great pains with my kit and having purchased two excellent rifles, one grilling afternoon saw me leave my station in the plains for Goulmerg, then the centre of attraction in Kashmere, where I intended to stay for a day or two in order to procure a good shikari* and to look up one or two friends who had offered to give me the benefit of their experiences.

Before I proceed any further I should state that not being a red hot favourite with my colonel I had experienced no little difficulty in obtaining my leave, in fact it was only when I mentioned that I intended shooting Big Game that he condescended to forward my leave application to the General, and then only to save a reputation of which he was immensely proud and which he had gained for himself by constant repetition of it, that he had never refused an application for leave for the purposes of sport.

Well, it turned out in my case that the spirit was quite willing but the flesh was deplorably weak, for when, after two sweltering days spent in the train, and a jolting, livershaking one spent in trying to retain my seat in a Tonga,† I arrived at Murree and saw the comfortable quarters that had been prepared for me at Powell's hotel I decided to defer the continuation of my journey to Goulmerg for a few days and to enjoy the comforts of Murree. The days passed quickly and lengthened into weeks, there was plenty of gaiety, picnics, tennis, racquets, balls and charming partners induced me to forget entirely my previously planned Big Game expedition and I was having a right royal time. However, there came a morning after an unusually late night when I had almost proposed to three different women, and was only prevented from doing so owing to the uncertainty in my own mind as to which I preferred, that my conscience pricked me as I was taking my early morning tea in bed, and finding I had only three weeks of my leave unexpired. I decided on at once continuing my journey to Kashmere. Of the chances of getting any shooting in so short a time I knew I had none, and my only object in leaving Murree was to be able to say when I rejoined my regiment in the plains, that I had been to Kashmere.

For weeks my ponies, which I had sent on ahead for the purpose of using them on the road, had been waiting for me somewhere on the Kashmere road and eating their heads off. Hastily springing out of bed I reduced my kit to only the bare necessities I should require for a fortnight, and telling my bearer of my intentions, ordered him to proceed to the Tonga station with my things (as I had to do the first part of the journey in this conveyance), with a note requesting that I might immediately have a Tonga placed at my disposal, and hurried off myself to have breakfast and to arrange for the remainder of my kit to be cared for until my return.

Within a couple of hours of my decision I was bowling along in the miserable, jolting, bone shaking, two wheeled contrivance to the accompaniment of jingling bells which hung at the horses' heads and a cracked bugle which the Syce‡ insisted on blowing incessantly with annoying zeal and energy. After proceeding in this manner for some hours, during which I had wondered

considerably what wicked angel had influenced my conscience to so great an extent as to cause me to leave my comfortable quarters and all my charming partners at tennis and balls in order to endure such untold discomforts, and after I had more than once vowed that never again when applying for leave would I specify either my object or my destination, I arrived at a Dak-bungalow, where I was to sleep the night and where my ponies were waiting for me. With a great joy I dragged my aching self from that conveyance and with a still greater joy I was soon splashing in a hot tub which my excellent bearer had immediately procured for me, having purloined a kettle of hot water from the bearer of another Sahib** whilst his back was turned, however, that was no concern of mine, and as my bearer was a Pathan who stood over six feet I felt sure that I should not be annoyed by any considerable wrangling in the compound when the matter of his annexing the hot water was discovered.

After having had a fair dinner I retired early and did not wake the next morning till the bearer informed me that my ponies were ready. Hastily dressing and disposing of breakfast I watched my kit packed onto a pony, and, mounting another, my little caravan commenced its march, a march which was going to gain for me, without any undue zeal or any evil intention on my part, a reputation as a Shikari with many, and as a Poacher with one disappointed individual.

On the evening of the seventh day of my march I passed a native on the road who got into conversation with my bearer which resulted in the pair of them running after me to inform me that within a few hundred yards of me there was a very large stag with enormous antlers and that I could, without any difficulty, approach close enough to get a shot at once; now I knew very well that it was the custom in Kashmere then for a sportsman who had arrived early in the season and taken possession of a valley to consider it exclusively his own for shooting purposes, so long as he remained there, so I was most careful to enquire whether there was not a Sahib encamped in the valley already, but my informant was positive that there was not. He said that he lived in it and for weeks had not heard a shot fired or seen a Sahib, so, dismounting, I put together my rifle and, slipping half a dozen cartridges into my pocket, told my bearer to remain where he was with the ponies and followed my self-appointed guide.

After we had been walking about three quarters of an hour my guide made signs for me to proceed cautiously and together we crawled to the top of a ridge, the guide being slightly in advance. On reaching the top, and before looking over it, we paused just for an instant to recover breath, after which the guide cautiously raised his head and looked over, immediately beckoning me to approach. Very carefully I crept up to him and, on looking over the ridge, I beheld a sight which positively rivetted my eyes to it, for there, not two hundred yards below me, was a magnificent stag carrying what I felt sure would turn out to be a pair of record antlers. He was grazing unconcernedly whilst I inserted a cartridge into my rifle, took careful aim and fired. With a bound he swung round and fell dead almost on the same spot on which he had stood. As darkness was coming on, I told my guide to run back and fetch my bearer and ponies, having decided to spend the night there. Before I went to sleep that night I had decapitated and skinned my stag and also had decided that as I had secured so magnificent a trophy I would proceed no further into

* Native Hunter.

† A two-wheeled, springless cart, drawn by horses at a gallop.

‡ Groom.

§ Rest House.

** English Gentleman.