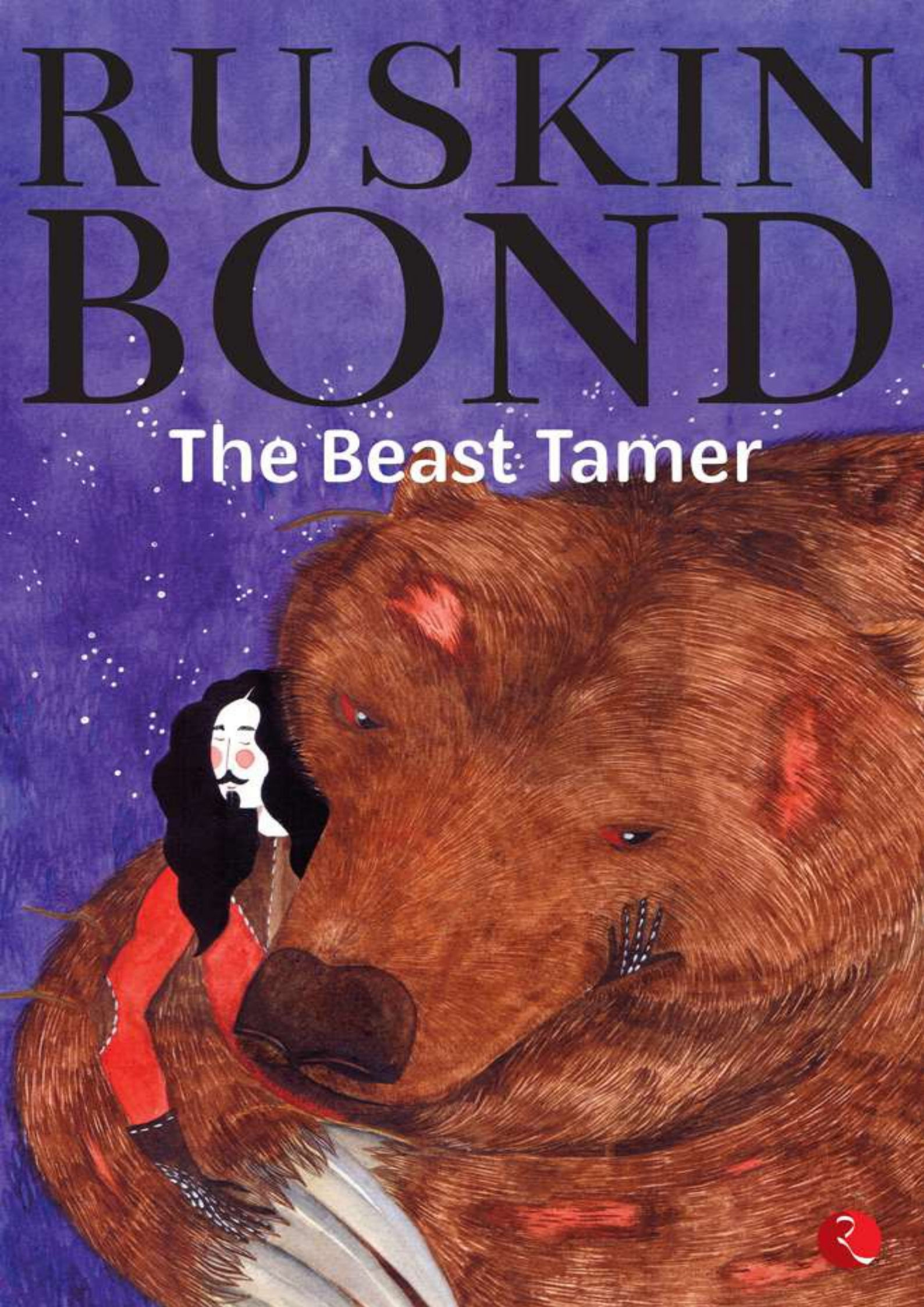
RUSKIN BOND

The Beast Tamer



The Beast Tamer

Ruskin Bond has been writing for over sixty years, and now has over 120 titles in print—novels, collections of short stories, poetry, essays, anthologies and books for children. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, received the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1957. He has also received the Padma Shri (1999), the Padma Bhushan (2014) and two awards from Sahitya Akademi—one for his short stories and another for his writings for children. In 2012, the Delhi government gave him its Lifetime Achievement Award.

Born in 1934, Ruskin Bond grew up in Jamnagar, Shimla, New Delhi and Dehradun. Apart from three years in the UK, he has spent all his life in India, and now lives in Mussoorie with his adopted family.

The Beast Tamer

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Nikolai S. Leskov

Introduction

Explorers, hunters, officers lost in the wilderness, soldiers in extreme danger—they have many characteristics in common, including a certain amount of foolhardiness, luck and the stories they have put down about their adventures. Searching for wild animals in the depths of jungles or coming across terrible rituals in out-of-the-way places, some of these writers have narrated their stories that remain bloodcurdling reads even today.

Of course, not all stories are accounts of what happened to an adventurer; some come from the imagination of extremely skilled writers. ‘The Beast Tamer’ by the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov is one such. Leskov’s stories vividly portray the Russian countryside and people. In this particular story, the cruel landowner and his eccentric and strange rules that the people dependent on him have to live by, ends up putting in danger the life of a captive bear. The description of the bear hunt, the feeling of companionship that the poor creature has for its keeper and the bloodthirsty atmosphere in the forest, where the bear trap has been laid, will remain in the mind even long after one has finished reading the story.

‘Hunters of Souls’ too carries an imminent sense of doom and danger as the British visitor to the forests around Daltonganj loses his Indian companions while he faces off with dangerous animals. His companions are not dead though, for he stumbles upon a ritual carried out by soul hunters where the companions play a crucial role. As he watches on in horror, wondering when he may step in for the rescue, he witnesses a hidden ceremony and a messy secret of those who remained outside the control of the British Raj.

This sense of wonder and amazement on finding oneself in an alien land, where the travellers are unable to quickly come to grasp with the unwritten rules and floundering in a sea of outlandish situations, happens in a few stories in this collection. There are also tales of shikar, where the writer has described tracking and coming upon panthers and man-eating tigers. The rules of the forest are as inflexible as that of human society, and

to successfully negotiate them and emerge unscathed is an achievement for these narrators.

Danger lurks not only in lesser known places or in the deeps of the forests, but in obvious places like battlefields and in the theatre of war. There are stories here of soldiers in wars who have stared death in the face and known that they can escape only by outwitting the enemy. Some manage to do so, and these stories of bravery and enterprise make for remarkable reading. I found I was quite breathless as I read ‘The Great Retreat’ and ‘Escape from a Sunken Submarine’ and therefore both of these are a part of this collection.

Some among us may enjoy the thrill of staring at danger. Some of us may rather meet them only in the pages of a book as we sit and read in the comfort of our homes. This book is for both these kind of readers.

Ruskin Bond

Some Panthers

C.A. Kincaid

I cannot pretend to be in any sense of the word a big game shot; but I have been out a good many times after panthers. Since some of my experiences with them were rather exciting, I think that they might interest the readers of the *Indian State Railways Magazine*.

Kathiawar, when I first knew it thirty years ago, simply swarmed with panthers. There was a panther to be found on every hill and in almost every thicket. It was no uncommon occurrence to go out after black buck and to come back with a couple of buck and a panther lying dead in the same bullock cart. Colonel Fenton, while in Kathiawar, killed over eighty of them and several men whom I knew had speared them as if they had been pigs. The cause of the multitude of these dipras was no doubt the disordered state of the country. Only a few years before I was posted to Kathiawar, the province was overrun with bands of dacoits. They were generally led by some unfortunate landowner, who had been dispossessed of his estate by a none too scrupulous overlord. If he could escape capture long enough, he generally got his claims settled. If he was captured, he was shot out of hand. But as every small landowner in Kathiawar was in danger immediate or remote of dispossession, his sympathy and his secret help were always given to the man who had ‘left the path’ as the Gujarati phrase went and had become a bahirwatia or outlaw. The bands of dacoits levied blackmail everywhere and robbed unfortunate shopkeepers or merchants or even rich cultivators whom they caught, mercilessly. The result was that village after village was deserted and left untilled; and panthers made their homes in what had once been cultivated areas.

To return, however, to the subject of my article, my first panther is the one that I shall always remember most vividly. No doubt because it was

my first, but also because it gave me more trouble than any other. I had obtained permission to shoot a panther in the Gir forest from the Junagadh authorities and, armed with a new 400 Jeffery high-velocity rifle that I just had built for me, I went off gaily to the Gir. I first tried Tellala, a favourite spot for panthers, but my chief, Colonel Kennedy, had just bagged a brace there and there were no others for the moment. The Junagadh authorities, who were always kindness itself to British officers, arranged that I should go to another part of Gir, a village known, so far as I remember, as Gurmukhwadi.

'When I arrived at my camp at my destination, I found tents in great numbers and furnished with every regard to my comfort. My servants were highly excited, because they had passed lions on the way from Tellala. However, no damage had been done and after listening to their highly varnished tale, I asked whether there had been a kill. A tall shikari, who had been listening to the servants' tale with some contempt, stepped forward and said that a panther had killed a peasant's goat early that morning and would probably return that afternoon to feed on it. Would the sahib sit up for it? The sahib said with much eagerness that he would sit up for it. Then the shikari said with perfect frankness: 'Shooting panthers, sahib, is different from shooting hares. Will the sahib kindly shoot at a mark and show me whether he can hit anything?' It was impossible to take offence at the man's words. He spoke with such dignity. I accordingly fired at a mark and apparently satisfied him; for he went away saying he would return at four and take me to the kill.

The hours passed very slowly, but at last four struck and the shikari appeared. We rode about two miles, dismounted near a small woodland village and walked a few hundred yards to where a machan or stand had been built over the remains of the unfortunate goat. It was not long before the shikari gave me a nudge to let me know that the panther was somewhere about. I do not know what he had seen, nor did I dare ask him, for I was too excited. He must have caught a glimpse of the panther, for a few minutes later a female panther stepped out of some undergrowth and sitting down like a dog began to call. My shikari wanted me to wait; but it was my first panther and I could not wait. What if the brute should bolt while I waited for it to come nearer. Regardless of the shikari, I put up my rifle and although I was very awkwardly placed for my aim, I fired. The high velocity bullet missed the panther's chest and struck it in the hindleg. It swung round twice in a circle and vanished in the undergrowth instantly.

The next question was what was to be done. Before I had left India, several persons, who had shot in other parts of India, had warned me

against the danger of following a wounded tiger or panther on foot. ‘Always wait for your elephant,’ they said. But in the Bombay Presidency there are no elephants. For that contingency my mentors had not provided; and as it is impossible to leave a wounded panther at large to kill the villagers, I had to descend sadly from my tree and start following the wounded beast on foot. I must confess that as I walked, I wondered why I had ever been so foolish as to go out panther shooting. I was not only concerned about myself, but about the villagers too. They had come out in great numbers and armed, as all villagers in native states are with swords, they threw caution to the winds. One man got on to the panther’s trail and shouting out ‘Am avyo’ (He has come this way), he ran off at full speed on the panther’s tracks.

Unhappily, the villager was on the right trail and, while I ran after him as quickly as I could, he came to where the wounded panther lay. It charged straight at him and knocking him over, tried to get at his throat. He held it off long enough for a young Rajput to draw his sword and give it a tremendous cut across the head. It left its intended victim and ran into a little bush close by. I had by this time come up and was shewn the wounded panther. It was lying down, but was wagging its tail like an angry cat. Again wondering why I had ever had the foolish wish to go out panther shooting, I drew a bead on the back of the wounded beast’s neck. It was the most visible part of its body. The high velocity bullet this time hit its mark fair and square. The tail wagging ceased and the panther was dead. Much of my pleasure at my first panther was spoilt by the injury to the rash villager. Fortunately it was not serious. I had the man sent to the nearest hospital. In a few days he was perfectly well again; but I fancy that he treated panthers in future with more respect.

The most daring panther that I remember was one I shot some years later in the same Gir forest. My wife and I were camped by the seaside at Verawal, when a forester came and complained that there was a very bold panther near where he lived, would the sahib come and shoot it. We were going into the Gir just then after lions, so I could do nothing at the time; but while camped in the Gir, I found a day to attend to the bold panther. One afternoon my wife and I started out on horseback followed by a shikari leading a wretched she-goat. Near the machan, we had to dismount and cross some very wild country. Once we arrived at the machan, events moved very quickly. We climbed into our tree, the beaters tied up the goat and, as they left, called to it. As the form of the last man moved round a rock, the head of a panther came round a rock, on the other side. The brute was not in the least afraid of men and, so we heard afterwards, had several

times carried off goats on a lead.

The panther was a little far off for a perfectly safe shot, so I waited. The goat had been calling cheerfully to its human friends when it suddenly saw the panther a few yards away. It became petrified with terror and made no further sound. It walked to the end of its cord and gazed as if hypnotized at the monster, whose dinner it was to provide. The panther did not seem hungry. It slowly sat down like a huge tomcat and watched with quiet enjoyment the emotions it was rousing in the goat's breast. I, on the other hand, was growing more and more excited. I felt that if I waited much longer, my hand would tremble, and I would not be able to aim straight. I drew a bead on the brute's chest, as it faced me. I pulled the trigger and the panther rolled over growling helplessly. My second barrel hit it in the body and all motion stopped. I had hardly fired my second barrel, when my men came running back very much surprised to hear the shots so soon. We descended and found that my first bullet had hit the panther higher than I had intended. The bullet had struck it straight between the eyes. To use the expression of my shikari, I had given it a chanllo or sect mark. No other incident followed save the almost unendurable swagger of the unharmed goat on the return journey. It was clear to the beast's mind at any rate that it alone 'had won the War'.

Another very bold panther came into my tents when I was in Mahableshwar. Our bull-terrier bitch had presented us with a litter of puppies, which would have served admirably for a healthy panther's supper. The mother had the courage of her race and although chained to one of the tentpoles, kept up so fierce a growling that the servants heard her and drove away the panther in time. The same day I learnt that the panther had been seen in the Blue Valley Road, which was quite close. At the suggestion of a local shikari, I went the same evening with a goat in the hope of getting a shot. On the way we met the panther. It was in no way disconcerted, but just stepped aside to let us pass. I could see it faintly in the undergrowth, but not clearly enough to fire. We decided to go on and sit up just off the Blue Valley Road. We tied up our goat and waited for an hour or so. It was now so dark that it was useless to wait any longer, so we decided to go back, leaving the goat there. Next morning the shikari reported that the goat had been killed and advised my sitting up for the panther the same afternoon. My wife insisted on coming too; and at five o'clock we were in the machan. We had a longish wait, for carriages were passing along the road; and last of all an idiotic Member of Council who had never done any shooting himself, passed by with his wife. Seeing the goat, he went up to it and not seeing us began to tell his wife all about the

shoot that would shortly take place. We condemned him to all sorts of hot places while he talked and we sighed with relief when he passed on. The panther, who had probably been as bored by the Member's talk as we had been, waited only a few minutes longer. Suddenly, it galloped across an open space almost noiselessly, looked up and down the road to see if any more carriages were coming, and then walked with leisurely step to the kill. I fired between its shoulders and it sank without a struggle.

On another occasion at Mahableshwar, I had an experience that I had some difficulty in getting my friends to believe. A panther-kill was reported about three miles beyond the Robbers' Cave. I rode out there, reaching the spot about half past four, as the panther was expected to return early. When I reached the spot, I found the men, who were watching the kill in some excitement. The panther had already returned, and they had had some difficulty in chasing it back into the woods. After this tale, I hardly expected to see the animal again. But the country was very wild. The lords of the jungle had no fear of man; and I had hardly seated myself comfortably in the machan, when the shikari nudged me. Looking in the direction where he pointed, I could just make out through the undergrowth a panther lying like a cat and switching away flies with its tail. There was no chance of a safe shot for the moment, so with a heart hammering with excitement, I waited on events. Suddenly the brute vanished and I wondered where it had gone. I looked towards the kill, but it had not gone there. I turned to the shikari and saw him shaking with terror. 'He is coming to attack us,' he whispered. I could see nothing whatever of the animal and wondered whence the attack would be launched. For some time I could get no sense out of the man. At last he pointed to a branch of the next tree and above our heads. There, like a cat on the back of an armchair, was the panther. It had apparently climbed up the tree and in doing so had scared the shikari. Quite ignorant of our presence it was looking at the kill, waiting for its appetite to improve. I at first hesitated to shoot, for I feared that I might knock the panther on the top of us. Then I calculated that it would miss us and aiming carefully, fired. Instantaneously the animal slid down its own tree and missed us with a good deal to spare. It was only about ten feet off when I fired and it was dead before it reached the ground.

Sometimes one had to go very far afield at Mahableshwar for one's panther. One day in the second week in June when the rains begin to fall, I got khabar of a panther in the valley beyond the Krishna. There was a drop of two thousand feet into the Krishna valley, a climb of two thousand feet the other side and then a drop of two thousand feet into the valley next to

it. I started at two in the afternoon from my bungalow. As we reached the brow of the plateau and began to descend, we passed a little image of Ganpati and the hillmen all salaamed to it, because Ganpati is the God who blesses all beginnings. The author who begins to write a new book, the banker who opens a new ledger, the traveller who starts on a voyage, all invoke the kindly help of Ganpati. Then we dropped down the steep path amid pouring rain, then up the other side and then down the hill again. Fortunately, the rain stopped and I climbed into my machan. I was wet to the skin, but my clothes dried rapidly in the sun and I was cheered by the sound of a panther calling a few hundred yards away. I wanted a drink badly, but the shikari had no pity and made me settle in my machan. 'There will be lots of time to drink, sahib,' he said, 'when you have killed the panther.' To this austere view I had to agree, as there was always the danger, that the panther, near as it was, might see us.

It was a long wait. The panther kept calling for an hour, but came no nearer. Then a long silence followed. I grew impatient. I said to the shikari, 'It's no use waiting any longer, is it?' He put his finger to his lips and said one word, 'Yell' (it will come). I grumbled no more. The kill was the body of a young heifer. The panther had dragged its victim's corpse under a high rock that stood up about twenty yards from where I was hidden. I looked so long and earnestly at the kill and the rock that I must have hypnotized myself into a doze. I woke up with a start, as the shikari touched my shoulder and whispered, 'Ala' (it has come). I gripped my rifle, looked all round but could see nothing. It was dusk and it was getting difficult to notice objects. Then I noticed what seemed to be a round stone on the top of the rock opposite me. I had not observed it before and I wondered whether it could be a portion of a panther. It seemed, however, to be motionless. Just as I was about to look elsewhere, the round rock began to grow and then alter its shape, and I at last made out clearly the head and forequarters of a panther. It looked enormous in the fading light and I confess that I thought it was a tiger.

Slowly the wary beast pulled itself to its feet and began to walk round the side of the great rock. For a second it disappeared, and I was in an agony of apprehension that it had gone forever. I wondered how on earth I should climb back all those thousands of feet after a blank day. Then it reappeared and I was all excitement again. Very slowly and silently, it walked across the face of the rock until it was just over the dead heifer. 'Maro sahib' (Shoot), whispered my shikari and I aimed as best I could; for it had got so dark that I could barely make out the foresight. I fired and was very pleased to see my enemy crumple up and fall over. I still hoped

that it might be a tiger and I joyously descended from my tree after giving the prone object a second barrel. The beaters would have rushed up to the dead animal, but I was able to keep them by me. We walked up to it, I covering it with my rifle. At last one of the beaters bent forward and pulled the animal's tail. It made no response. 'It is dead, sahib,' said the shikari. 'No wagh would suffer such an insult were it alive.' The shikari was right. It was dead, but it was only a panther.

I had my drink, while the beaters tied the panther's feet to a bamboo. Then with our enemy ignominiously hanging upside down from the bamboo, we started homewards. At the frontier of every village, the beaters shouted to the village God that they had killed a panther and that the God should rejoice. We climbed up two thousand feet, then walked down two thousand feet into the Krishna valley. The stream was lit up in the weirdest way. The whole population of the valley were engaged in catching the crabs that infest the river bed and damage the crops. All of them had torches in their hands. These, I was told, dazzled the crabs. In any case, they gave the hunters a chance of seeing their quarry. I watched them for some time and then started to climb the last two thousand feet to the brow of the Mahableshwar plateau. I shall never forget that climb. It was raining again. I had had no tea and no dinner. By the time I reached the top, I was 'dead to the world'. And when we passed the little image of Ganpati, I, this time, *salaamed* before any one else.

It was 2 a.m. by the time I found my tonga on the road. Into it we stuffed the panther; and as I drove off I heard the beaters singing and laughing as they raced down the steep hill paths. Fatigue and they had never met.

The next summer I got a second panther in very nearly the same place, only a hundred feet up the far side of the valley. It was a bold panther this time, so the shikari told me, and it would not keep me waiting long. It had, it seemed, early that morning rushed past a herdsman, pulled down one of his young cows in spite of his loudly vocal protests. The other herdsmen had come up and had driven the robber off his prey and word had been sent to Mahableshwar. I received the news from my shikari and again I went down two thousand feet and up two thousand feet and down two thousand feet and then up a hundred feet the other side. The kill lay out in the open and the round trees were villagers squatting like vultures. They had had a hard time keeping the panther off the kill.

I got into my machan, loaded my rifle and settled myself comfortably. Then I looked round. It was the wildest spot that I had ever been in. Rough, low scrub covered the hillside and hid the coarse grass beneath.

There was not a sign of human dwelling visible, although there must have been huts somewhere in which the herdsmen lived. I felt thankful that good actions done in some former life had saved me from a life spent in such a valley. Then I looked at the kill and at the bushes round it. As I did so, a beautifully marked panther walked fearlessly into the open. It stood still and looked to see if the herdsmen, who had previously driven it off its prey, were still there. Seeing and hearing nothing, it turned to take a step nearer the kill. I put up my rifle and aimed. As I did so, my sight protector came off the barrel and fell to the ground. I passed an agonizing moment. If the sight protector had struck a rock, the noise would have startled the panther and I should never have been seen again. Happily the sight protector fell in the grass and made no sound. A second later I had fired and the panther was dead. It was a beautiful beast and I was delighted to get the skin. The tramp back was severe, but less so than on the previous occasion. It was much earlier in the day and I was back for dinner.

I went several times afterwards into the Krishna and adjoining valleys, but without any fortune. One day, however, I had an interesting experience. I had climbed down into the Krishna valley and up the other side, and there I sat over the kill. It was a young bull that had been slain that morning by a panther, said by the villagers to have developed man-eating tendencies. I waited until it was dark and then got out of the machan. To light us homewards, one of the beaters carried a lantern. Just before we got to the edge of the plateau and were about to descend into the Krishna valley, the lantern bearer stopped and pointed to the ground. We came up and looked. Over the footprints that we had left as we walked towards the machan were the footprints of the panther. As we stalked it, it had stalked us, and had we not been such a large party, it might have tried to carry one of us off. It was very interesting and I was almost consoled for my blank day. I have always had a soft spot in my heart for that panther. We did each other no injury; we parted as friends. I did not get the panther and better still, it did not get me.

Hunters of Souls

Augustus Somerville

During a long period of service in the Survey Department of the Government of India, I have had occasions, to visit many of the remotest parts of India, away from the beaten tracks and devoid of those forms and amenities of civilization that an average traveller learns to expect.

It was on one of these excursions that I came across an extraordinary tribe living in the heart of the mountain fastnesses of Chhota Nagpur. These people who call themselves Bhills, but who, I have reason to suspect from their colour, language and facial expressions, are closely related to the Sontal and Ghond tribes, are a nomadic, semi-barbaric race living exclusively on wild animals, in the snaring and trapping of which they are experts, and also on their reputation as ‘Soul Catchers’. In this last extraordinary avocation I was most interested, but could glean no information from the natives themselves until one day I had an opportunity of watching a ‘Soul Catcher’ at work.

Early in October. 1908, I received orders to survey a large section of forest land in the Palamu District. Certain wiseacres had discovered traces of minerals, such as mica, coal, etc., in the neighbourhood and were making tentative offers for the purchase of a large tract of this land, with mining rights thrown in. A wide-awake government, hearing that I had a mining engineer’s certificate attached to the many credentials that secured me this position, decided to send me down to survey the land, and incidentally report on its possibilities as a mining area.

I will hasten over the first part of the journey as uninteresting, but once at Daltonganj, a small station on the extreme end of the only decent motoring road in the district, I found myself on the brink of the unknown.

Next morning I procured a hand-cart for the transport of my tent, guns, ammunition, etc., and with two servants and a native guide, set out for the interior.

The only road was a rough cart track, which after we had followed for about six miles, disappeared in the impenetrable undergrowth through which we were compelled to travel; abandoning the cart, we bundled the tent and accessories into three packs, which my two servants and the guide carried, and shouldering my rifle myself, set out on the 30-mile trek that would eventually bring us to the village of the Soul Catchers.

That night we camped on the edge of the jungle, near the banks of a small stream. In a short time we had the tent erected and a good fire blazing merrily. Dangerous animals were numerous in the district, and after a good dinner, I turned in with my rifle fully loaded on the cot besides me.

Nothing untoward occurred that night, but in the early hours of the morning, the servants awoke me with the disquieting information that our guide had disappeared.

Needless to say, I took this information very seriously. To be without a guide in that wilderness of unchartered forest and impenetrable bush was alarming enough, but what worried me most was that I had supplies only for a couple of days, and the possibilities of locating the village without a guide was remote enough to depress the most sanguine of explorers.

I will never forget the three days we wandered in that forest. It was one of the most awful experiences I have ever had.

From the onset, I had determined to travel light and so abandoned the tent and other heavy accessories. My survey instruments, I buried securely in the vicinity of a large pepul tree, marking the spot with several heavy boulders from the adjoining stream, then carrying only our food, guns and ammunition, set out for the nearest human habitation.

Directing myself solely with my pocket compass, I travelled due south-east—the direction we were taking prior to the guide's disappearance. Of beaten tracks there were none, but hitherto we had managed to avoid the worst sections of the forest fairly successfully. Bereft of the experience and woodcraft of our guide, we blundered into all manner of pitfalls, and on several occasions found ourselves in thick masses of undergrowth composed almost entirely of stunted plum bushes fairly bristling with thorns, that tore our clothes and lacerated our hands and legs fearfully. All that day we trekked through a waterless section of the forest and suffered agonies from heat and thirst. Towards evening, however, we emerged on an open plain on the edge of a vast swamp. My two servants were

advancing slightly ahead of me, and as they left the forest and saw the cold water ahead, they threw down their burdens and raced towards the marsh. At this instant I also broke from the entangling bushes on the edge of the swamp and all but followed their example, so parched was I, when I beheld a sight that for a moment, kept me spellbound. As the natives reached the water-edge, two huge black forms rose, and with a snort of rage made for the unfortunate men. In a moment I had recognized the animals for the powerful, fearless wild buffalo of the Chhota Nagpur plateau. Unslinging my rifle from my shoulder, I fired at the animal nearest to me, but in my haste aimed too low, so that the bullet, intended for the shoulder, penetrated the animal's knee. The buffalo went down with a crash and as I turned to fire at its mate, I realized with a thrill of horror, that I was too late. The second unfortunate Indian, in his haste to leave the water, had slipped on the marshy banks and lay floundering in the mire. In a moment the buffalo was on him, and with one mighty sweep of its huge horns, hurled his body through the air to land a mangled mass of bones and flesh some ten feet from the bank. At this moment it spotted me, and with a snort of rage, charged in my direction. I am afraid I let no sporting sentiments interfere with my shooting. Working the bolt of my rifle steadily from my shoulder—my rifle being of the magazine pattern—put four successive shots into the huge brute in as many seconds, so that it went down as if pollaxed.

By this time my remaining servant, trembling with the shock of his recent experience, had reached my side, and reloading, I went towards the wounded buffalo. Although handicapped with its broken legs, the animal was nevertheless making a gallant effort to get out of the deep mire that hampered its movements. As we approached the beast, it glared at us, and with a savage bellow attempted to charge. Awaiting till it had approached sufficiently close, one well-directed shot put an end to its miseries, and we were safe to attend to our unfortunate comrade.

Poor fellow, he must have been killed instantaneously; covering up the body with a piece of cloth, we dug a shallow grave and buried him as decently as possible. By this time it was getting dark, so we built a fire and camped a short distance away.

That night I slept badly. The excitement of the evening and the strangeness of the situation kept me continuously awake. Towards morning the cold became intense, and unable to sleep, I determined to rise, replenish the fire and if possible boil some water for an early cup of tea.

Leaving the shelter of the bush in which I lay, I walked briskly towards the place where I had seen Mohamed Ali stock our small store of edibles.

Unable to find them, I was first under the impression that I had mistaken the spot, but a closer inspection showed a few remaining packages containing flour and sugar. Shouting loudly to Mohamed Ali to wake up, I started a feverish search in the surrounding bushes for further signs of the stores, but although I wandered far into the forest, not a single trace of food could I find. Incensed with Mohamed Ali for his carelessness and blaming myself bitterly for not carefully attending to the storing of this essential part of our equipment more carefully, I awaited the arrival of my servant impatiently, determined to give him a bit of my mind.

I must have waited fully half an hour, still searching round in the hope of finding part of the missing stores, before I was aware that no Mohamed Ali had turned up.

'What on earth is the matter with the fellow,' I wondered. 'He surely cannot be still asleep.'

Returning to the camp, I looked all round for him. His blanket lay in a ruffled heap on the spot where he had slept, but of the man himself there was no trace.

All that morning I waited, searching the surrounding forest and even firing my rifle occasionally in the hope of attracting his attention if the poor fellow had wandered into the forest and lost his direction, but to no avail, and at last I was compelled to admit that henceforth I would have to travel alone.

Imagine my position. One of my servants killed, two mysteriously spirited away in the dead of night, and no provision of any sort except a little flour and sugar to sustain me till I reached a human habitation of some type.

To say I was depressed, is to put it mildly. Candidly, I was more than depressed, I was scared. The vision of myself parched with thirst, faint from starvation, wandering through the dense forest, a prey to any wild animal I chanced to meet, filled me with the gravest apprehensions.

Keep on, I knew I had to. To stay where I was, would only diminish my chances of reaching civilization, so that, while I had the strength and ability, I determined to push on depending on my good fortune to strike some village.

Cutting first a generous supply of meat from the carcass of one of the buffaloes I had shot the evening previous, I packed the few things I needed and, with as much ammunition as I could carry, set out on my lonely trek.

All that day I worked steadily south-east, but although I kept a sharp lookout, I failed to detect any signs of human habitation. That night, fearing to sleep on the ground alone, I looked around for a convenient tree,

and after singeing a portion of the meat over a small fire, I ate a frugal meal, and climbed to the topmost branches.

The evening was still light and I scanned the forest in every direction. On every side was an unending vista of green and yellow leaves broken here and there by small clearings, but of villages no sign existed.

The night fell quickly, and soon a glorious moon sailed over the tree tops flooding the rustling, billowy sea of green below me, with a soft translucent light. It was a night, which in spite of my precarious position, I recall with the keenest delight.

Scarcely had the darkness fallen when a sambur belled in a thicket nearby and soon the forest awoke to its nocturnal life of mystery and movement.

From my lofty perch, I watched a herd of spotted deer troop past my tree, pursued by a stealthy yellow form which I instantly recognized for a huge leopard. I could have shot the beast easily, so unaware was he of any human presence, but I refrained from firing and later was thankful for this forbearance.

As the night wore on, I settled myself more comfortably in the deep fork of the tree and was soon asleep.

I may have slept a couple of hours, perhaps less, when I was awakened by a peculiar throbbing sound that seemed to fill the forest.

I roused myself, and looking round eagerly, soon detected the direction from which the sound was proceeding. As it approached, I recognized the low droaning of the large drums the Sontals in this district use and I must confess the thought of human beings filled me with a strange sensation of joy and relief.

Fortunately a natural prudence restrained me from springing from my perch and hastening in the direction of the drums. Waiting till the first of the drummers emerged from the thick forest, I raised myself and was about to call out, when I noticed that the leading natives, bearing huge flaming torches, were nude, except for a single loincloth and grotesquely decorated in yellow and vermillion. The torch-bearers were followed by others hideously painted in white and black representing skeletons. These extraordinary beings were executing a wired type of dance and chanting a solemn dirge, while immediately behind them, slung from bamboo poles, were the bodies of two men. The vanguard of this strange procession was formed of a large crowd of Sontals armed with spears, bows and arrows, and various other crude weapons.

The procession passed immediately under my tree, and as the bearers of the two corpses (as I took them to be) were beneath me, I looked down

and received quite a shock—the bodies were those of our guide and my servant Mohamed Ali.

Waiting till the procession had passed, I took my rifle, and slipping from the tree, followed cautiously in their wake. I had not far to go. Reaching a clearing, the procession stopped. As the dancers and musicians advanced, each threw his burning torch on the ground and in a little while there were a heap of torches burning fiercely, around which the whole procession gathered.

Concealing myself in the bushes, a short distance out of the circle of light, I watched in amazement the strange rites that now followed.

First of all, the two bodies were laid side by side on the ground close to the fire. Two of the dancers—more grotesquely decorated than the others and whom I rightly conjectured were high priests of this strange sect—advanced and raising each body in turn, set the pole into a hollow in the ground, so that the bodies now confronted the dancers in an upright position. The instant the firelight fell on their faces, I realized with a thrill of horror that both men were alive, but so drugged or otherwise stupefied that they hung loosely in their fastenings, swaying like drunken beings.

No sooner was this done, than the whole circle of dancers sprang into activity. Round and round the fire they whirled, chanting a queer plaintive refrain, punctuated with staccato beats from the muffled drums. For a long while they danced till, at last weary with their exertions, they gave a final shout and settled down once more.

The two priests now advanced. Going up to the captives they raised their heads and forced them to drink some concoction which they poured from a pitcher brought by one of the dancers. Whatever the drink was, it must have been a powerful restorative. Within five minutes both men were fully awake and conscious of all that was taking place round them.

What, I wondered, would be the ultimate fate of these two men. It was not likely that in a district so near to British administration they would attempt a cold-blooded murder, but had I known what was to follow, death would have been a merciful release.

Seeing that both men were now perfectly conscious, one of the priests arose and taking a long sharp knife in his hands advanced towards his victims. I fingered my trigger uneasily, uncertain to fire or not, but determined at all cost to save the lives of those two servants of mine. Instead of injuring them, however, he commenced a long harangue. Pointing frequently towards the prisoners and then into the forest in the direction in which I had come, he seemed to be working his followers up to some momentous decision and he was not long in gaining their

unanimous support. The moment he stopped, with one voice, the whole tribe chanted ‘Maro, maro’ (Kill, kill) and, with a swiftness that completely deceived me, the priest struck twice, and the red blood gushed down the chests of the victims. Quickly I slung my rifle round, bringing the foresight to bear on the murderer. But from the moment of that one fierce shout and the anguished cry from the two prisoners, not a further sound could be heard. A strange tense expectant hush seemed to fill the forest. On the face of the two prisoners were depicted the most abject terror, their wounds, probably superficial, bled profusely, but the men were unaware of the blood, instead they stood staring before them into the forest, waiting for some awful apparition to come, and come it did.

Swiftly, silently, remorseless as death itself came a queer sinister shape. Not two feet high, semi-human in form, its hair, straggling and entangled all over its body, its face hideous, with two great eyes darting out of cavernous sockets, it leapt and gambolled out of the forest, into the clearing, and with a shrill maniacal laugh, stood confronting the two prisoners.

So hideous, so repulsive was this awful creature, that my rifle forgotten, I stood staring, unable to believe my eyes; and then started a dance the likes of which I have never seen.

Whirling slowly at first, advancing, retreating, this grotesque human shape, fluttered up and down before the terror-stricken silent men. Gradually the pace increased, a drum commenced to throb gently, swifter grew the dance and louder grew the drums and louder the chanting of the priests joined the roll of the drums; slowly, one by one, the other dancers joined in, the spectators swayed by a common impulse beat time to the ever swelling music, and the prisoners, hypnotized by the rhythm of sound and movement round them, sank lower and lower, till they hung inert, their bonds alone supporting them.

The end came suddenly, dramatically. A rifle shot rang out a sharp command, and a thin line of khaki-clad figures broke from the cover of the jungle and surrounded the dancers.

In a moment pandemonium broke loose. Surprised, startled and wholly unprepared, the dancers and priests broke and fled for the cover of the surrounding forests. Anxious to join the melee, I broke from the cover of the forest and rushed towards the fire. At that instant, I came face to face with one of the presiding priest.

With a fine disregard for sacerdotal procedure, I jammed my rifle butt into his ribs that he went down with a groan and stayed there. Reaching my two servants, I hastened to undo their bonds, and while engaged in this

task, I was suddenly seized from behind and swinging round found myself face to face with a young Police Officer.

‘Well I’m damned. If it isn’t the very man we are looking for,’ he cried with surprise. ‘What on earth are you doing here?’

‘Can’t you see,’ I said, ‘Getting these two poor devils out of the scrape they have got into.’

Mutual explanation followed and I learned that from the moment I had left Daltonganj I had been shadowed by members of this tribe under the mistaken impression that I was an Excise Officer on one of my periodical raids into the interior. The guide had been overpowered and carried off the first night in the hope that without a guide further progress would be impossible, but as I continued, all unknown to me, in the right direction, my servant Mohamed Ali suffered the same fate.

Anxious to avenge themselves on what they considered were informers of the Police, these two men were taken into the heart of the forest and handed over to the ‘Soul Catchers’. The rites I witnessed were explained to me by the young Police Officer who had arrived on the scene so opportunely.

The men were first drugged with a native concoction containing bhang. On arrival at the scene of operations, they were given an antidote and restorative, and later branded in the chest by the priests, so that they were marked men for life. Next a strange half-demented creature, who lived in that part of the forest and who was credited with supernatural powers, danced before the victims who were thus hypnotized and in this condition made to believe that their souls had left them and were in the keeping of the ‘Soul Catchers’. They were seldom harmed physically, but were socially ostracized, driven from village to village and refused even the ordinary necessities of life. The hardships of such an existence usually drove these poor creatures crazy or they died from starvation and neglect. None dared to assist them for fear of incurring the enmity of the ‘Soul Catchers’ themselves. There was, however, a method of release and many took this course. By selling all they possessed, they would raise the necessary amount of money needed, and this on being paid to the high priest of the sect, a ceremony was performed by which the unfortunate victim regained his soul and his position in society. Although in the turmoil that followed the first rush of the Police, the strange creature I had seen eluded the troops and disappeared in the forest, the high priest of the sect I had knocked senseless with my rifle was secured and duly appeared in court. I will never forget the sensation he created, when in his full regalia, he appeared in the dock to answer the charges against him.

Although I formed the principal witness, he produced an alibi that was unshakable. In fact the whole village turned out en masse, prepared to swear that on that particular night this same priest was asleep in his self but in the middle of the village—and that—the whole case was a police plot brought up out of spite.

He was eventually convicted and got three years hard, and the tribe of ‘Soul Catchers’ shifted to healthier quarters, but to this day I never visit Daltonganj and the neighbouring villages without a strange sensation of being watched and spied on.

Mustela of the Lone Hand

C.G.D. Roberts

It was in the very heart of the ancient wood, the forest primeval of the North, gloomy with the dark-green crowded ranks of fir and spruce and hemlock, and tangled with the huge windfalls of countless storm-torn winters. But now, at high noon of the glowing Northern summer, the gloom was pierced to its depths with shafts of radiant sun; the barred and chequered transparent brown shadows hummed with dancing flies; the warm air was alive with the small, thin notes of chickadee and nuthatch, varied now and then by the impertinent scolding of the Canada jay; and the drowsing tree-tops steamed up an incense of balsamy fragrance in the heat. The ancient wilderness dreamed, stretched itself all open to the sun and seemed to sigh with immeasurable content.

High up in the grey trunk of a half-dead forest-giant was a round hole, the entrance to which had been the nest of a pair of big, red-headed, golden-winged woodpeckers, or ‘yellow-hammers’. The big woodpeckers had long since been dispossessed—the female, probably, caught and devoured, with her eggs, upon the nest. The dispossesssor, and present tenant, was Mustela.

Framed in the blackness of the round hole was a sharp, muzzled, triangular, golden-brown face with high, pointed ears, looking out upon the world below with keen eyes in which a savage wildness and an alert curiosity were incongruously mingled. Nothing that went on upon the dim ground far below, among the tangled trunks and windfalls, or in the sun-drenched tree-tops escaped that restless and piercing gaze. But Mustela had fed well, and felt lazy, and this hour of noon was not his hunting hour; so the most unsuspecting red squirrel, gathering cones in a neighbouring pine, was insufficient to lure him from his rest, and the plumpest hare,

waving its long, suspicious ears down among the ground shadows, only made him lick his thin lips and think what he would do later on in the afternoon, when he felt like it.

Presently, however, a figure came into view at sight of which Mustela's expression changed. His thin black lips wrinkled back in a soundless snarl, displaying the full length of his long, snow-white, deadly-sharp canines, and a red spark of hate smouldered in his bright eyes. But no less than his hate was his curiosity—a curiosity which is the most dangerous weakness of all Mustela's tribe. Mustela's pointed head stretched itself clear of the hole, in order to get a better look at the man who was passing below his tree.

A man was a rare sight in that remote and inaccessible section of the Northern wilderness. This particular man—a woodsman, a 'timber-cruiser', seeking out new and profitable areas for the work of the lumbermen—wore a flaming red-and-orange handkerchief loosely knotted about his brawny neck, and carried over his shoulder an axe whose bright blade flashed sharply whenever a ray of sunlight struck it. It was this flashing axe and the blazing colour of the scarlet-and-orange kerchief that excited Mustela's curiosity—so excited it, indeed, that he came clean out of the hole and circled the great trunk, clinging close and wide-legged like a squirrel, in order to keep the woodsman in view as he passed by.

Engrossed though he was in the interesting figure of the man, Mustela's vigilance was still unsleeping. His amazingly quick ears at this moment caught a hushed hissing of wings in the air above his head. He did not stop to look up and investigate. Like a streak of ruddy light he flashed around the trunk and whisked back into his hole, and just as he vanished a magnificent long-winged goshawk, the king of all the falcons, swooping down from the blue, struck savagely with his clutching talons at the edges of the hole.

The quickness of Mustela was miraculous. Moreover, he was not content with escape. He wanted vengeance. Even in his lightning dive into his refuge he had managed to turn about, doubling on himself like an eel. And now, as those terrible talons gripped and clung for half a second to the edge of the hole, he snapped his teeth securely into the last joint of the longest talon and dragged it an inch or two in.

With a yelp of fury and surprise, the great falcon strove to lift himself into the air, pounding madly with his splendid wings and twisting himself about, and thrusting mightily with his free foot against the side of the hole. But he found himself held fast, as in a trap. Sagging back with all his weight, Mustela braced himself securely with all four feet and hung on, his

whipcord sinews set like steel. He knew that if he let, for an instant, to secure a better mouthful, his enemy would escape; so he just worried and chewed at the joint, satisfied with the punishment he was inflicting.

Meanwhile, the woodsman, his attention drawn by that one sudden yelp of the falcon and by the prolonged and violent buffeting of wings, had turned back to see what was going on. Pausing at the foot of Mustela's tree, he peered upwards with narrowed eyes. A slow smile wrinkled his weather-beaten face. He did not like hawks. For a moment or two he stood wondering what it was in the hole that could hold so powerful a bird. Whatever it was, he stood for it.

Being a dead shot with the revolver, he seldom troubled to carry a rifle in his 'cruisings'. Drawing his long-barrelled 'Smith and Wesson' from his belt, he took careful aim and fired. At the sound of the shot, the thing in the hole was startled and let go; and the great bird, turning once over slowly in the air, dropped to his feet with a feathery thud, its talons still contracting shudderingly. The woodsman glanced lip, and there, framed in the dark of the hole, was the little yellow face of Mustela, insatiably curious, snarling down upon him viciously.

'Gee,' muttered the woodsman, 'I might hev' knowed it was one o' them pesky martens! Nobody else o' *that* size 'd hev' the gall to tackle a duck-hawk!'

Now, the fur of Mustela, the pine-marten or American sable, is a fur of price; but the woodsman—subject, like most of his kind, to unexpected attacks of sentiment and imagination—felt that to shoot the defiant little fighter would be like an act of treachery to an ally.

'Ye're a pretty fighter, sonny,' said he, with a whimsical grin, 'an' ye may keep that yaller pelt o' yourn, for all o' me!' Then he picked up the dead falcon, tied its claws together, slung it upon his axe, and strode off through the trees. He wanted to keep those splendid wings as a present for his girl in at the settlements.

Highly satisfied with his victory over the mighty falcon—for which he took the full credit to himself—Mustela now retired to the bottom of his comfortable, moss-lined nest and curled himself up to sleep away the heat of the day. As the heat grew sultrier and drowsier through the still hours of early afternoon, there fell upon the forest a heavy silence, deepened rather than broken by the faint hum of the heat-loving flies. And the spicy scents of pine and spruce and tamarack steamed forth richly upon the moveless air.

When the shadows of the trunks began to lengthen, Mustela woke up, and he woke up hungry. Slipping out of his hole, he ran a little way down

the trunk and then leapt, lightly and nimbly as a squirrel, into the branches of a big hemlock which grew close to his own tree. Here, in a crotch from which he commanded a good view beneath the foliage, he halted and stood motionless, peering about him for some sign of a likely quarry.

Poised thus, tense, erect and vigilant, Mustela was a picture of beauty, swift and fierce. In colour he was of a rich golden-brown, with a patch of brilliant yellow covering throat and chest. His tail was long and bushy, to serve him as a balance in his long, squirrel-like leaps from tree to tree. His pointed ears were large and alert, to catch all the faint, elusive forest sounds. In length, being a specially fine specimen of his kind, he was perhaps a couple of inches over two feet. His body had all the lithe grace of a weasel, with something of the strength of his great-cousin and most dreaded foe, the fisher.

For a time nothing stirred. Then from a distance came, faint but shrill, the chirr-r-r-r of a red squirrel. Mustela's discriminating ear located the sound at once. All energy on the instant, he darted towards it, springing from branch to branch with amazing speed and noiselessness.

The squirrel, noisy and imprudent after the manner of his tribe, was chattering fussily and bouncing about on his branch, excited over something best known to himself, when a darting, gold-brown shape of doom landed upon the other end of the branch, not half a dozen feet from him. With a screech of warning and terror, he bounded into the air, alighted on the trunk and raced up it, with Mustela close upon his heels. Swift as he was—and everyone who has seen a red squirrel in a hurry knows how he can move—Mustela was swifter, and in about five seconds the little chatterer's fate would have been sealed. But he knew what he was about. This was his own tree. Had it been otherwise, he would have sprung into another, and directed his desperate flight over the slenderest branches, where his enemy's greater weight would be a hindrance. As it was, he managed to gain his hole—just in time—and all that Mustela got was a little mouthful of fur from the tip of that vanishing red tail. Very angry and disappointed, and hissing like a cat, Mustela jammed his savage face into the hole. He could see the squirrel crouched, with pounding heart and panic-stricken eyes, a few inches below him, just out of his reach. The hole was too small to admit his head. In a rage he tore at the edges with his powerful claws, but the wood was too hard for him to make any impression on it, and after half a minute of futile scratching, he gave up in disgust and raced off down the tree. A moment later the squirrel poked his head out and shrieked an effectual warning to every creature within earshot.

With that loud alarm shrilling in his ears, Mustela knew there would be no successful hunting for him till he could put himself beyond the range of it. He raced on, therefore, abashed by his failure, till the taunting sound faded in the distance. Then his bushy brown brush went up in the air again, and his wonted look of insolent self-confidence returned. As it did not seem to be his lucky day for squirrels, he descended to earth and began quartering the ground for the fresh trail of a rabbit.

In that section of the forest where Mustela now found himself, the dark and scented tangle of spruce and balsam-fir was broken by thickets of stony barren, clothed unevenly by thickets of stunted white birch, and silver-leaved quaking aspen, and wild sumach with its massive tufts of acrid, dark-crimson bloom. Here the rabbit trails were abundant, and Mustela was not long in finding one fresh enough to offer him the prospect of a speedy kill. Swiftly and silently, nose to earth, he set himself to follow its intricate and apparently aimless windings, sure that he would come upon a rabbit at the end of it.

As it chanced, however, he never came to the end of that particular trail or set his teeth in the throat of that particular rabbit. In gliding past a bushy young fir-tree, he happened to glance be path it, and marked another of his tribe tearing the feathers from a new-slain grouse. The stranger was smaller and slighter than himself—a young female—quite possibly, indeed, his mate of a few months earlier in the season. Such considerations were less than nothing to Mustela, whose ferocious spirit knew neither gallantry, chivalry, nor mercy. With what seemed a single flashing leap, he was upon her—or almost, for the slim female was no longer there. She had bounded away as lightly and instantaneously as if blown by the wind of his coming. She knew Mustela, and she knew it would be death to stay and do battle for her kill. Spitting with rage and fear, she fled from the spot, terrified lest he should pursue her and find the nest where her six precious kittens were concealed.

But Mustela was too hungry to be interested just then in mere slaughter for its own sake. He was feeling serious and practical. The grouse was a full-grown cock, plump and juicy, and when Mustela had devoured it, his appetite was sated. But not so his blood-lust. After a hasty toilet he set out again, looking for something to kill.

Crossing the belt of rocky ground, he emerged upon a flat tract of treeless barren covered with a dense growth of blueberry bushes about a foot in height. The bushes at this season were loaded with ripe fruit of a bright blue colour, and squatting among them was a big black bear, enjoying the banquet at his ease. Gathering the berries together, wholesale

with his great furry paws, he was cramming them into his mouth greedily, with little grunts and gurgles of delight, and the juicy fragments with which his snout and jaws were smeared, gave his formidable face an absurdly childish look. To Mustela—when that insolent little animal flashed before him—he vouchsafed no more than a glance of good-natured contempt. For the rank and stringy flesh of a pine-marten he had no use at any time of the year, least of all in the season when the blueberries were ripe.

Mustela, however, was too discreet to pass within reach of one of those huge but nimble paws, lest the happy bear should grow playful under the stimulus of the blueberry juice. He turned aside to a judicious distance, and there, sitting up on his hindquarters like a rabbit, he proceeded to nibble, rather superciliously, a few of the choicest berries. He was not enthusiastic over vegetable food, but, just as a cat will now and then eat grass, he liked at times a little corrective to his unvarying diet of flesh.

Having soon had enough of the blueberry patch, Mustela left it to the bear and turned back toward the deep of the forest, where he felt most at home. He went stealthily, following up the wind in order that his scent might not give warning of his approach. It was getting near sunset by this time, and floods of pinky gold, washing across the open barrens, poured in along the ancient corridors of the forest, touching the sombre trunks with stains of tenderest rose. In this glowing colour Mustela, with his ruddy fur, moved almost invisible.

And, so moving, he came plump upon a big buck-rabbit squatting half asleep in the centre of a clump of pale green fern.

The rabbit hounded straight into the air, his big, childish eyes popping from his head with horror. Mustela’s leap was equally instantaneous, and it was unerring. He struck his victim in mid-air, and his fangs met deep in the rabbit’s throat. With a scream the rabbit fell backwards and came down with a muffled thump upon the ferns, with Mustela on top of him. There was a brief, thrashing struggle, and then Mustela, his forepaws upon the breast of his still quivering prey—several times larger and heavier than himself—lifted his blood-stained face and stared about him savagely, as if defying all the other prowlers of the forest to come and try to rob him of his prize.

Having eaten his fill, Mustela dragged the remnants of the carcass under a thick bush, defiled it so as to make it distasteful to other eaters of flesh, and scratched a lot of dead leaves and twigs over it till it was effectually hidden. As game was abundant at this season, and as he always preferred a fresh kill, he was not likely to want any more of that victim,

but he hated the thought of any rival getting a profit from his prowess.

Mustela now turned his steps homeward, travelling more lazily, but with eyes, nose and ears ever on the alert for fresh quarry. Though his appetite was sated for some hours, he was as eager as ever for the hunt, for the fierce joy of the killing and the taste of the hot blood. But the unseen powers of the wilderness, ironic and impartial, decided just then that it was time for Mustela to be hunted in his turn.

If there was one creature above all others who could strike the fear of death into Mustela's merciless soul, it was his great-cousin, the ferocious and implacable fisher. Of twice his weight and thrice his strength, and his full peer in swiftness and cunning, the fisher was Mustela's nightmare, from whom there was no escape unless in the depths of some hole too narrow for the fisher's powerful shoulders to get into. And at this moment there was the fisher's grinning, black-muzzled mask crouched in the path before him, eyeing him with the sneer of certain triumph.

Mustela's heart jumped into his throat as he flashed about and fled for his life—straight away, alas, from his safe hole in the tree-top—and with the lightning dart of a striking rattler the fisher was after him.

Mustela had a start of perhaps twenty paces, and for a time he held his own. He dared no tricks, lest he should lose ground, for he knew his foe was as swift and as cunning as himself. But he knew himself stronger and more enduring than most of his tribe, and therefore he put his hope, for the most part, in his endurance. Moreover, there was always a chance that he might come upon some hole or crevice too narrow for his pursuer. Indeed, to a tough and indomitable spirit like Mustela's, until his enemy's fangs should finally lock themselves in his throat, there would always seem to be a chance. One could never know which way the freakish Fates of the wilderness would cast their favour. On and on he raced, therefore, tearing up or clown the long, sloping trunks of ancient windfalls, twisting like a golden snake through tangled thickets, springing in great airy leaps from trunk to rock, from rock to overhanging branch, in silence; and ever at his heels followed the relentless, grinning shape of his pursuer, gaining a little in the long leaps, but losing a little in the denser thickets, and so just about keeping his distance.

For all Mustela's endurance, the end of that race, in all probability, would have been for him but one swift, screeching fight, and then the dark. But at this juncture the Fates woke up, peered ironically through the grey and ancient mosses of their hair, and remembered some grudge against the fisher.

A moment later, Mustela, just launching himself on a desperate leap,

beheld in his path a huge hornets nest suspended from a branch near the ground. Well he knew, and respected, that terrible insect, the great black hornet with the cream-white stripes about his body. But it was too late to turn aside. He crashed against the grey, papery sphere, tearing it from its cables, and flashed on, with half a dozen white-hot stings in his hindquarters prodding him to a fresh burst of speed. Swerving slightly, he dashed through a dense thicket of juniper scrub, hoping not only to scrape his fiery tormentors off, but at the same time to gain a little on his big pursuer.

The fisher was at this stage not more than a dozen paces in the rear. He arrived, to his undoing, just as the outraged hornets poured out in a furiously humming swarm from their overturned nest. It was clear enough to them that the fisher was their assailant. With deadly unanimity they pouched upon him.

With a startled screech the fisher bounced aside and plunged for shelter. But he was too late. The great hornets were all over him. His ears and nostrils were black with them, his long fur was full of them, and his eyes, shut tight, were already a flaming anguish with the corroding poison of their stings. Frantically he burrowed his face down into the moss and through into the moist earth, and madly he clawed at his ears, crushing scores of his tormentors. But he could not crush out the venom which their long stings had injected. Finding it hopeless to free himself from their swarms, he tore madly through the underbrush, but blindly, crashing into trunks and rocks, heedless of everything but the fiery torture which enveloped him. Gradually the hornets fell away from hirn as he went, knowing that their vengeance was accomplished. At last, groping his way blindly into a crevice between two rocks, he thrust his head down into the moss, and there, a few days later, his swollen body was found by a foraging lynx. The lynx was hungry, but she only sniffed at the carcass and turned away with a growl of disappointment and suspicion. The carcass was too full of poison even for her not-too-discriminating palate.

Mustela, meanwhile, having the best and sharpest of reasons for not delaying in his flight, knew nothing of the fate of his pursuer. He only became aware, after some minutes, that he was no longer pursued. Incredulous at first, he at length came to the conclusion that the fisher had been discouraged by his superior speed and endurance. His heart, though still pounding unduly, swelled with triumph. By way of precaution he made a long detour to come back to his nest, pounced upon and devoured a couple of plump deer-mice on the way, ran up his tree and slipped comfortably into his hole, and curled up to sleep with the feeling of a day

well spent. He had fed full, he had robbed his fellows successfully, he had drunk the blood of his victims, he had outwitted or eluded his enemies. As for his friends, he had none—a fact which to Mustela of the Lone Hand was of no concern whatever.

Now, as the summer waned, and the first keen touch of autumn set the wilderness aflame with the scarlet of maple and sumach, the pale gold of poplar and birch, Mustela, for all his abounding health and prosperous hunting, grew restless with a discontent which he could not understand. Of the coming winter he had no dread. He had passed through several winters, faring well when other prowlers less daring and expert had starved, and finding that deep nest of his in the old tree a snug refuge from the fiercest storms. But now—he knew not why—the nest grew irksome to him, and his familiar hunting-grounds distasteful. Even the eager hunt, the triumphant kill itself, had lost their zest. He forgot to kill except when he was hungry. A strange fever was in his blood, a lust for wandering. And so, one wistful, softly-glowing day of Indian summer, when the violet light that bathed the forest was full of mystery and allurement, he set off on a journey. He had no thought of why he was going, or whither. Nor was he conscious of any haste. When hungry, he stopped to hunt and kill and feed. But he no longer cared to conceal the remnants of his kills, for he dimly realized that he would not be returning. If running waters crossed his path, he swam them. If broad lakes intervened, he skirted them. From time to time he became aware that others of his kind were moving with him, but each one furtive, silent, solitary, self-sufficing, like himself. He heeded them not, nor they him; but all, impelled by one urge which could but be blindly obeyed, kept drifting onward toward the west and north. At length, when the first snows began, Mustela stopped, in a forest not greatly different from that which he had left, but ever wilder, denser, more unvisited by the foot of man. And here, the wanderlust having suddenly left his blood, he found himself a new hole, lined it warm with moss and dry grasses, and resumed his hunting with all the ancient zest. Back in Mustela’s old hunting-grounds a lonely trapper, finding no more golden sable in his snares, but only mink and lynx and fox, grumbled regretfully:

‘The marten hev quit. We’ll see no more of ‘em round these parts for another ten year.’

But he had no notion why they had quit, nor had anyone else—not even Mustela himself.

The Leopard

Ruskin Bond

I first saw the leopard when I was crossing the small stream at the bottom of the hill. The ravine was so deep there that for most of the day it remained in shadow. This encouraged many birds and animals to emerge from cover, even during the hours of daylight. Few people ever passed that way: only milkmen and charcoal-burners from the surrounding villages. As a result, the ravine had become a little haven of wildlife, one of the few natural sanctuaries left in the area.

Nearly every morning, and sometimes during the day, I heard the cry of the barking-deer. In the evening, walking through the forest, I disturbed parties of kaleej pheasant, who went gliding down the ravine on open, motionless wings. I saw pine-martens and a handsome red fox. I recognized the footprints of a bear.

As I had not come to take anything from the jungle, the birds and animals soon ‘grew accustomed to my face’, as Mr Higgins would say. More likely, they recognized my footfalls. My approach did not disturb them. A spotted forktail, which at first used to fly away, now remained perched on a boulder in the middle of the stream while I got across by means of other boulders only a few yards away. Its mellow call followed me up the hillside.

The langurs in the oak and rhododendron trees, who would at first go leaping through the branches at my approach, now watched me with some curiosity as they munched the tender green shoots of the oak. But one evening, as I passed, I heard them chattering with excitement; and I knew I was not the cause of the disturbance.

As I crossed the stream and began climbing the hill, the grunting and chattering increased, as though the langurs were trying to warn me of some

hidden danger. I looked up, and saw a great orange-gold leopard, sleek and spotted, poised on a rock about twenty feet away from me. The leopard looked at me once, briefly and with an air of disdain, and then sprang into a dense thicket, making absolutely no sound as he melted into the shadows.

I had disturbed the leopard in his quest for food. But a little later I heard the quickening cry of a barking-deer as it fled through the forest.

After that encounter I did not see the leopard again, although I was often made aware of his presence by certain movements.

Sometimes I thought I was being followed; and once, when I was late getting home and darkness closed in on the forest, I saw two bright eyes staring at me from a thicket. I stood still, my heart thudding against my ribs. Then the eyes danced away, and I realized that they were only fireflies.

One evening, near the stream, I found the remains of a barking-deer which had only been partly eaten. I wondered why the leopard had not hidden the remains of his meal, and decided that he had been disturbed while eating. Climbing the hill, I met a party of shikaris resting beneath the pine trees. They asked me if I had seen a leopard. I said I had not. They said they knew there was a leopard in the forest. Leopard-skins were selling in Delhi at a thousand rupees each, they told me. I walked on.

But the hunters had seen the carcass of the deer, and they had seen the leopard's pug-marks, and they had kept coming to the forest. Almost every evening I heard their guns banging away.

'There's a leopard about,' they always told me. 'You should carry a gun.'

'I don't have one,' I said.

The birds were seldom to be seen, and even the langurs had moved on. The red fox did not show itself; and the pinemartens, who had become quite bold, now dashed into hiding at my approach. The smell of one human is like the smell of any other.

And then, of course, the inevitable happened.

The men were coming up the hill, shouting and singing. They had a long bamboo pole across their shoulder's, and slung from the pole, feet up, head down, was the lifeless body of the leopard. He had been shot in the neck and in the head.

'We told you there was a leopard!' they shouted, in great good humour. 'Isn't he a fine specimen?'

'He was a fine leopard,' I said.

I walked home through the silent forest. It was very silent, almost as

though the birds and animals knew that their trust had been violated.

'And God gave Man dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth…'

For a leopard-skin coat value one thousand rupees.

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The Man-eater of Mundali

B.B. Osmaston

Jaunsar-Bawai, which includes Chakrata, is an outlying portion of the Civil District of Dehra Dun. It is situated north-west of Dehra, between Mussoorie and Simla, and is very mountainous throughout, the hills ranging from 2,000 to 10,000 feet in altitude. These hills, except on southern aspects, are mostly clothed with forests of deodar, fir, pine, oak, etc., and mountain streams and torrents flow through the valleys. In summer the climate is pleasantly cool, but very cold in winter, with heavy falls of snow down to 6,000 feet. There was much game in the form of gooral, barking deer, serow, musk deer and leopard; also partridges, chukor and several species of pheasants. Sambhar pig were scarce, and chiral, absent altogether. Tigers literally avoid these hill forests, not because they dislike the cold, but because they find feeding themselves difficult, if not impossible. In the plains sambhar and chiral constitute their main food supply, but these are scarce or non-existent in the hills.

Moreover, a tiger is unable to pursue and catch smaller game, such as gooral, which take refuge on steep slopes where a tiger due to its weight cannot safely follow. In 1878, however, a tigress suddenly appeared beyond Chakrata, at about 9,000 feet; she is believed to have come up from Dehra Dun, having followed the Gujars' buffaloes on their spring migration up to the hills.

These Gujars are a nomadic race of graziers, and own herds of magnificent buffaloes, which they maintain largely in the Government forests, feeding them mainly on loppings from trees. During the winter months, they keep to the forests in the plains, but in April they start driving their cattle up to the hills where they remain throughout the summer and rains, at altitudes between 7,000 and 11,000 feet; and in October, before

the advent of snow, they take them down again.

But, to return to the tigress in question. Having followed the Gujar's cattle up to the hills, killing and feeding on stragglers from the herds during their 60–80 miles slow-moving trek, she their settled down to an easy and comfortable existence in the vicinity of the Gujar's camps, without any food problems whatever! But when October came, and the Gujars started driving their cattle down to the plains again, she seems to have either accidentally missed their departure, or, more likely, to have been more or less compelled to remain behind because she had meanwhile produced three babies which were still entirely dependent on her, and far too young to travel.

She thus, all at once, found herself and her cubs stranded, up at some 8,000 to 9,000 feet, with snow in the offing, and normal food supplies virtually non-existent. She and her farnil soon became desperately hungry and, one day while she was out hunting, she suddenly came across a man at close quarters, and, in her extremity, she killed him. She found that he was both ridiculously easy to kill, and also excellent to eat.

This led to her rapidly becoming a confirmed, notorious and cunning man-eater, taking toll from villages scattered over some 200 square miles of mountainous country. The villagers were terror-stricken and would not go out except in large parties. Even so, her killings continued, either by day or by night, and more often than not, it was a woman she selected.

She brought up her three cubs on human flesh and they too became man-eaters. They, however, lacked the cunning of their mother and were killed long before she was accounted for: one was killed by a spring-gun set by Mr Lowrie at Lokhar; another was shot near Chakrata by Mr Smythies, who obtained the assistance of British soldiers to surround the valley in which the young tiger had been located; the third cub was found dead under a tree which appeared to have been struck by lightning. The tigress, however, had continued in her evil ways, until in 1879 a reward of ₹500 was placed on her head. This had resulted in many visits from experienced shikaris, but none had ever succeeded in getting in touch with her, and the reward remained unclaimed for ten long years.

That was the picture when I arrived at Mundali on 11 May 1889. I had been in India less than 5 months and had never seen a tiger outside a zoo. The day I reached Mundali, I heard that the tigress had killed a buffalo calf about half a mile from our camp. The latter included Forest Students from Dehra Dun, in the charge of Mr Fernandez, Deputy Director of the Forest School. I determined to tie up a machan in a tree near the kill, from which I hoped to get a shot at the tigress when she returned. But the same idea

had also occurred to several of the students, and I foresaw little chance, therefore, of anyone at all getting a shot that way. However, a young fellow called Hansard, one of the students, approached me with a suggestion that we should explore the steep ravine below the kill at midday, when, we thought, the tigress would be enjoying a siesta. I readily agreed and we set out, I being armed with a double-barrelled 12-bore rifle by Riley, firing a conical shell propelled by 6 drains of black powder, which was kindly lent by Mr Fernandez. Hansard had only a small bore rifle, which I later realized was quite inadequate for the purpose.

The kill was situated at the head of a precipitous ravine which had extremely steel-wooded sides, and a small spring stream at the bottom, bubbling down through a wild confusion of countless large and small boulders. It was under the lee of one of these large rocks that we were hoping perhaps to find the tigress asleep; and with that end in view, we cautiously started off down the ravine—I on one side fairly close to the stream, while Hansard was some 20 yards higher up on the other side.

The going was very difficult and slow, and we had not managed to get very far, when I suddenly heard a fierce snarling noise from moderately high up on the further side of the ravine. I momentarily imagined that it was Hansard trying to pull my leg; but, upon raising my head to tell him to shut up and keep quiet, I saw to my horror, the tigress on top of him, biting at his neck.

It is extraordinary with what lightning speed thoughts can flash through one’s brain in an emergency of that nature; and, in a matter of perhaps half a second, I knew that I must shoot—whatever the danger, of hitting Hansard, instead of or as well as the tigress—and in the next half second I had fired. The tigress immediately let go of Hansard and came charging down at me. I fired the second barrel as she came bounding down (but without effect), and then dropped the empty rifle and fled for my life down the precipitous ravine, leaping wildly from boulder to boulder in my head-long flight, and expecting every moment to get the tigress on top of me. But after I had covered some distance without either breaking my neck or being seized by the tigress, I realized that I was not being pursued after all; and I decided to cut straight back through the forest to the camp, in order to get another rifle, and help for Hansard.

Several of the students and their servants accompanied me back to the spot, bringing with them a camp-bed for use as a stretcher. Upon arrival there, we found Hansard lying unconscious by the stream, and the tigress lying dead a few yards away. It was my first shot that had actually killed her, the second one having merely grazed one of her fore-paws.

We afterwards ascertained from Hansard that he never knew that she was stalking him until she was on him, and he certainly never had a chance to fire his rifle. He was wearing a thick woollen muffler rolled up round his neck which doubtless did much to save him. In spite of this, however, the tigress had mauled him terribly, one hole penetrating from below his ear into his throat. Bits of the red muffler were adhering to the claws of the tigress when we found her in the water. She was old, though exactly how old it was impossible to say; but her canine teeth were worn right down almost to the gums and one, at least, was badly decayed. Otherwise she appeared to be in good health, and had a very good coat. Her length was 8 feet 6 inches.

Hansard and the tigress were at once carried to the camp where the former's wounds were attended to by the Assistant Surgeon attached to the school-camp, and two days later he was carried miles across the hills to Mussoorie on a stretcher. There he remained in the Station Hospital for some months and, when he was eventually discharged, in reasonably good shape, he married his hospital nurse, and they went to Ceylon, where he had another forest appointment.

Some years later I met his son, who said that his father had eventually died from the after effects of that terrible encounter. The day after the tigress was brought into camp, the villagers flocked in from near and far to see the body of the dreaded beast which had carried off so many of their friends and relations during the past ten years.

Many of them cut off little bits of the tigress' flesh and hung them as charms round the necks of their children. The killing of the tigress was reported to the government and the reward of ₹500 was duly paid to me; this was shared with Hansard, who certainly deserved it at least as much as I did.

[More than a hundred years later, a notice-hoard at Mundali still marks the spot where Osmaston shot the man-eater—Ed.]

Beckwith’s Case

Maurice Hewlett

The facts were as follows. Mr Stephen Mortimer Beckwith was a young man living at Wilsford in the Amesbury district of Wiltshire. He was a clerk in the Wilts and Dorset Bank at Salisbury, was married and had one child. His age at the time of the experience here related was twenty-eight. His health was excellent.

On 30 November 1887, at about ten o’clock at night, he was returning home from Amesbury, where he had been spending the evening at a friend’s house. The weather was mild, with a rain-bearing wind blowing in squalls from the south-west. It was three-quarter moon that night, and although the sky was frequently overcast, it was at no time dark. Mr Beckwith, who was riding a bicycle and accompanied by his Fox-terrier, Strap, states that he had no difficulty in seeing and avoiding the stones cast down at intervals by the road-menders; that flocks of sheep in the hollows were very visible, and that passing Wilsford House he saw a barn owl quite plainly and remarked its heavy, uneven flight.

A mile beyond Wilsford House, Strap, the dog, broke through the quickset hedge upon his right-hand side and ran yelping up the down, which rises sharply just there. Mr Beckwith, who imagined that he was after a hare, whistled him in, presently calling him sharply, ‘Strap, Strap, come out of it.’ The dog took no notice, but ran directly to a clump of gorse and bramble halfway up the down, and stood there in the attitude of a pointer, with uplifted paw, watching the gorse intently, and whining. Mr Beckwith was by this time dismounted, observing the dog. He watched him for some minutes from the road. The moon was bright, the sky at the moment free from cloud.

He himself could see nothing in the gorse, though the dog was

undoubtedly in a high state of excitement. It made frequent rushes forward, but stopped short of the object that it saw and trembled. It did not bark outright, but rather whimpered—‘a curious, shuddering crying noise’, says Mr Beckwith. Interested by the animal’s persistent and singular behaviour, he now sought a gap in the hedge, went through on to the down and approached the clumped bushes. Strap was so much occupied that he barely noticed his master’s coming; it seemed as if he dared not take his eyes off for one second from what he saw in there.

Beckwith, standing behind the dog, looked into the gorse. From the distance at which he stood, still he could see nothing at all. His belief then was that there was either a tramp in a drunken sleep, possibly two tramps, or a hare caught in a wire, or possibly even a fox. Having no stick with him, he did not care, at first, to go any nearer, and contented himself with urging on the Terrier. This was not very courageous of him, as he admits, and was quite unsuccessful. No verbal excitations could draw Strap nearer to the furze-bush. Finally the dog threw up his head, showed his master the white arcs of his eyes and fairly howled at the moon. At this dismal sound Mr Beckwith was himself alarmed. It was, as he describes it—though he is an Englishman—‘uncanny’. The time, he owns, the aspect of the night, loneliness of the spot (midway up the steep slope of a chalk down), the mysterious shroud of darkness upon shadowed and distant objects, and flood of white light upon the foreground—all these circumstances worked upon his imagination.

He was indeed for retreat; but here Strap was of a different mind. Nothing would excite him to advance, but nothing, either, could induce him to retire. Whatever he saw in the furze-bush Strap must continue to observe. In the face of this, Beckwith summoned up his courage, took it in both hands and went much nearer to the furze-bushes, much nearer, that is, than Strap the Terrier could bring himself to go. Then, he tells us, he did see a pair of bright eyes far in the thicket, which seemed to be fixed upon his, and by degrees also a pale and troubled face. Here, then, was neither fox nor drunken tramp, but some human creature, man, woman, or child, fully aware of him and of the dog.

Beckwith, who now had surer command of his feelings, spoke aloud, asking, ‘What are you doing there? What’s the matter?’ He had no reply. He went one pace nearer, being still on his guard, and spoke again. ‘I won’t hurt you,’ he said. ‘Tell me what the matter is.’ The eyes remained unwinkingly fixed upon his own. No movement of the features could be discerned. The face, as he could now make it out, was very small—‘about as big as a big wax dolls,’ he says, ‘of a longish oval, very pale.’ He adds,

‘I could see its neck now, no thicker than my wrist; and where its clothes began, I couldn’t see any arms, for a good reason. I found out afterwards that they had been bound behind its back. I should have said immediately, “That’s a girl in there”, if it had not been for one or two plain considerations. It had not the size of what we call a girl, nor the face of what we mean by a child. It was, in fact, neither fish, flesh, nor fowl. Strap had known that from the beginning, and now I was of Strap’s opinion myself.’

Advancing with care, a step at a time, Beckwith presently found himself within touching distance of the creature. He was now standing with furze half-way up his calves, right above it, stooping to look closely at it; and as he stooped and moved now this way, now that, to get a clearer view, so the crouching thing’s eyes gazed up to meet his, and followed them about, as if safety lay only in that never-shifting, fixed regard. He had noticed, and states in his narrative, that Strap had seemed quite unable, in the same way, to take his eyes off the creature for a single second.

He could now see that, of whatever nature it might be, it was in form and features, most exactly a young woman. The features, for instance, were regular and fine. He remarks in particular upon the chin. All about its face, narrowing the oval of it, fell dark, glossy curtains of hair, very straight and glistening with wet. Its garment was cut in a plain circle round the neck and shorn off at the shoulders, leaving the arms entirely bare. This garment, shift, smock or gown, as he indifferently calls it, appeared thin, and was found afterwards to be of a grey colour, soft and clinging to the shape. It was made loose, however, and gathered in at the waist. He could not see the creature’s legs as they were tucked under her. Her arms, it has been related, were behind her back. The only other things to be remarked upon were the strange stillness of one who was plainly suffering, and might well be alarmed, an appearance of expectancy, a dumb appeal; what he himself calls rather well ‘an ignorant sort of impatience, like that of a sick animal’.

‘Come,’ Beckwith now said, ‘let me help you up. You will get cold if you sit here. Give me your hand, will you?’ She neither spoke nor moved; simply continued to search his eyes. Strap, meantime, was still trembling and whining. But now, when he stooped yet lower to take her forcibly by the arms, she shrank back a little way and turned her head, and he saw to his horror that she had a great open wound in the side of her neck-from which, however, no blood was issuing. Yet it was clearly a fresh wound, recently made.

He was greatly shocked. ‘Good God,’ he said, ‘there’s been foul play

here,’ and whipped out his handkerchief. Kneeling, he wound it several times round her slender throat and knotted it as tightly as he could; then, without more ado, he took her up in his arms, under the knees and round the middle, and carried her down the slope to the road. He describes her as of no weight at all. He says it was ‘exactly like carrying an armful of feathers about’. ‘I took her down the hill and through the hedge at the bottom as if she had been a pillow.’

Here it was that he discovered that her wrists were bound together behind her back with a kind of plait of things so intricate that he was quite unable to release them. He felt his pockets for his knife, but could not find it, and then recollected suddenly that he should have a new one with him, the third prize in a whist tournament in which he had taken part that evening. He found it wrapped in paper in his overcoat pocket, with it cut the thongs and set the little creature free. She immediately responded—the first sign of animation which she had displayed by throwing both her arms about his body and clinging to him in an ecstasy. Holding him so that, as he says, he felt the shuddering go all through her, she suddenly lowered her head and touched his wrist with her cheek. He says that instead of being cold to the touch, ‘like a fish’, as she had seemed to be when he first took her out of the gorse, she was now ‘as warm as toast, like a child’.

So far he had put her down for ‘a foreigner’, convenient term for defining something which one does not quite understand. She had none of his language, evidently; she was undersized, some, three feet six inches, by the look of her, and yet perfectly proportioned. She was most curiously dressed in a frock cut to the knee, and actually in nothing else at all. It left her barelegged and bare-armed, and was made, as he puts it himself, of stuff like cobweb, ‘those dusty, drooping kind which you put on your finger to stop bleeding’. He could not recognize the web, but was sure that it was neither linen nor cotton. It seemed to stick to her body wherever it touched a prominent part. ‘You could see very well, to say nothing of feeling, that she was well-made and well-nourished.’ She ought, as he judged, to be a child of five years old, ‘and a feather-weight at that’; but he felt certain that she must be ‘much more like sixteen’. It was that, I gather, which made him suspect her of being something outside experience. So far, then, it was safe to call her a foreigner: but he was not yet at the end of his discoveries.

Heavy footsteps, coming from the direction of Wilsford, in due time proved to be of Police Constable Gulliver, a neighbour of Beckwith’s and guardian of the peace in his own village. He lifted his lantern to flash it into the traveller’s eyes, and dropped it again with a pleasant ‘good

evening'. He added that it was inclined to be showery, which was more than true, as it was, at the moment, raining hard. With that, it seems, he would have passed on.

But Beckwith, whether smitten by self-consciousness of having been seen with a young woman in his arms at a suspicious hour of the night by the village policeman, or bursting perhaps with the importance of his affair, detained Gulliver. 'Just look at this,' he said boldly. 'Here's a pretty thing to have found on a lonely road. Foul play somewhere, I'm afraid;' he then exhibited his burden to the lantern light.

To his extreme surprise, however, the constable, after exploring the beam of light and all that it contained for some time in silence, reached out his hand for the knife which Beckwith still held open. He looked at it on both sides, examined the handle and gave it back. 'Foul play, Mr Beckwith?' he said, laughing. 'Bless you, they use bigger tools than that. That's just a toy, the like of that. Cut your hand with it, though, already, I see.' He must have noticed the handkerchief, for as he spoke the light from his lantern shone full upon the face and neck of the child, or creature, in the young man's arms, so clearly that, looking down at it, Beckwith himself could see the clear grey of its intensely watchful eyes, and the very pupils of them, diminished to specks of black. It was now, therefore, plain to him that what he held was a foreigner indeed, since the parish constable was unable to see it. Strap had smelt it, then seen it, and he, Beckwith, had seen it; but it was invisible to Gulliver. 'I felt now,' he says in his narrative, 'that something was wrong. I did not like the idea of taking it into the house; but I intended to make one more trial before I made up my mind about that. I said good night to Gulliver, put her on my bicycle and pushed her home. But first of all I took the handkerchief from her neck and put it in my pocket. There was no blood upon it, that I could see.'

His wife, as he had expected, was waiting at the gate for him. She exclaimed, as he had expected, upon the lateness of the hour. Beckwith stood for a little in the roadway before the house, explaining that Strap had bolted up the hill and had had to be looked for and fetched back. While speaking he noticed that Mrs Beckwith was as insensible to the creature on the bicycle as Gulliver the constable had been. Indeed, she went much farther to prove herself so than he, for she actually put her hand upon the handle-bar of the machine, and in order to that drove it right through the centre of the girl crouching there. Beckwith saw that done. 'I declare solemnly upon my honour,' he writes, 'that it was as if Mary had drilled a hole clean through the middle of her back. Through gown and skin and bone and all her arm went; and how it went in I don't know. To me it

seemed that her hand was on the handle-bar, while her upper arm, to the elbow, was in between the girl's shoulders. There was a gap from the elbow downwards where Mary's arm was inside the body; then from the creature's diaphragm her lower arm, wrist and hand came out. And all the time we were speaking the girl's eyes were on my face. I was now quite determined that I wouldn't have her in the house for a mint of money.'

He put her, finally, in the dog-kennel. Strap, as a favourite, lived in the house; but he kept a Greyhound in the garden, in a kennel surrounded by a sort of run made of iron poles and galvanized wire. It was roofed in with wire also, for the convenience of stretching a tarpaulin in wet weather. Here it was that he bestowed the strange being rescued from the down. It was clever, I think, of Beckwith to infer that what Strap had shown respect for would be respected by the Greyhound, and certainly bold of him to act upon his inference. However, events proved that he had been perfectly right. Bran, the Greyhound, was interested, highly interested, in his guest. The moment he saw his master, he saw what he was carrying. 'Quiet, Bran, quiet there,' was a very unnecessary adjuration. Bran stretched up his head and sniffed, but went no farther; and when Beckwith had placed his burden on the straw inside the kennel, Bran lay down, as if on guard, outside the opening and put his muzzle on his forepaws. Again Beckwith noticed that curious appearance of the eyes which the Fox-terrier's had made already. Bran's eyes were turned upwards to show the narrow arcs of white.

Before he went to bed, he tells us, but not before Mrs Beckwith had gone there, he took out a bowl of bread and milk to his patient. Bran, he found to be still stretched out before the entry; the girl was nestled clown in the straw, as if asleep or prepared to be so, with her face upon her hand. Upon an afterthought he went back for a clean pocket handkerchief, warm water and a sponge. With these, by the light of a candle, he washed the wound, dipped the rag in hazeline and applied it. This done, he touched the creature's head, nodded a good night and retired. 'She smiled at me very prettily,' he says. 'That was the first time she did it.'

There was no blood on the handkerchief which he had removed.

Early in the morning, following upon the adventure, Beckwith was out and about. He wished to verify the overnight experiences in the light of refreshed intelligence. On approaching the kennel he saw at once that it had been no dream. There, in fact, was the creature of his discovery playing with Bran the Greyhound, circling sedately about him, weaving her arms, pointing her toes, arching her graceful neck, stooping to him, as if inviting him to sport, darting away—'like a fairy,' says Beckwith, 'at

her magic, dancing in a ring.' Bran, he observed, made no effort to catch her, but crouched rather than sat, as if ready to spring. He followed her about with his eyes as far as he could; but when the course of her dance took her immediately behind him, he did not turn his head, but kept his eye fixed as far backward as he could, against the moment when she should come again into the scope of his vision. 'It seemed as important to him, as it had the day before to Strap, to keep her always in his eye. It seemed—and always seemed so long as I could study them together—intensely important.' Bran's mouth was stretched to 'a sort of grin'; occasionally he panted. When Beckwith entered the kennel and touched the dog (which took little notice of him), he found him trembling with excitement. His heart was heating at a great rate. He also drank quantities of water.

Beckwith, whose narrative, hitherto summarized, I may now quote, tells us that 'the creature was indescribably graceful and lightfooted. You couldn't hear the fall of her foot: you never could. Her dancing and circling about the cage seemed to be the most important business of her life; she was always at it, especially in bright weather. I shouldn't have called it restlessness so much as busyness. It really seemed to mean more to her than exercise or irritation at confinement. It was evident also that she was happy when so engaged. She used to sing. She sang also when she was sitting still with Bran; but not with such exhilaration.

'Her eyes were bright—when she was dancing about—with mischief and devilry. I cannot avoid that word, thought it does not describe what I really mean. She looked wild and outlandish and full of fun, as if she knew that she was teasing the dog, and yet couldn't help herself. When you say of a child that he looks wicked, you don't mean it literally; it is rather a compliment than not. So it was with her and her wickedness. She did look wicked, there's no mistake—able and willing to do wickedness; but I am sure she never meant to hurt Bran. They were always firm friends, though the dog knew very well who was the master.

'When you looked at her you did not think of her height. She was so complete; as well-made as a statuette. I could have spanned her waist with my two thumbs and middle fingers, and her neck (very nearly) with one hand. She was pale and inclined to be dusky in complexion, but not so dark as a gypsy; she had grey eyes, and dark brown hair, which she could sit upon if she chose. Her gown you could have sworn was made of cobweb; I don't know how else to describe it. As I had suspected, she wore nothing else, for while I was there that first morning, so soon as the sun came up over the hill she slipped it off her and stood dressed in nothing at all. She was a regular little Venus, that's all I can say. I never could get

accustomed to that weakness of hers for slipping off her frock, though no doubt it was very absurd. She had no sort of shame in it, so why on earth should I?

‘The food, I ought to mention, had disappeared: the bowl was empty. But I know now that Bran must have had it. So long as she remained in the kennel or about my place she never ate anything, nor drank either. If she had I must have known it, as I used to clean the run out every morning. I was always particular about that. I used to say that you couldn’t keep dogs too clean. But I tried her unsuccessfully, with all sorts of things: flowers, honey, dew—for I had read somewhere that fairies drink dew and suck honey out of flowers. She used to look at the little messes I made for her, and when she knew me better, would grimace at them, and look up in my face and laugh at me.

‘I have said that she used to sing sometimes. It was like nothing that I can describe. Perhaps the wind in the telegraph wires comes nearest to it, and yet that is an absurd comparison. I could never catch any words; indeed I did not succeed in learning a single word of her language. I doubt very much whether they have what we call a language—I mean, the people who are like her, her own people. They communicate with each other, I fancy, as she did with my dogs, inarticulately, but with perfect communication and understanding on either side. When I began to teach her English, I noticed that she had a kind of pity for me, a kind of contempt perhaps is nearer the mark, that I should be compelled to express myself in so clumsy a way. I am no philosopher, but I imagine that our need of putting one word after another may be due to our habit of thinking in sequence. If there is no such thing as Time in the other world, it should not be necessary there to frame speech in sentences at all. I am sure that Thumbeline (which was my name for her; I never learned her real name) spoke with Bran and Strap in flashes, which revealed her whole thought at once. So also they answered her, there’s no doubt. So also she contrived to talk with my little girl, who, although she was four years old and a great chatterbox, never attempted to say a single word of her own language to Thumbeline, yet communicated with her by the hour together. But I did not know anything of this for a month or more, though it must have begun almost at once.

‘I blame myself for it, myself only. I ought, of course, to have remembered that children are more likely to see fairies than grownups; but then—why did Florrie keep it all a secret? Why did she not tell her mother, or me, that she had seen a fairy in Bran’s kennel? The child was as open as the day, yet she concealed her knowledge from both of us without the least

difficulty. She seemed the same careless, laughing child she had always been; one could not have supposed her to have a care in the world; and yet for nearly six months she must have been full of care, having daily secret intercourse with Thumbeline and keeping her eyes open all the time lest her mother or I should find her out. Certainly she could have taught me something in the way of keeping secrets. I know that I kept mine very badly, and blame myself more than enough for keeping it at all. God knows what we might have been spared, if, on the night I brought her home, I had told Mary the whole truth! And yet how could I have convinced her that she was impaling someone with her arm while her hand rested on the bar of the bicycle? Is not that an absurdity on the face of it? Yes, indeed; but the sequel is no absurdity. That's the terrible fact.

'I kept Thumbeline in the kennel for the whole winter. She seemed happy enough there with the dogs, and, of course, she had had Florrie, too, though I did not find that out until the spring. I don't doubt, now, that if I had kept her in there altogether, she would have been perfectly contented.

'The first time I saw Florrie with her, I was amazed. It was a Sunday morning. There was our four-year-old child standing at the wire, pressing herself against it, and Thumbeline close to her. Their faces almost touched; their fingers were interlaced; I am certain that they were speaking to each other in their own fashion, by flashes, without words. I watched them for a bit; I saw Bran come and sit up on his haunches and join them. He looked from one to another, and all about; and then he saw me.

'Now that is how I know that they were all three in communication, because, the very next moment, Florrie turned round and ran to me, and said in her pretty baby-talk, "Talking to Bran. Florrie talking to Bran". If this was willful deceit, it was most accomplished. It could not have been better done. "And who else were you talking to, Florrie?" I said. She fixed her round blue eyes upon me, and said shortly, "No-one else." And I could not get her to confess or admit, then or at any time afterwards, that she had any cognizance at all of the fairy in Bran's kennel, although their communications were daily, and often lasted for hours at a time. I don't know that it makes things any better, but I have thought sometimes that the child believed me to be as insensible to Thumbeline as her mother was. She can only have believed it at first, of course, but that may have prompted her to a concealment which she did not afterwards care to confess to.

'Be this as it may, Florrie, in fact, behaved with Thumbeline exactly as the two dogs did. She made no attempt to catch her at her circlings and wheelings about the kennel, nor to follow her wonderful dances, nor (in

her presence) to imitate them. But she was (like the dogs) aware of nobody else when under the spell of Thumbeline's personality; and when she had got to know her, she seemed to care for nobody else at all. I ought, no doubt, to have foreseen that and guarded against it.

'Thumbeline was extremely attractive. I never saw such eyes as hers, such mysterious fascination. She was nearly always good-tempered, nearly always happy; but sometimes she had fits of temper and kept herself to herself. Nothing then would get her out of the kennel, where she would lie curled up like an animal with her knees to her chin and one arm thrown over her face. Bran was always wretched at these times, and did all he knew to coax her out. He ceased to care for me or my wife after she came to us, and instead of being wild at the prospect of his Saturday and Sunday runs, it was hard to get him along. I had to take him on a lead until we had turned to go home; then he would set off by himself, in spite of hallooing and scolding, at a long steady gallop, and one would find him waiting crouched at the gate of his run, and Thumbeline on the ground inside it, with her legs crossed like tailor, mocking and teasing him with her wonderful shining eyes. Only once or twice did I see her worse than sick or sorry; then she was transported with rage and another person altogether. She never touched me—and why or how I had offended her I have no notion—but she buzzed and hovered about me like an angry bee. She appeared to have wings, which hummed in their furious movement; she was red in the face; her eyes burned; she grinned at me and ground her little teeth together. A curious shrill noise came from her, like the screaming of a gnat or hover-fly; but no words, never any words. Bran showed me his teeth too, and would not look at me. It was very odd.

'When I looked in, on my return home, she was as merry as usual, and as affectionate. I think she had no memory.

'I am trying to give all the particulars I was able to gather from my observation. In some things she was difficult, in others very easy to teach. For instance, I got her to learn in no time that she ought to wear her clothes, such as they were, when I was with her. She certainly preferred to go without them, especially in the sunshine; but by leaving her, the moment she slipped her frock off, I soon made her understand that if she wanted me she must behave herself according to my notions of behaviour. She got that fixed in her little head, but even so she used to do her best to hoodwink me. She would slip out one shoulder when she thought I wasn't looking, and before I knew where I was, half of her would be gleaming in the sun like satin. Directly I noticed it I used to frown, and then she would pretend to be ashamed of herself, hang her head and wriggle her frock up

to its place again. However, I could never teach her to keep her skirts about her knees. She was as innocent as a baby about that sort of thing.

‘I taught her some English words, and a sentence or two. That was towards the end of her confinement to the kennel, about March. I used to touch parts of her, or of myself, or Bran, and peg away at the names of them. Mouth, eyes, ears, hands, chest, tail, back, front: she learned all those and more. Eat, drink, laugh, cry, love, kiss, those also. As for kissing (apart from the word) she proved herself to be an expert. She kissed me, Florrie, Bran, Strap, indifferently, one as soon as another, and any rather than none, and all four for choice.

‘I learned some things myself, more than a thing or two. I don’t mind owning that one thing was to value my wife’s steady and tried affection far above the wild love of this unbalanced, unearthly little creature, who seemed to be like nothing so much as a woman with the conscience left out. The conscience, we believe, is the still small voice of the Deity crying to us in the dark recesses of the body; pointing out the path of duty; teaching respect for the opinion of the world, for tradition, decency and order. It is thanks to conscience that a man is true and a woman modest. Not that Thumbeline could be called immodest, unless a baby can be so described or an animal. But could I be called true? I greatly fear that I could not—in fact, I know it too well. I meant no harm; I was greatly interested; and there was always before me the real difficulty of making Mary understand that something was in the kennel which she couldn’t see. It would have led to great complications, even if I had persuaded her of the fact. No doubt she would have insisted on my getting rid of Thumbeline—but how on earth could I have done that if Thumbeline had not chosen to go? But, for all that, I know very well that I ought to have told her, cost what it might. If I had done it I should have spared myself lifelong regret, and should only have gone without a few weeks of extraordinary interest, which I now see clearly could not have been good for me, as not being founded upon any revealed Christian principle, and most certainly were not worth the price I had to pay for them.

‘I learned one more curious fact which I must not forget. Nothing would induce Thumbeline to touch or pass over anything made of zinc. I don’t know the reason for it; but gardeners will tell you that the way to keep a plant from slugs is to put a zinc collar round it. It is due to that I was able to keep her in Bran’s run without difficulty. To have got out she would have had to pass zinc. The wire was all galvanized.

‘She showed her dislike of it in numerous ways: one was her care to avoid touching the sides or tops of the enclosure when she was at her

gambols. At such times, when she was at her wildest, she was all over the place, skipping high like a lamb, twisting like a leveret, wheeling round and round in circles like a young dog, or skimming, like a swallow on the wing, above ground. But she never made a mistake; she turned in a moment or flung herself backward if there was the least risk of contact. When Florrie used to converse with her from outside, in that curious silent way the two had, it would always be the child that put its hands through the wire, never Thumbeline. I once tried to put her against the roof when I was playing with her. She screamed like a shot hare and would not come out of the kennel all day. There was no doubt at all about her feelings for zinc. All other metals seemed indifferent to her.

'With the advent of spring weather, Thumbeline became not only more beautiful, but wilder, and exceedingly restless. She now coaxed me to let her out, and against my judgement, I did it; she had to be carried over the entry; for when I had set the gate wide open and pointed her the way into the garden, she squatted down in her usual attitude of attention, with her legs crossed, and watched me, waiting. I wanted to see how she would get through the hateful wire, so went away and hid myself, leaving her alone with Bran. I saw her creep to the entry and peer at the wire. What followed was curious. Bran came up wagging his tail and stood close to her, his side against her head; he looked down, inviting her to go out with him. Long looks passed between them, and then Bran stooped his head, she put her arms around his neck, twined her feet about his foreleg, and was carried out. Then she became a mad thing, now bird now moth; high and low, round and round, flashing about the place for all the world like a humming-bird moth, perfectly beautiful in her motions (whose ease always surprised me), and equally so in her colouring of soft grey and dusky-rose flesh. Bran grew a puppy again and whipped about after her in great circles round the meadow. But though he was famous at coursing, and has killed his hares single-handed, he was never once near Thumbeline. It was a curious sight and made me late for business.

'By degrees she got to be very bold, and taught me boldness too, and (I am ashamed to say) greater degrees of deceit. She came freely into the house and played with Florrie up and down stairs; she got on my knee at meal-times, or evenings when my wife and I were together. Fine tricks she played with me, I must own. She spilled my tea for me, broke cups and saucers, scattered my patience cards, caught poor Mary's knitting wool and rolled it about the room. The cunning little creature knew that I dared not scold her or make any kind of fuss. She used to beseech me for forgiveness occasionally when I looked very glum, and would touch my

cheek to make me look at her imploring eyes, and keep me looking at her till I smiled. Then she would put her arms round my neck and pull herself up to my level and kiss me, and then nestle down in my arms and pretend to sleep. By and by, when my attention was called off her, she would pinch me, or tweak my necktie, and make me look again at her wicked eye peeping out from under my arm. 1 had to kiss her again, of course, and at last she might go to sleep in earnest. She seemed able to sleep at any hour or in any place, just like an animal.

‘I had some difficulty in arranging for the night when once she had made herself free of the house. She saw no reason whatever for our being separated; but I circumvented her by nailing a strip of zinc all round the door; and I put one around Florrie’s too. I pretended to my wife that it was to keep out draughts. Thumbcline was furious when she found out how she had been tricked. I think she never quite forgave me for it. Where she hid herself at night I am not sure. I think on the sitting-room sofa; but on mild mornings I used to find her outdoors, playing round Bran’s kennel.

‘Strap, our Fox-terrier, picked up some rat-poison towards the end of April and died in the night. Thumbeline’s way of taking that was very curious. It shocked me a good deal. She had never been so friendly with him as with Bran, though certainly more at ease in his company than mine. The night before he died, I remembered that she and Bran and he had been having high games in the meadow, which had ended by their all lying down together in a heap, Thumbeline’s head on Bran’s flank, and her legs between his. Her arm had been round Strap’s neck in a most loving way. They made quite a picture for a Royal Academician; “Tired of Play” or “The End of it Romp” I can fancy he would call it. Next morning I found poor old Strap stiff and staring, and Thumbeline and Bran at their games just the same. She actually jumped over him and all about him as if he had been a lump of earth or stone. Just some such thing he was to her; she did not seem able to realize that there was the cold body of her friend. Bran just sniffed him over and left him, but Thumbeline showed no consciousness that he was there at all. I wondered, was this heartlessness of obliquity? But I have never found the answer to my question.

‘Now I come to the tragical part of my story, and wish with all my heart that I could leave it out. But beyond the full confession I have made to my wife, the County Police and the newspapers, I feel that I should not shrink from any admission that may be called for of how much I have been to blame. In May, on the 13 of May, Thumbeline, Bran and our only child, Florrie, disappeared.

‘It was a day, I remember well, of wonderful beauty. I had left all three

of them together in the water meadow, little thinking of what was in store for us before many hours. Thumbeline had been crowning Florrie with a wreath of flowers. She had gathered cuckoo-pint and marsh marigolds and woven them together, far more deftly than any of us could have done, into a chaplet. I remember the curious winding, wandering air she had been singing (without any words, as usual) over her business, and how she touched each flower first with her lips, and then brushed it lightly across her bosom before she wove it in. She had kept her eyes on me as she did it, looking up from under her brows, as if to see whether I knew what she was about.

'I don't doubt now but that she was bewitching Florrie by this curious performance, which every flower had to undergo separately: but fool that I was, I thought nothing of it at the time, and bicycled off to Salisbury, leaving them there.

'At noon my poor wife came to me at the Bank, distracted with anxiety and fatigue. She had run most of the way, she gave me to understand. Her news was that Florrie and Bran could not be found anywhere. She said that she had gone to the gate of the meadow to call the child in, and, not seeing her, or getting any answer, she had gone down to the river at the bottom. Here she had found a few picked wild flowers but no other traces. There were no footprints in the mud, either of a child or a dog. Having spent the morning with some of the neighbours in a fruitless search, she had now come to me.

'My heart was like lead, and shame prevented me from telling her the truth, as I was sure it must be. But my own conviction of it clogged all my efforts. Of what avail could it be to inform the police or organize search-parties, knowing what I knew only too well? However, I did put Gulliver in communication with the head office in Sarum, and everything possible was done. We explored a circuit of six miles about Wilsford; every fold of the hills, every spinney, every hedgerow was thoroughly examined. But that first night of grief had broken down my shame: I told my wife the whole truth in the presence of the Reverend Richard Walsh, the congregational minister, and in spite of her absolute incredulity, and, I may add, scorn, next morning I repeated it to Chief Inspector Notcutt of Salisbury. Particulars got into the local papers by the following Saturday: and next I had to face the ordeal of the *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily News*, *Daily Graphic*, *Star* and other London journals. Most of these newspapers sent representatives to lodge in the village, many of them with photographic cameras. All this hateful notoriety I had brought upon myself, and did my best to bear like the humble, contrite Christian, which I hope I may say I

have become. We found no trace of our dear one, and never have to this day. Bran, too, had completely vanished. I have not cared to keep a dog since.

‘Whether my dear wife ever believed my account, I cannot be sure. She has never reproached me for my wicked thoughtlessness, that’s certain. Mr Walsh, our respected pastor, who has been so kind as to read this paper, told me more than once that he could hardly doubt it. The Salisbury police made no comments upon it one way or another. My colleagues at the Bank, out of respect for my grief and sincere repentance, treated me with a forbearance for which I can never be too grateful. I need not add that every word of this is absolutely true. I made notes of the most remarkable characteristics of the being I called Thumbeline at the time of remarking them, and those notes are still in my possession.’

Pendlebury’s Trophy

John Eyton

I

Arthur St John Pendlebury—known to his intimates as ‘Pen’—was the beau-ideal of the cavalry subaltern, with plenty of friends, money and self-assurance. Before he had been in the country a year, India was at his feet; this is not to say that he had overstudied her languages or customs, but that he had sufficient means for fulfilling any of his aspirations, which were limited to picnics, polo ponies and shikar trophies. To the latter his first long leave was devoted. To one who has stalked the Highland stag under the eye of an experienced man, the stag of Kashmir seems easy game, and satisfaction was in Pendlebury’s eye as he ran it over his pile of kit on Rawalpindi station: new portmanteau; new gun-cases, containing his twelve-bore, his Mannlicher Schonhauer, his Holland and Holland High Velocity; fieldglasses and telescope; kodak, for recording triumphs; new tent, fully equipped with every device for comfort and cooking altogether a capital outfit, pointing to an interesting addition to the Scotch heads in the hall at Pendlebury, for he could not fail to bag a Kashmiri stag or two in three weeks. To this sentiment Ali Baksh, his Mohammedan servant, agreed in perfect English… capital man, Ali Baksh —a real treasure.

The drive from Rawalpindi to Srinagar was quite pleasant, the scenery being almost English, though the road was only soso. On arrival, Pendlebury resisted the tame temptations of picnic-making, and got down to business at once. He was not going to be bothered with consulting the old local bores in the Club, because the obvious thing to do was to get hold of a native fellow who could talk English a bit, and knew the ropes from A to Z, and such a man was known to Ali Baksh, who would find him out quietly and persuade him to accompany the saheb. His friend, he said, was

the best man in Kashmir, who being in constant request, would accompany only noted shikaris. Ali Baksh tactfully insinuated that Pendlebury belonged to the latter category, and Pendlebury of course believed him—for even the finished product of Eton and the Bullingdon is often singularly artless in the experienced hands of an Indian bearer.

At eleven o'clock on the morning after arrival, Ali Baksh produced the paragon, whose name was also something Baksh Pir, Baksh, Pendlebury believed him to say. He was a fine-looking, well-set-up fellow, with fierce moustaches and glittering eyes; nicely turned out too, with a khaki suit of military cut, mauve shirt and neat puttees; he carried a long mountaineering pole, and had glasses slung in a leather case over his shoulder, and was altogether the type of what a shikari ought to look, and indeed does look in magazine illustrations. To the experienced old bores in the Club, he might have appeared to overdo the part, but to Pendlebury he was the very thing. Besides, he knew all the likely spots, had excellent chits from officers in quite good regiments, indicating invariable success, and, lastly, got on well with Ali Baksh.

So Pir Baksh was engaged on the spot—for the modest sum of one hundred rupees, paid in advance, for the three weeks' trip, and on the understanding that he would waste no time over uncertainties, but would lead on direct to the spot where an astounding stag had been marked down. About this stag there was no doubt whatever, for Pir Baksh himself resided in its neighbourhood, and knew its haunts and habits so well that the stag might almost be said to be one of the family. He had been keeping it, he said, for a General, but could not resist the temptation of seeing it fall to the rifle of so noble a saheb as Pendlebury. They parted quite effusively, after payment had been made, and Ali Baksh accompanied Pir Baksh to make the bandobast. Pendlebury washed his hands of these matters, so naturally did not see Pir hand over the stipulated thirty rupees to his friend Ali outside.

As Pendlebury remarked in the mess on his return from leave. 'What I like about this country is that you only have to get hold of a good servant, tell him what you want to do and how you like it, and say "Bazar chalo, bandobast kayo." He'll do the rest. Now I had a first-class bandobast up in Kashmir—never had to say a word myself; no use messing a good man about.'

And so it was—his two men certainly were not messed about, for between them they did everything, and ran Pendlebury—engaging ponies and carriers on the basis of a twenty per cent commission for themselves; leading in men from the shops, who staggered beneath a vast weight of

stores, some of which were destined for Pendlebury's consumption; making a great show of polishing things and cleaning clean rifles. There was nothing wrong with that bandobast, and Pendlebury could well afford to pay the hundred and fifty odd rupees, which it was found necessary to disburse. In fact, the charm of the whole thing was that Pendlebury believed throughout that he was saving money—a fact which redounds to the credit of the astute pair.

The start for the first camp was worth watching; first rode Pendlebury, every inch a cavalry officer, his blue eyes full of good humour, and his cheeks quite pink with excitement; his shooting suit was good to look upon, and Ali Baksh could certainly polish boots. At a respectful distance behind him rode Pir Baksh, resplendent in Jodhpur breeches, while, last of all, Ali marshalled the kit, a fine staff in one hand, and in the other that emblem of the bearer, a brass hurricane lamp. It was a procession to be proud of, and successful shikar was in the very air.

The haunt of the famous stage was ten marches away, and Pendlebury beguiled them with small-game shooting and the taking of snapshots. The marches were very well run, and it was not the fault of Pir Baksh that the leather suitcase, the telescope, and the cartridge bag got lost in the process of crossing a river. In fact, Pendlebury thought Pir Baksh had behaved very openly about the whole thing, and had seemed to regard the matter as a personal loss—whereas, in truth, it was exactly the opposite. But for this mishap all went swimmingly.

They reached the little village at the edge of the forest in the evening, and Pendlebury's tent was pitched under delightful chenal trees near a little stream which looked first-class for trout. He could hardly sleep for excitement, and lay awake picturing the record stag and its record head, and hearing the sound of a high-pitched song in the bazaar, where, had he but known it, Pir and Ali were entertaining the local shikaris at his expense. Finally he shouted, *'Choop. Choop karo ek dam*!' and lay back with the satisfaction of one whose commands are obeyed.

Next day it was arranged that Pir Baksh should go for khabar of the stag, while Pendlebury fished the river for trout. So Pendlebury sallied out with his split-cane and fly-boxes, and a man to carry his net, and another man to bear his lunch, while Pir Baksh, with his glasses and pole and preposterous jodhpuris, departed in the opposite direction. It was curious that so confident and so famous a shikari should require the assistance of a local man, a stranger of ragged and unkempt appearance—but we will suppose that he too needed some one to carry his lunch.

Pendlebury had a pleasant enough day by the bright, clear stream, and

brought home several minute trout for his dinner. Of the movements of Pir Baksh little is known, except that he went quite a distance into the forest, starting at 10 a.m. and returning at noon, after which hour he sat with Ali and the local talent in the bazaar. Yet, when he was announced at 8 p.m., he entered the tent wearily enough, with much bazaar dust on his boots and puttees—so much that Pendlebury could see that the fellow had had a pretty stiff day of it. Pir Baksh was mysterious and confidential; in response to Pendlebury's eager inquiries, he allowed that he had seen the stag, but when Pendlebury whooped with delight, he qualified this intelligence with the remark that the stag was bahut hoshiar, and had only arrived on the scene in the late evening, after a complete day of tireless, lonely watching on the part of Pir Baksh. He had heard the stag at intervals and had not dared to move for fear of making it nervous. It would be as well to let it rest, under due observation, for a day or two, and then make certain of it. Incidentally he had heard in the bazaar on his return that another saheb, a well-known hunter, had set his heart on this stag and had hunted it for a month, but, since he had not seen fit to engage the services of Pir Baksh, he had not had a shot. It was finally suggested that Pendlebury would do well to visit a noted pool three miles down stream for the next day or two, and this Pendlebury agreed to do. After all, Pir Baksh knew the ropes, and this stag was worth waiting for.

So for the next two days Pendlebury lashed the stream for trout, while each morning Pir Baksh started with a set face for the jungle and spent the day in the bazaar, arriving each evening at a later hour and more visibly weary and dusty. Each evening, too, the antlers of the stag had grown with its cunning. Rowland Ward's book, which Pendlebury of course carried, had no record in it to touch this head, as described by Pir Baksh; to Rowland Ward the head should go for setting up—none of your local mochis. Pendlebury saw the footnote in that book, 'Shot by A. St J. Pendlebury, Esq, the Blue Hussars, Kashmir, 1920. A remarkable head, with record points, length and span'. On the third evening Pir Baksh was very late indeed. Pendlebury had turned in, and had long lain listening to a perfect orgy in the bazaar, when, about midnight, Ali Baksh gave that deprecating cough whereby the Indian servant makes known his humble presence, and announced Pir Baksh.

A tired, grimy, dusty picture he made in the light of the electric torch, and a pitiful tale he told. He had sat up without food for a day and half a night

'Bahut kaam kiya, saheb. Main bilkull bhuka ho gya—bilkull. Kuchh nahin khaya gya.'

Great indeed had been the sufferings of the worthy man (considering they had been experienced in the bazaar), but he had seen the stag at close quarters, and something told him that the saheb would shoot it tomorrow.

Such a stag—a Barasingha indeed, with antlers like trees, and it roar like a river; such a stag had not been seen for twenty years, when 'Ismith' saheb had missed just such a one, and had given him, Pir Baksh, his new rifle and a hundred golis, vowing he would never shoot again…'*Kabhi ham aisa barawala nahin dekha*.' Pendlebury was, of course, half out of his mind with excitement, and, had it been feasible, he would have gone out there and then and tried conclusions. As it was, he contented himself with lauding Pir Baksh to the skies, an honour which the latter accepted with sweet humility. He would make the bandobast; they would start out after tiffin, and would lie up till the evening. Let the saheb have no doubts; he would slay that stag, and his name would be great in Kashmir…'*Kuchh shaqq nahin hai; qaza zarur hoga…zarur*.'

Like an echo outside the tent, Ali Baksh repeated the comforting 'zarur'.

II

Pendlebury arose at 6 a.m. for the stag which he was to see at 6 p.m., and spent the most nerve-racking morning of his life. He cut himself shaving; he fiddled with his rifles, and asked a dozen times whether he should take the High Velocity or the little Mannlicher; he counted out ten rounds of ammunition and laid them ready…then decided to rake the other rifle, and counted out twenty more; then, finally changed his mind and decided to take both, with about thirty rounds; he stuffed his pipe too full, and broke the vulcanite stem in tapping it out; changed his boots three times; smoked quantities of cigarettes, and burnt a hole in his copy of Rowland Ward with one of them; and had neither a good breakfast nor a sufficient lunch.

In fact Pendlebury did his utmost to spoil his eye and his hand, instead of strolling out with a rod and forgetting the great stag in the excitement of landing a pound trout, as any of the old bores at the Club would have advised him to do.

At last the great moment arrived, and Ali Baksh whispered, 'Pir Baksh here, sir.' With an immense effort Pendlebury assumed the nonchalance he did not feel, and strolled out of the tent, where he found Pir Baksh carrying a rifle and looking very businesslike in ancient garments; a ragged, disreputable stranger had the other rifle. When Pendlebury, who was feeling nervous enough already, objected to the latter's presence, Pir

Baksh pointed out the advantages of having a man on the spot to help skin the shikar, and so had his way. On the way Pendlebury did a great many things which the old bores at the Club would have deprecated: he smoked too many cigarettes—'to steady his nerves'; he slogged along instead of walking quietly, thus laying up a clammy shirt for himself in the evening; also, he cursed the men for not hurrying, and then cursed still more when, half-way, he discovered that he had forgotten his second-best pipe, his flask and his sandwiches. However, it was too late to do anything then.

They climbed uphill through thick forest bordering a little hill stream till they came to an open glen, with green moss at their feet and tall trees around them. Half-way up the glen Pir Baksh whispered a halt, and Pendlebury was led behind the trunk of a fallen tree, where he was asked to wait, without moving, while Pir Baksh and the stranger moved furtively off under cover of the trees.

Hours seemed to pass as Pendlebury fingered his Mannlicher, the final choice, expecting every moment to see the dark shape loom in the glen. Time and time again he opened his breech to see if the thing were working, and feverishly moved the backsight up and down the slide, finally leaving it at five hundred yards, when a sudden sound startled him.

It was booming, long-drawn…the unmistakable roar of a stag far above him. He was at once certain that Pir Baksh had messed up the whole show, and that he ought to be farther up the glen; it would be dark for a certainty before the stag moved down; it was getting dark already. A twig cracked behind him, and he turned to see Pir Baksh behind him, holding his finger to his lips.

'*Barawala ata,*' whispered Pir Baksh, while Pendlebury got into a position of readiness; there was no doubt about the approach of the stag, for it roared more than once, and was evidently moving down the little stream.

A quarter of an hour passed—the sun sank—still no view of the stag; in five minutes it would be too dark to see the foresight. Pendlebury began to fidget, when suddenly Pir Baksh touched his arm, and pointed… a dark shape was moving under the trees by the stream.

'*Woh hai, saheb,*' whispered Pir Baksh. '*Maro. Maro. Zarur lag jaega.*'

Pendlebury aimed his wavering piece in the direction of the dark shape, and squeezed the trigger…

There was a flash and a kick—then a commotion under the trees, as a big animal splashed with a snort through the tiny stream and crashed into the undergrowth beyond—farther and farther away.

‘Damn!’ said Pendlebury—not so Pir Baksh, who sprang to his feet with a wild, ‘*Lag gya. Lag gya*. *Zakhmi hai*,’ and, motioning to Pendlebury to stay where he was, ran towards the stream, throwing out a parting, ‘*Milega zarur*.’

It was quite dark when Pir Baksh returned and informed the ecstatic Pendlebury that the stag ‘*sekht zakhmi ho gya*. *Khun bahut hai. Aiye, saheb*.’ Up jumped Pendlebury and followed across the glen and the stream, where Pir Baksh borrowed his electric torch and searched the ground…yes, there was blood…first a mere drop on a leaf; then, five yards on, a bigger splash; farther still, a regular patch dyeing the ground. Pir Baksh explained that the beast had been hit forward—a truly wonderful shot—and had carried on to die. He would be found quite dead in the morning—till then there was nothing to be done.

On the way home, Pir Baksh, in the intervals of exultation, promised to make an early start, dissuading Pendlebury from accompanying him by remarking that this was only poor shikari’s work, unsuitable for the Saheb Bahadur. Pendlebury was fagged out, and let him have his way; before he went to bed, he had a last loving look at the Mannlicher, which he found sighted at five hundred yards! This he put down to carelessness in carrying, and congratulated himself that he had not had it at five hundred when he fired; good shot as it had been, he would not have put the beast at over seventy yards…funny how he had felt certain that he had hit him before Pir Baksh spoke!

III

Pendlebury’s next morning was almost as bad as the last. He clung to the camp, springing out of his chair at the slightest sound; he had occasion to throw his boots at Ali because the latter had made a noise like Pir; once more he failed to do justice to his meals, and spent the day alternating between triumph and despair. But the hours never brought Pir Baksh, and at last he turned into bed and lay awake, listening. Presently he heard a hubbub, then saw lights outside. As he sprang out of bed he was greeted with the welcome, ‘*Mil gya…saheb*,’ in the dulcet tones of Pir Baksh; he rushed out, and there, amid a crowd of admiring servants, stood Pir Baksh himself, grimed with mud and dust from head to foot, his clothes artistically torn, blood on his coat but in his hands great antlers, branching out from a draggled mask.

Pendlebury whooped; the servants sucked in their breath with wonder; and Pir Baksh, in shrill tones, raised his paean of victory. Twenty miles

had he toiled; fifteen hours without food; but for the saheb's honour he would have dropped with fatigue and died. Even in death the great stag had been wondrous cunning, and would never have been brought to book but for the superior cunning of Pir Baksh; there had been a personal encounter, in which danger had been gladly braved for the saheb, and a valuable life risked. Great was the name of 'Pendlebury saheb', who gives life to poor men, even to the humble shikari, beneath his feet…

This stirring recital—composed that day in the bazaar—was followed by that little lull which tactfully indicates baksheesh to the least imaginative of us, and Pendlebury rose to the occasion nobly. There was a hundred-rupee note for Pir Baksh; twenty for the disreputable stranger who had given *bahri madad*, and who was described as a '*sidha admi…kam kerne wala bhi*'; twenty more for Ali Baksh for being a good fellow; and mithai for all the camp. Pendlebury did things handsomely.

▪

The old Club bores might, with reason, have sniffed at that head had they seen it; but, as it happens, it was packed straight off to Pendlebury's agents in Bombay, for shipping to London, on the advice of Pir Baksh—so there was no one to call attention to a resemblance between these antlers and a pair produced by the disreputable stranger aforesaid on the occasion of Pir Baksh's first visit to the bazaar. In point of fact, both pairs had a similar chip off of one of the brow points.

The stranger had asked twenty rupees for this pair…but who can fathom the mind of the East?

Another trivial detail…Pir Baksh and the said stranger had slain a young stag on the second day; while Pendlebury was fishing, for they had feasted the village with fresh venison that night. It was also on record that Pir Baksh had retained the mask, and had bottled a small quantity of blood.

One more fact—Pendlebury had been mistaken about his sighting, and the stag at which he fired in the dusk was not a warrantable one; at least, so the stranger informed me afterwards. Not that it matters, for the shot went well over its back.

But what matters? The great head has the pride of place at Pendlebury Hall, and Pendlebury is happy whenever he sees it.

And, anyway, Pir Baksh was an artist.

The Great Retreat

Aubrey Wade

The twenty-first of March 1918 is a date that can never be forgotten in the history of the Great War. It nearly spelled defeat for the Allies—it was the day that the great retreat began. This is the vivid story of a man who was with the artillery, and whose guns helped to cover that retreat. When the retreat began, they were stationed at Jussy, and it is at Jussy that his story opens.

At half-past four in the morning I thought the world was coming to an end.

We awoke to the sound of debris, which was flying right and left from the explosion of a great shell somewhere near at hand. Before I had properly grasped what had occurred, another shell came down with a terrific roar just outside. I had a momentary glimpse of the end of the structure collapsing like a piece of stage scenery; the whole place shook about our ears with the violence of the explosion; I felt sure the next one would annihilate us. Frantically I dragged on my clothes and cursed myself for being such a fool as to undress in spite of the warning. Shells were falling everywhere now in a heavy bombardment. More frequent flashes lit up the windows, and while I tugged desperately at my big field-boots, something ripped through the woodwork near my face. A great hole showed where it passed through the wall; my candle had disappeared, leaving me to scramble for the rest of my equipment in a darkness charged with terror.

And then, amid the crash of the shells, we heard a voice: ‘Stand to the horses! Stand to the horses!’

There was a movement to the door, a careful hesitating advance into the darkness outside; one by one the drivers filed out and went over to the

horse-lines on the other side of the field. I was last through the door, and on my way out I spotted some one huddled up in bed right by the entrance. I knew whose bed it was, it was that of a certain lanky Scottish recruit, who was on the sick-list with boils all over him. I shook him urgently. ‘Come on, man; you’ll be killed if you stop here!’

A weak voice answered me from beneath the blankets: ‘Och awa’ wi’ ye. I’m aff duty!’

‘You’d better come. It’s not safe here, mind.’

‘I’m of duty, I tell ye!’

There was not much time to waste on a lunatic like that, so I gave him up and followed the others; and half-way over to the horses I was glad I had not waited any longer, for a shell shrieked into the exact centre of the four huts and must have killed him as he lay there.

In the stables, I took hold of my horse and led her out across the field to where the rest of the waggon-line occupants loomed up in the heavy fog that shrouded everything. It was a thick, cold, clammy sort of mist, so dense that it was impossible to see more than a few yards in front of one’s face. Here, away from the huts, there were no shells dangerously close; the violence of the bombardment was concentrated on the huts, the village behind, and the roads to the line and back to Flavy. I stood with the reins looped over my arm, my little mare grazing quietly, for perhaps a quarter of an hour, getting a glimpse of the others now and then through the fog. A full hour passed, during which time the shelling seemed to get even worse, so that when I heard some one calling me by name, I guessed there had been something happening at the guns.

And I was not wrong. I was wanted to replace casualties.

Our little party of gunners and signallers left the wagonline as the mist was clearing. We could see the road quite plainly in front of us—so plainly, in fact, that we saw things on it which decided us not to take the road at all, but make a detour across country. Only a few hours previously I had ridden along that road in the light of the stars, and it had seemed like a country road at home in its untouched whiteness; but now it was different. The shells had torn great holes in its length, and with the shells had come the red splashes of death where ammunition-waggons and infantry transport had been caught in the open when the barrage started. Smashed vehicles festooned its borders; horses lay there rigid alongside them, and occasionally a blotch of khaki.

The gun-position looked somehow different. Something had been happening there, too. Shell-holes were dotted about between the guns, gaping holes which showed up glaringly against the smooth green of the

turf, and the guns were in action with the covers off and piles of ammunition ready at the trails. No shells came over as we walked on to the position, and ahead in the line the landscape was beginning to show its accustomed outlines as the fog lifted. Outside the TDO there was a little crowd of gunners, and an officer bending over someone who was lying on the grass at their feet. It was poor old Corporal S, of the signallers, who had caught it badly, and was about to be carried away to the dressing-station. I looked at his face as the stretcher passed me, and recognition came into his eyes. And then they called me into the dugout to take over the telephone.

All the morning the gunners ‘stood’ ready to fire as soon as we should hear where the enemy had got to in their advance. No information had come down yet except the tales the wounded had to tell of how they had been suddenly overwhelmed in the frontline and surrounded by hordes of Jerries in the fog. The enemy had broken through all right after the terrific bombardment of the early hours, but he was held up somewhere or other, and now and again the rattle of machine guns came back to us.

The front grew quieter as the morning wore on. Shelling became less frequent. But the fog had cleared completely, and every moment we expected orders for action, now that observation of the enemy movements was possible. Towards midday the noises of firing dropped to an occasional shell or so, and then came silence. It was all very mysterious and alarming. What was happening up there in front? Should we see the Boches coming over?

It was half-past twelve when the first message came over the phone. Five minutes later the range had been worked out and the battery was in action, banging away at some unseen target over the low slopes in front of us, wooded slopes towards which we had directed half-fearful glances during the morning. With minor alterations of range, the guns kept it up for the next hour, two rounds per gun per minute, and I seized the opportunity of getting out on the position to have a look at things.

Directly ahead the rising ground precluded all view of the line, so my sightseeing was limited to the flanks. On the right there was another battery in action about half a mile away, going strong with flashing salvoes. I looked to the left, and then I saw something which made my heart contract and sent me running back to the TDO to fetch Ross out to have a look.

The infantry were running away.

Down the slopes they came, throwing away their rifles as they ran, coming down towards the guns at the double in twos and threes, hatless

and wholly demoralized, calling out to us as they passed that Jerry was through and that it was all over. No use staying there with those guns, they yelled as they ran by; he was through! Privates, non-commissioned officers, running for their lives out of the horror they had tried to stand up to all that day, running past our guns in increasing numbers, and making us realize to the full the desperate plight we were in. Why should we not retire as well and save the guns?

But the Major was out on the position now, tight-lipped and grim, swinging his revolver in his hand and telling us all that no man was to leave the guns without orders or he would be shot; watching the rise ahead and then glancing back at the broken remnant of the battalion fleeing in disorder; sweeping the skyline with his glasses for the first signs of grey figures coming over—we were to stay.

Towards three o'clock more and more infantry retired on our left and made us feel that we would shortly be the only people in the line at all. Messages came through with increasing rapidity ordering us to fire here and there on the advancing enemy. The ammunition was running out and an orderly was sent galloping off to the waggon-line for more. The whole brigade was now firing salvo after salvo into Lambay Wood, just in front, where masses of the Jerries were. Across the front as far as the eye could see there was no other artillery brigade firing; the one on our right had packed up at midday, and we were alone on the sector with the whole might of the enemy closing on us.

No more infantry came down now. There were no more there. Inquisitive aeroplanes had found the coast all clear for a general advance. Only our brigade held the line, firing desultory salvoes into Lambay Wood, sweeping the guns across a too-wide arc of the front in a futile attempt to stay the tide of field-grey that was spreading towards us out there in the darkness of the evening. Across the length and breadth of the sector, save only where our battery defiantly banged away and reloaded and banged again, there settled a prolonged silence. A faint and strangely alarming rumble of transport reached us at intervals from afar, as if the enemy had penetrated behind us on the flanks and was dragging up his artillery. We did not know. The hours went by to seven o'clock and then eight o'clock with still no order to retire. With the coming of night the guns ceased their work, as the location of the enemy was now shrouded in mystery. The next thing that would happen, I thought, would be our last shoot of the war, at point-blank range, as they came running down that same slope with their bombs and bayonets.

It was long past nine o'clock when the jingling gun-teams broke from

the gloom behind the position and bore down upon us urgently. In a flurry of excitement at our release we hooked them in, working like mad at the swingle-trees of the limbers, grabbing telephones and equipment and running over our horses as soon as the guns were ready to pull out. I got mounted, looked around for Ross—ah, here he was, all aboard. The first of the guns was moving across the field now, and one by one the others dropped into line. We trotted ahead to our places. In a few minutes the whole battery was safely out on the road and headed in the direction of Jussy, moving along at a fast walk that for me, at least, was not fast enough. My strained ears had detected, in the last few moments on the position, a nearer rumbling than ever of unseen transport, a murmuring of vast columns on the move through the night.

We retired through Jussy, taking a last look at the old familiar scenes of the waggon-line as we rode past, at the huts, now wrecked by the storm of shell-fire of that morning, at the low horse-shelters behind them; and presently we were riding through the next village of Flavy-le-Martel.

Here on the outskirts of the place the Major turned his horse off the main road and steered left in a southerly direction. Ahead of us we could dimly make out the outline of a hill against the night sky, and we felt ourselves climbing a steady rise leading up to the summit of the hill, where we halted. Now we were on a sort of plateau, from which we could look down on the almost-side-by-side villages of Jussy and Flavy. It was nearly midnight. We had travelled a good way back and felt much safer up there by Faillouel on the hill. I began to think about getting some sleep now that we were clear of immediate danger, but stood around for a while to find out what the orders were. There were no buildings near where we could billet; the guns had been run into position behind a low ridge in the open field so that if we slept at all, it would be under the sky with all our clothes on. Then the order was passed round that we were staying there for the night. I found there was nothing for the signallers to do, so I spread my waterproof sheet under a waggon, wrapped myself in my shell-shocked coat and a blanket, and slept. I and the rest of the battery slept for five hours. I mention this because it was the longest sleep we had for ten days and nights following this first stand at Faillouel.

It was cold up there on that plateau. Very early in the morning I awoke half frozen and scrounged two more blankets that some one had left lying about. The guard was pacing back and fore in rear of the silent guns. Another hour or so passed before morning dragged us all out to see how the war was going on down in the valley, and the smell of breakfast was in the air. Evidently there was no danger just yet. No firing had been done

during the night, but the guns were ready for any eventuality with a round in the breech.

Quite a number of gunners, I noticed, were furtively eating biscuits and small cakes, and one or two of the more gluttonous were spreading the biscuits with condensed milk. Cigarettes were also in evidence, large packets of twenties and fifties that I stared at enviously, at the same time reflecting how foolish I had been not to have remembered that canteen in Flavy. The parsons had of course left everything they could not carry with them for the especial benefit of the troops following after; I determined to be on the lookout for the next canteen. We opened fire on the approaching German infantry at ten o'clock that morning.

During the day we got shelled intermittently from the direction of Montescourt, doubtless in response to messages sent back by the scouting aeroplane which cruised cheekily over Faillouel and the battery, with no opposition from antiaircraft guns. Nothing came near enough to do any damage, however. All day the guns flashed and cracked from the plateau with a steadily decreasing range as the Fritzes came on through Jassy in the valley below us. The rate of advance was slower now. Evidently they were chary of penetrating farther into open country where our task of dropping high-explosive into them would be ever so much easier, preferring to hold on until their artillery could be brought to bear on the brigade that incessantly spoilt their crossing of the canal. A rumour spread that cavalry had been seen behind Jussy.

The short March afternoon waned, twilight fell, and still the guns kept up their barrage. Night found them lighting up the scrubby plateau with the six-fold flash of salvoes interspersed with successive rounds of gun-fire; no rest for the gunners and no friendly rolling of supporting artillery on either flank such as we were wont to hear in the line. In the small hours firing ceased for a while; then as soon as it was daylight somehow other information came through, which woke the guns again.

At midday there was more shelling and this time with more accuracy of aim, which was not to be wondered at now that they could look straight up at the battery-smoke on our plateau. Some of us scattered out of the way right over to the end of the field from where we found it was possible to see a wide stretch of what lay in front; and by dint of keeping careful watch I saw for the first time real live Germans on the warpath against us. They were a good way off, but the helmets were unmistakable.

Towards one o'clock came the disheartening sight of small detachments of our own infantry retiring on both sides of us. They came back in little knots of twos and threes, scattered wide apart. Seeing them

made us more anxious than ever to get out to the crossroads before our way of escape was quite cut off. But right up to the last we were kept at it, firing now with the gun-teams hooked in alongside and the whole battery in a growing state of anticipation. From the smoke-covered position itself the actual front could not be seen, the banks of the lane obstructing our view, and our consequent ignorance of the movements of the enemy added to our alarm.

Then all of a sudden the gun stopped firing. I looked round. A messenger was galloping off to the other batteries, his horse's hoofs strumming across the plateau. There was a yell of 'Limber up!', and in a moment the guns were hidden by the swift-wheeling teams manoeuvring for the hook-in. Sharp orders rattled out. The position was now a confusion of horses, guns and men, a confusion that straightened itself out as the first team drew clear and made for the gate. I leapt into the saddle, beckoned to Ross, and struck off after them before the next team should come through and perhaps get stuck in the difficult gateway. The first gun had managed it all right and was out in the lane waiting for the others, perhaps two hundred yards away from the gate. We rode to the head of them, dismounted for fear of observation up there on horseback, and hung about consumed with impatience at the time the rest of the battery were taking to follow us. At painfully slow intervals the teams struggled through and joined the column. Now there remained only one gun in the field. Anxiously we waited for its appearance, saw the heads of the leaders showing in the gateway, and then realized with a sharp fear that they were stuck. Over-eagerness and the psychological effect on the drivers of being last out had resulted in their 'trying to take the gate with them'. The Major was there, directing the efforts of sweating inners and steadying the frantic horses expected to see coal-scuttle helmets coming round the corner of the crossroads.

I kept a sharp watch on the end of the lane. Should they come now, I would be their first capture, then Ross and then the whole line of guns. We stood close against hope that somehow gun would come through. And then on top of everything came the whining scream of shells, one after the other, pounding on the plateau behind us and making the horses snort in fright. In the midst of all this I became aware that someone was scrambling down the bank towards me. I whirled round to find myself confronted by a young infantry officer with two privates in attendance. He, and they, had evidently been having a rough time somewhere. His face was dirty and bloodstreaked, his uniform nearly in tatters. I realized with a shock that he was mad.

‘Who are you?’ he snarled, his eyes glaring, ‘and where are you going?’

‘A Battery, 2—th Brigade, sir, preparing to retire.’ ‘Retire?’ he said, ‘Retire?’ A wan smile flickered over his face as I answered him. ‘*Retire*?’ he repeated dreamily. ‘But you can’t retire. Don’t you know that the German army is advancing up this slope?’

I knew only too well. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well, damn you, you must stop them!’

The glare returned. I felt very uncomfortable, and wished the Major would come along. I didn’t like the way the stranger clapped the bolt of his rifle as he spoke.

‘Now, come along all of you,’ he continued. ‘Get those rifles off the guns and climb up on the bank with my two hussars and hold the enemy. Get a move on, damn you!’

The drivers stared open-mouthed as Ross and I obeyed his orders and began slowly to unfasten the straps that held the rifles on the gun-limber. The two hussars had now posted themselves on top of the bank, but the officer stood there in the road muttering to himself. In desperation I called to him, ‘What about all these guns, sir?’

His only answer was to raise his rifle till he had me covered, and I really thought he would shoot. I went on unstrapping, and had got one rifle loose when I heard the urgent gallop of hoofs and the Major’s voice: ‘Walk! March!’

The poor mad officer turned to meet him. I slipped the rifle back in its place, dived between the wheel and centre horses and ran round to get my own mount, with Ross close at my heels. As we moved off I turned to watch developments. The Colonel had arrived now and was glaring at the forlorn figure in his path. I felt terribly sorry for the infantry officer, but he seemed past all reasoning with, and I had a last glimpse of him going to meet his end at the side of his two hussars on the top of the bank.

He vanished from my mind as we approached the crossroads and heard continuous whinings of bullets over our heads. We kept low on our horses. As long as the bank sheltered us it was not so bad, but at the turn there lay an open expanse in the centre of which was the crossroads. We began to trot. Behind us the ground quivered to the successive shocks of shells that smothered the plateau in black explosions.

‘Trot out!’

At a fast trot that threatened to break into a gallop we rode into full view of the German armoured car that was stuck there on the road up from Flavy with its machine gun spitting and cracking at the unexpected target

that had so suddenly presented itself. Faster and faster grew the pace; the noise of the guns and vehicles behind us increased to a sustained roar, and round we went with our heads down alongside the necks of our horses and the air full of eerie whistlings.

A mile down the road we eased up and finally settled down to a brisk walkout, now that the immediate danger was past. A little farther along we saw a sergeant of our B battery riding back to meet us. I thought B were through all right, but the next day I heard that they had been left behind to deal with the cavalry and that one of their gun-teams had been disabled at the crossroads by the machine gun. The sergeant had volunteered to go back and get the gun.

Very much pleased with ourselves at having got safely out of such a tight corner, we rode at ease through open, untouched country where the road wound gently around low wooded hills and dipped into pleasant valleys, wondering now and again where the Fritzes might be and how much farther we were to retire. There was no general flight on the part of the army which was in the line, or at least their flight was not visible. It was true that many bedraggled parties of infantrymen had passed through our positions that day, but apart from them we saw no great bodies of troops on the move. The reason for this I discovered later was the fact that the line had been so thinly held that when the retirement started there was hardly any one left to retire. Our own division, the Fourteenth, to which we had been attached for the last few months, seemed to be lost altogether. For the first three days of the great retreat of the Fifth Army we had seen no other artillery at all, nor had we heard any.

We were still retreating in a southerly direction, which was bringing us more and more into the French army area. As yet we had seen no French troops, but a strong rumour spread that one of their army corps was hurrying to our support and would come along at any moment. We discovered some days afterwards that they were hurrying in a totally different direction.

At four o’clock in the afternoon the brigade dropped into action in open country with the guns elevated to fire over a range of thickly wooded hills. I did not know where the enemy were, and even now I do not know. A brisk rate of firing were kept up all the evening and till long past midnight. Sleep was again denied to us; during the night we were shelled with light stuff which indicated that the enemy field batteries were not very far behind their infantry. All sorts of wild rumours were current. It was said that we were entirely surrounded and that the enemy was now in our rear and slowly closing in. We lost the desire for sleep, fidgeting about

aimlessly round the guns and hoping the next move was not far off. But it was ten o'clock in the morning when the order arrived.

This time we did not travel very far back. Just over the next range of hills, descending slowly on the other side, we saw a level plain spread out before us, a plain that bore no sign of activity. It seemed that the brigade were the sole survivors of the Fifth Army in this part of the line. No help showed itself on either hand; there was just the brigade vainly trying to steady things up and escaping by the skin of its teeth from the rapidly advancing enemy, a rolling expanse of deserted country greeting us as we deployed into action again, and a sense of unreality hanging over everything.

We opened fire again on our unseen target at three o'clock in the afternoon, but not for long. Nerves were getting frayed. In the absence of information it was suicidal to delay our retirement. Cavalry might be sweeping round on the flanks. And the French had not come yet.

Another hour of the road, then action again. Six o'clock now on the 24th of March. Strung out across the low-lying fields were the silent guns, eighteen of them in a line together, with wider spaces between marking off the batteries, trained carefully on a dip in the wooded skyline in front of them. Through this small defile the enemy would most certainly appear, and the first sight of field-grey against the trees would jerk the firing-levers of the whole brigade. We stared at the distant woods, and waited.

Then suddenly from behind us, from the quiet countryside, rode forth at the gallop a magnificent line of French cavalry. We thrilled to their approach. Straight for the line they rode, passing on the right of the guns with pennons flying from erect lances and urging their horses to greater speed as they took the slope leading up to the woods ahead. They breasted the rise in open formation, drawn apart from each other somewhat but in perfect line as the fringe of the trees was reached. Now we took our gaze off them and looked behind us again, this time full expecting to see the landscape hidden by the moving masses of horizon-blue uniforms, which we had so long awaited. But there was nothing to be seen. Keenly disappointed we returned to the more hopeful sight of the single line of horsemen on the hillside. We still felt sure that they must be the advance guard of the legions to come. But even this picture had taken on a different aspect now, and the last vestiges of hope died in our hearts as we saw them turn tail at the approach to the defile and come flying back down the slope at a much greater speed than they had gone up it. We concluded sadly that they had only been retreating the wrong way and had discovered their mistake in time. Somewhere at the end of the line of guns there sounded a

faint, ironic cheer as the Cuirassiers or Chasseurs or whatever they were disappeared the way they had come.

Darkness came on without the slightest sign of the enemy's appearance in the defile so carefully covered by the guns. And once it was dark it was no use waiting any longer; so about nine o'clock we took to the road again.

Through the night we rode, strangers in a strange land of great mysterious woods and silent, deserted hamlets. There was not a soul left in the villages on our line of march, the population of the countryside having abandoned everything and fled twenty-four hours before the retreating armies came rough. What they could not carry with them they had left behind, and there were whole rows and streets of cottages with furniture in them and curtains still up at the windows, all ready to be plundered and perhaps burnt by the Jerries in a few hours' time. It seemed only right we could in order that it should not fall enemy, but strict orders were issued against looting. When darkness fell, however, we did a bit of foraging in one village, and several bottles of wine made their appearance; moreover, when we pulled into Crissolles to billet for the night, I was sure I could smell roast chicken somewhere.

Billet for the night was the order. Already it was twelve o'clock. We were not to undress but to lie down in the nearby barns with all our clothes on and the harness on the horses' backs. Our barn-load debated whether we should take off just a few of our things, and, very stupidly in view of the circumstances, we decided to undress and put our handy so that we could slip them on at once if necessary.

It became necessary at one o'clock, after we had slept like logs for a short hour. Some one burst in through the door of the barn, waking us up with excited shouts: 'Come on out of it! Jerry's in the end of the village!' A mad scramble ensued; we fought for our boots and puttees and tunics in pitch darkness, no one stopping to light a candle, then we fell over each other in our haste to be going. The battery was moving off already; our subsection sergeant was yelling himself hoarse for us to get our horses and follow; we got mounted in a hurry, with bandoliers hanging round our necks, and trotted out of the field down to the road. Everything and everybody seemed to be on the move; columns of vehicles were retiring through the village at a brisk trot, while our brigade waited to collect its stragglers and follow suit. Then we too made off in the direction of supposed safety, clearing the outskirts of Crissolles at the same time as the field-greys cautiously advanced through its streets and burnt a barn here and there to give themselves light.

Away on the right a red glow shone against the night sky; another

village was being fired, perhaps a town. To the left was the blackness of great forests; everything was shrouded in silence, and the air seemed charged with suspense and uncertainty. For all we knew we were running right into their hands as the gloomy woods closed in over the road. We listened for the noises of German cavalry galloping to head us off, but the silence held.

There was some little excitement when it became known that one of the members of the battery had been left behind in Crissolles. The missing man was an NCO who had somehow failed to hear the alarm and had looked out of his deserted loft to see German infantry in the yard below him. He dropped through the window on the other side and ran for it, catching us up some hours later by sheer good luck.

Here was a crossroads, and a mounted figure, a staff officer. I could see the red tabs and the gold braid. The whole brigade halted dead behind us as the Major stopped to receive orders. Two torches played eagerly over maps at the saddlebows. Noyon, said the Major. Roye, said the staff officer, very stiffly and brusquely. That way, said the Major. This way, said the staff captain, pointing. Under no circumstances, said the Major; the line of retreat lay so-and-so and so-and-so and so on, and he would take full responsibility. A new note had come into his voice, hard and authoritative; the staff officer could do what he liked, but this particular brigade was going this way and no other way.

We drew on, leaving the staff captain with his gold braid and red tabs standing in the shadows out of our way. Good old Major!

The signposts told us that we had left Noyon behind us a little way now. Soon it would be captured, a great town full of shops and the like, now merely an incident of the night to us, a passing memory of a word on the signposts. We were concerned more with the strange noises on our left. Since leaving Crisssolles we had heard them continuously, a loud rumbling of transport that seemed to be coming nearer, as though the road upon which the unknown army travelled ran parallel with our own. As the roar grew louder, one thought only filled our minds—the Jerries were cutting us off ! Their road was converging upon ours, and sooner or later it would join at a fork, and we should be done for. Why didn’t we trot and make a dash for it?

The Major told me then to ride back for Corporal G, hand over my horse to him and send him up ahead for orders. I did so very reluctantly; I didn’t want to lose my grey, and besides it meant having to ride on the waggons or a gun-limber, which was very uncomfortable. But the mare was handed over, Corporal G galloped off to report to the Major, and we

all heard him riding off alone into the darkness. Now the noise on our left was positively alarming in its closeness.

Then, suddenly, the level rumble of our own column changed to the heavier thundering of guns and waggons driving faster and faster on the echoing road. The waggon I was sitting on got under way at a rare pace, making me hold on tight to the hand rail. Round a wide bend we careered before entering on a long straight stretch which promised a gallop. And gallop we did. It was half a mile or more to the next bend, and here it was that the other road met ours, running into it from the shadows. And at a fork, bolt upright in his saddle, with rifle levelled at the livid face of a French general, sat Corporal G, holding back a whole division of flying Frenchmen that we might get out first.

Morning came while we were still on the road. The pace had dropped some hours since to a monotonous walk. We went on, half asleep in our saddles, hungry, thirsty, gnawing at mouldy bits of biscuit hunted up from our pockets, chilled through and through with the bitter wind of the March dawn. We rode through deserted hamlets and now and again a larger village, its main street crowded with the vehicles and horses of the armies in retreat with us—there were long delays while the disorder of traffic was sorted out somehow and sent on its weary way again; then we were alone once more on the road as the dawn showed us a wide view of open country. At nine o'clock, still breakfastless, we dropped into action near the village of Lagny. All day the guns kept up their barrage on the roads that we had ourselves traversed during the night. The ranges were very short; that fact we realized without caring much for its significance, for we were very tired and moved about as in a dream.

Late afternoon saw the usual spectacle of the infantry retiring. Small parties of them threaded their way past our guns, some slightly wounded, all dropping with fatigue. They asked for something to eat, but we had nothing ourselves and they carried on resignedly. Two or three of the Staffords flung themselves down by the guns, utterly worn out and unable to go any farther. From them we got news of the proximity of the German infantry, news which made us wonder why the Jerries did not make one clean sweep with their cavalry and cut off the last scattered remnants of the Fifth Army. There was no one at all in the line.

'Did you see anything of a staff officer on the road?' asked one of the infantrymen, a corporal.

'On horseback?' I remembered the staff captain.

'Yes.'

'We saw one last night trying to direct traffic. That one you mean?'

‘That’s the bloke. He tried to direct us, but we lynched him. He was a Jerry.’

With the disappearance of the infantry, we knew it would not be long before we, too, took the road again. Another night of travel faced us. Already we were a good forty miles from St Quentin and it looked as though we should be on the run for a few more days at least, as there seemed no sign of a stand being made anywhere. At nightfall, therefore, we limbered up to retire, and this time we trusted there was to be a sleep at the end of the march. We could not go on much longer without food or sleep.

We arrived in Thiescourt village at midnight. The rattle of the guns on the pave woke us out of our doze, and we looked around expectantly, thinking that here at last was the long-awaited billet where we should sleep for at least twenty-four hours. But the place was alive with other artillery and infantry and transport of all kinds, crowded wheel to wheel in the main square in a solid block of traffic that moved this way and that way and yet did not move at all. Behind us more and more horses and wagons poured into the village to add to the congestion. It was like a jam of logs on a Canadian river, waiting for someone to move the key-log.

Eventually we scrambled through amid the curses of those who were squeezed against our wheels as we pulled put. The bottleneck of Thiescourt, where we had been stuck for over an hour, released us into the starlit night, and we rode on again muffled up against the cold. They followed six solid hours of the road, with billets as far away as ever and the horses on the point of collapse.

Three days later there was a strange sight to be seen in a field on the outskirts of Arsy village, near to Compiegne: the sight of a whole brigade of Field Artillery, horses and men, fast asleep in full marching order. The Great Retreat, so far as we knew, was over at last; the line had been stabilized at Amiens and the threatened drive through to Paris stopped just in time.

And so we slept. From three o’clock in the afternoon until the stars came out to look at us, there on the grass we lay like drugged men, every bone in our bodies aching from the rigours of ten days and nights of rearguard actions and hasty retirements and the endless journeyings through the night, famished, unwashed, in the main street of Compiegne with only the promise of rest that afternoon keeping us from falling out of our saddles; and now we were safe at last. We slept, and slept, and slept.

Escape From a Sunken Submarine

T.C. Bridges and H. Hessell Tiltman

> *The courage and fortitude with which all these men, in the practical darkness of the slowly flooding compartment, faced a situation more than desperate, was in accordance with the very highest traditions of the Service.*

These words are quoted from a report received by the Admiralty from the Commander-in-Chief of the British Fleet in Chinese waters, with regard to the loss of the submarine, Poseidon, and the whole report was read by the First Lord of the Admiralty before a crowded House of Commons on a day in July 1931. The First Lord added, amid cheers, that suitable recognition of those concerned was under consideration by the Admiralty.

The Poseidon, one of the large and powerful P Class of submarines, was built in 1929 by the firm of Armstrong-Vickers, She was two hundred-and-sixty-feet long, had a surface speed of 17.5 knots, and was fitted with eight 21 inch torpedo tubes. Her displacement was one thousand four hundred and seventy five tons.

With her three sister ships, Perseus, Pandora and Proteus, she was commissioned at Barrow on 20 March 1930. She was manned equally from Portsmouth, Devonport and Chatham, and the four submarines left Portsmouth on 12 December 1930, on a fifteen-thousand-mile voyage to the eastern seas, where they were to replace vessels of the L Class. In old days submarines were always escorted on long voyages by surface ships, but these four P Class submarines were considered powerful enough to look after themselves, and voyaged without escort.

The voyage was marred by a mishap, for, when only five days out, the

Proteus and the Pandora came into collision. They were, however, only slightly damaged, and were able to reach Gibraltar, where repairs were effected. The flotilla then proceeded to Chinese waters, and made its way to Weihaiwei, the naval and coaling station on the north-east coast of the Chinese province of Shantung.

On June 9, 1931, manoeuvres were being carried out, and at midday the Poseidon was about twenty-one miles out from port and some distance from the rest of the squadron when she was rammed by the steamer, Yuta. The Yuta was a British built ship of about two thousand tons, but owned and manned by Chinese.

The Yuta struck the Poseidon on the starboard side with such terrible force that her heavy bow drove right through the steel side of the submarine. The force of the collision rolled the submarine over, flinging every one in her off his feet, and drove her almost under water. As the Yuta reversed her propellers and drew clear, the sea poured into the breach in the Poseidon's side, and within two minutes the submarine had disappeared. At the time of the collision the submarine had been running on the surface, so fortunately her conning-tower was open and twenty-nine of the crew, including five officers, managed to scramble out, and fling themselves into the sea. These were all picked up by boats lowered by the Yuta.

The rest, trapped helplessly in the bowels of the ship, were most of them, drowned at once. The exceptions were six men, who at the time of the accident were in the forward torpedo flat. These were Petty Officer Patrick Willis, who was torpedo gunner's mate, Able-seaman Locock, Able-seaman Holt, Ableseaman Nagle, Leading-seaman Clarke and a Chinese steward, Ah Hai.

Their feelings may be imagined when they were all flung off their balance by the deadly shock of the collision, and when they heard the screech of torn steel, all knew what had happened. From a distance came the echoed shout, 'Close watertight doors,' and all picked themselves up and sprang to obey. The bulkhead was buckled by the force of the collision, the door stuck, and it took the combined efforts of all the men to force it back into position. Willis took charge. 'Stick to it,' he told them; 'it may save the ship.' But within a few moments all knew that there was no chance of this, for the submarine lurched heavily to starboard, and she shot to the bottom with terrible speed.

It was a moment of absolute horror for the six men in that low-roofed, air-tight compartment. They were far out to sea, they knew the water was deep, but none knew exactly how deep. To make matters worse, the shock

of the collision had cut off all electric lights, and they were in black and utter darkness. With a slight jar the submarine struck bottom and settled on the soft mud, luckily in an upright position. For a few moments there was complete and deadly silence; then a beam of light cut through the blackness. Willis had found an electric torch and switched it on. His first care then was for the bulkhead door. A small amount of water was leaking through, but not enough to cause alarm. The danger was from suffocation. The air in this confined space would not last six men for very long. Willis knew that although every effort would be made to reach them by the surface ships, which included the aircraft carrier, Hermes and the cruisers, Berwick and Cumberland, a considerable time must elapse before divers could descend, and he was aware that if their lives were to be saved all must depend upon their own efforts.

There was just one hope. The Poseidon, like all modern submarines, carried the Davis rescue gear. This consists of a sort of gas-mask with a coat that slips over the head. It is Provided with a cylinder containing enough oxygen to last the Wearer for forty-five minutes. When the tap of the oxygen cylinder is turned, the garment expands like a balloon. Wearing this apparatus, a man can rise to the surface from any depth where the pressure is not sufficient to crush him.

Then why not step out at once and go up to the top is the question which will occur to a good many of our readers.

It seems simple enough, but in point of fact the difficulties of escaping from a closed steel shell, such as that in which Willis and his companions were imprisoned, are very great. The submarine lay at the bottom of water more than one hundred feet deep, and the pressure on the hatch, which was their only way out of the compartment, was enormous. The combined muscle power of a score of men could not have lifted that hatch a single inch, and, as Willis knew, the only way in which to open it was to equalize the pressure.

Some of the men knew this as well as Willis, but others did not fully understand, so as they stood there in the thick, stuffy darkness, Willis carefully explained it to them. Then he hesitated.

‘We’re in a pretty tight place. Hadn’t we better say a prayer, lads?’ he suggested. Nods gave consent, and as all stood with bared heads, Willis uttered a brief prayer for divine help, and the others responded, ‘Amen.’

Then Willis took command.

‘We’ve no time to waste,’ he said. ‘I’m going to open the valves and flood the compartment.’ Some one suggested that if he flooded the compartment he would drown the lot, for the water would rise over their

heads, but Willis had already thought that out, and directed two of the men to rig a hawser from one side to the other, so that they could all stand on it. The Chinese boy did not understand how to put on his escape gear, so Seaman Nagle showed him the way of it. Nagle backed up Willis all the way through, and did his share toward keeping up the spirits of the rest of his companions.

The valves were opened, and water began to pore in. The six took up their positions on the hawser below the hatch and waited. Since they had but one torch and no refill, Willis switched it off so as to save light, and there they stood in Stygian blackness while the water bubbled in and rose slowly over the floor beneath them.

The air grew more and more stuffy, and after a time the man next to Willis whispered to him that he thought the oxygen in his flask was exhausted, for he could no longer hear it bubbling. Willis tested his own, and found that it, too, was empty. But he had no idea of allowing that fact to be known. Anything like panic would be fatal at this juncture.

‘It’s all right,’ he answered, lying valiantly; ‘you can’t hear anything in mine, but there is plenty left.’ The minutes dragged by, each seeming like an hour. It was not only the darkness but the intense silence which strained their nerves to the uttermost. Now and then Willis switched on his torch, and glanced down at the water, which, owing to the air pressure, rose very slowly. After two hours and ten minutes had passed, the water had risen above the hawser and was up to the men’s knees, then at last Willis decided that the pressure must be pretty nearly equal, and that it was time to go.

Willis’s first inquiry was for Lovock and Holt, and he was saddened to hear that Lovock had come to the surface unconscious, and died almost immediately. Holt, in a state of exhaustion, had managed to support Lovock’s body until both were picked up.

Willis recovered rapidly, and refused to remain in hospital a day longer than was necessary. At the beginning of September he arrived back in England, and was drafted to the torpedo training school at Portsmouth. Then he began to suffer from sleeplessness. Night after night he lived over again those agonizing hours in the black gloom of the flooded chamber at the bottom of the muddy Chinese sea. He made no complaint, but neurasthenia developed, and he was sent to Netley Hospital.

Meantime a London newspaper started a shilling subscription for the purpose of buying a home for the brave fellow. The response was immediate and generous. Money came from all parts of the country and all parts of the Empire, and a house was bought at Merton, in Surrey, and well

equipped and furnished. There Patrick Willis, with his young wife and baby daughter Julia, has made his home.

Willis has left the navy and found employment in civil life. He is physically fit again, and no doubt in time his nervous system will recover from the strain to which it was subjected.

We began this chapter by quoting from the official report on the Poseidon disaster. We cannot end it better than by repeating the last sentence of that same report:

The coolness, confidence, ability and power of command shown by Petty Officer Willis, which, no doubt, was principally responsible for the saving of so many valuable lives, is deserving of the very highest praise.

Adventure Underground

Sylvia Green

‘But, Trev, you know I *loathe* crawling about in caves!’ said Judy Hamilton crossly.

She was lying on her back in the pinewoods above the Pyrenean village where she and her brother, Trevor, were spending the summer holidays.

In the hot sun of early afternoon the scent of the pines was wonderful. Judy, replete with one of Madame’s splendid picnics of cold omelette and potatoes and a yard or so of French bread, drowsily sniffed it up, murmuring to herself, ‘Divine!… mmmm…Divine!’

‘Whatever are you snuffling about?’ enquired Trev. ‘Well, as I was saying, the Painted Cave is simply marvellous. It’s an awful bind Marc having to go down to Perpignan to meet his father today, just when we were going to have a good scout round it…’

He paused for a comment, but Judy merely gave an inelegant grunt.

‘Oh, come on, Ju, be a sport!’ he urged. ‘I only want to go and finish looking at the Painted Cave. It really is worth seeing. Besides, you haven’t very far to go, and there’s nothing grisly like slithering through a siphon. In fact it’s really just a walk.’

‘An underground walk,’ Judy pointed out. ‘And probably with bats!’

‘Oh, belfries to you! Come on!’

Whether Judy would have come on had the day remained five is doubtful, but just then a distant roll of thunder was heard from across the valley. Opening her eyes and looking upwards, she saw that some ominous clouds had come up, though they had not yet obscured the sun. She sat up reluctantly. ‘Oh, well, if there’s going to be a storm we might as well be in your old Painted Cave, I suppose. Though I can’t think why it should

choose today to rain. It hasn't rained since we've been here!'

Trev merely said, 'Good girl!' approvingly, and began collecting the debris of the picnic. 'We'll nip down to Marc's place, and dump the rucksack there and borrow a couple of torches. And then off we go!'

It did not take them long to get down to the shed in the meadow behind Marc's home where he and his father, the Professor, kept their cave-exploring equipment.

'Oughtn't we to ask if we can borrow the torches?' enquired Judy doubtfully.

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Trev, selecting two helmets and two torches. 'Besides it looks as if everyone's having a zizz.'

Below them the village was asleep in the sunshine, and there seemed no one but themselves about as they took the steep path that led up through the meadows to the cave entrance. It gave them quite a start when Le Chevrier—the idiot boy who herded the goats—popped out from behind a boulder as they came up to the cave-entrance and started gibbering at them and flinging his arms about.

'Now what d'you suppose all that means?' queried Trev.

'I expect he doesn't want us butting into his nice dry cave

where he's going to shelter if it rains,' suggested Judy.

'Yep, that'll be about it.'

'Well, I wouldn't want his company either,' declared Judy. 'I think he's creepy!'

Trev chortled. 'In more ways than one, I bet! But he's quite harmless. Marc said so.'

'Maybe. But I can't do with caves and creepiness both at once, so I hope he isn't thinking of coming in with us!' But apparently he had no such intentions; when he saw they were set on going into the cave, he stopped gabbling at them and threw up his hands in a wild gesture. 'Oh, nuts to him!' said Trev and led on into the cave.

The entrance to the cave was on stepping-stones because out of its mouth flowed a small stream; but, once inside, it broadened out and there was room to walk beside the stream on a narrow beach of large water-worn stones. On the map the stream had the grandiloquent name of 'La Cataracte du Diable'—the Devil's Cataract—but Judy remarked that it was no more than an imp-sized one.

The light from the entrance lasted them for a good way in, but eventually the cave took a sharp turn and they had to put their torches on.

As Trev had promised, the journey to the Painted Cave was little more than a walk, though occasionally a rather scrambling walk over boulders,

and they followed the stream all the way till it went under a narrow, shoulder-high arch. Here there was no beach, so they had to walk in the stream to get through the arch, keeping their heads well down to avoid banging them on its low rock roof. Once through the arch, they could stand upright again; indeed the cavern they were now in seemed very lofty but very narrow, and the stream turned sharply as it came out of the arch and ran away to the left through this rocky defile. In front of them was an almost perpendicular rock-wall, so Judy was turning left to follow the stream when Trev checked her.

'No, it's this way,' he said, pointing to the right. To the right there appeared to Judy to be merely a continuation of the rock-wall, but when Trev shone his torch on it she saw that it sloped steeply backwards and that, though it was perfectly smooth, someone had driven several metal footholds into it so that it could easily be climbed.

'Here, I'll go first and give you a hand up,' said Trev. 'You have to squeeze through a sort of porthole at the top and then you just drop down into the Painted Cave.'

Judy could not resist saying sarcastically. 'Of course it's really just a walk!' But, in fact, the footholds made it quite easy, and a few minutes later they were standing on the fine sand floor of a smallish cave with fairly smooth rockwalls. In the light of their torches these walls were an astonishing sight for they were alive with painted animals; there were deer and bison, reindeer and cave-bears, wild boars and wild horses, in red and brown and yellow and black, and they seemed to charge out of the walls as the beams of light swept over them.

Judy gasped. 'Are they frightfully old?' she asked.

Trev nodded. 'Ten thousand years, at least, and some of them a lot more than that.'

'They're super. How could a lot of old cave-men draw so well?' wondered Judy. 'Come on, I want to go right round and see everything.'

'Okay,' agreed Trev, much gratified by Judy's enthusiasm. They were perhaps three-quarters of the way round when they became conscious of a loud roaring noise.

'I say, is that the thunder?' exclaimed Judy.

'I shouldn't think one would hear that down here,' objected Trev.

'Then what is it?' asked Judy uneasily. And then she pointed to the porthole entrance and exclaimed, 'It's coming from just out there!'

'Give me a hitch up and I'll see.'

Judy gave him a hitch and he got his head and shoulders through the porthole and looked out. What he saw in the light of his torch appalled

him. A black wall of water, so smooth as almost to seem solid, was surging down the stream-bed towards him; it hit the ramp up which they had climbed, swirling it up to within a foot or two of the porthole, and then was sucked back in a whirlpool of foam to go boiling through the low arch —which it completely filled—and so out into the outer cavern. This then was the real 'Cataracte du Diable'. He watched it horrified for a few moments, during which the black wall of water never slackened, and then dropped back white-faced into the Painted Cave.

But it did not need Trev's tell-tale face to tell Judy that something terrible had happened. The rushing of the water, magnified by the enclosed space, was now like the roar of an express train. Shouting to make herself heard, she asked in a shaking voice, 'What is it, Trev?' He shouted back a brief explanation and then, on her insistence, gave her a leg-up so that she could see for herself.

When she had seen, she asked in a stunned sort of way, 'What do we do now?'

As if trying to convince himself, Trev yelled, 'It may stop after a bit.'

'No!' cried Judy with conviction. 'No! Not with that name—it won't. Oh, Trev, whatever are we going to do?'

'We can just wait here and see if the water goes down, or…or we can make a search for some other way out while we're waiting. Marc says there are dozens of ways out of these caves. What d'you say?'

'I'm for searching then,' shrilled Judy, though what she longed to say was, 'Do something! Do anything! We're trapped. We're caught. But let's pretend we can do something to help ourselves. If I stay still a moment longer in this horrible place, I shall go into screaming hysterics!' With trembling fingers she picked up her torch. 'Let's start in the part we haven't seen yet.'

But the rock walls seemed absolutely solid in that part of the cave, and it was not till they had got halfway round again in a second review that Trev noticed a narrow opening at floor-level.

'I say, here's something!' he exclaimed. 'I think I'd better explore this.'

Judy was aghast. 'That little crack! Oh, Trev, you can't! You'd never get through—if there's anywhere to get through to!'

For answer Trev simply shouted, 'I'll give you a hitch up and you can tell me what the cataract's doing. If it's no different, I'm going to try this.'

They both knew from its sullen roar that it wasn't any different, but Judy obediently inspected it. And now she could not be sure that it had not crept up imperceptibly; no more than an inch or two, but, if it could do

that, might it not… She dropped hastily back and mouthed, ‘You win—try the crack. But I’m coming too!’ As she spoke she felt absolutely sick with dread. She thought, ‘I cannot—no, I cannot go into that tiny black space!’ And then, ‘But I must.’ Trev protested, ‘It’d be much better, Ju, for me to go first and see what it’s like.’

‘No,’ persisted Judy. ‘If you can go, I can go. In fact,’ she added in a forlorn attempt at banter, ‘anywhere you can go, I can go better. I’m not so broad in the shoulders as you.’

‘Probably broader in the beam!’ retorted Trev, not to be outdone in putting a good face on things. ‘By the way, have you any eats on you? Wish I hadn’t dumped the rucksack. There was quite a bit of picnic left in it.’ They checked their pockets, but these only yielded a meagre return; Trev had half a small bar of chocolate and Judy no more than two rather sticky fruit-drops.

‘Better than nothing,’ commented Trev with forced cheerfulness. ‘Now come on and let’s streamline ourselves as much as possible. This is going to be what Marc calls, reptation. Lovely word, isn’t it?’

‘I think it’s beastly. I suppose it means crawling about like a reptile?’

‘That’s about it. Now fix your torch in your helmet. And don’t come in absolutely on top of me or I’ll be putting my toe in your eye!’

The next few minutes were the worst that Judy could remember. The rock crack, or siphon, was just large enough to admit their bodies, and no more. Trev, who did not suffer from any fear of enclosed spaces, wriggled through fairly happily. But for Judy, in spite of her slighter form which went through more easily, every inch of the way was torture—mental torture. When Trev finally helped her out on the other side, she was trembling from head to foot with nervous reaction.

‘That’s a girl!’ Trev commended her, and swung his torch to see what the siphon had brought them to. The slight beam of light hardly seemed to pierce the immensity of gloom in front of them. Trev’s heart sank. Supposing that instead of finding a way out they were merely going deeper underground? Well, they could always turn back; meantime the thing to do was to press on and see.

At least the vast cavern they were in had a smooth floor so they were able to explore it fairly rapidly and they soon found a gallery leading off one corner of it. Trev, full of relief that it was not another siphon, led the way into it confidently, but the going was not good because the floor sloped down to one side and was slippery with water that dripped from the roof above. As they went on, the tilt of the floor increased so that it was hard to keep a footing on it, and then a swing of Trev’s torch showed that

an ominous-looking crevasse had opened at its lower edge. Suddenly there was a cry from Judy as her foot slipped and she slid down with her legs hanging over the black depths of the crevasse. Trev flung himself down to prevent himself from slipping too, and so pulled her back to safety; but her torch went down into the abyss and, with a shudder, they heard it strike the rock once and then again far below, and then the ghost of a splash echoed up to them. Very shaken, they traversed the rest of the gallery on hands and knees.

At last this nightmare progress ended on a solid rock platform, and here Trev insisted that they should stop and rest and eat their two fruit-drops. ‘Seeing that I’m in need of glucose!’ he announced. But Judy could not raise a smile or make a comeback to this remark.

From the platform several caverns, which presented no particularly difficult features, led on from one to another and their spirits began to recover. Then in the last of these they could find no outlet at all except a small hole, high in one corner, which could only be reached by what looked like a smooth rock-fall. When Trev touched it, however, he found it to be a horribly glutinous kind of mud. Somehow they clawed and kicked their way up this mud-bank to the hole, and found that it led into another rock gallery, solid this time but too low to stand upright, and with a floor of jagged, upended rocks over which they must drag themselves painfully crouching.

So they went on for what seemed like hours, stumbling, creeping, crawling, often falling, through a bewilderment of galleries and caverns, some beautiful with stalactites, some full of flittering bats disturbed by the torchlight, and some in which the black silence was broken by the monotonous drip of unseen water; and nearly all of them were difficult, if not perilous, in some new and unforeseen way. Trev led on doggedly—because he must. He knew that his optimistic words about turning back were no longer true; they had long since passed the point of no return. And Judy followed where he led, struggling gamely on after him.

At last they stumbled out into what seemed to be just another vast cavern. The rock-floor was very broken, but at least they could ease the aching muscles of their backs by walking upright. They had not penetrated far into it, however, when Judy gave a deep sigh of exhaustion and flopped down on the ground, half-sitting and half-lying against an upstanding rock.

‘I c-can’t go any further for a b-bit, Trev,’ she groaned, her teeth chattering from the deadly chill of these subterranean depths.

‘Let’s have a rest, then,’ agreed Trev, keeping his teeth from chattering too by a great effort. He sat down beside her and asked. ‘What about a bit

of chocolate?'

'No, I don't want any,' said Judy indifferently.

'But you have some if you like.'

'Nope. I'll wait and have it with you later.'

'What time is it?'

Trev turned the torch on his watch, but it was smashed. 'Oh, heck! I must have bust it in one of those falls. What about yours?'

'F-forgot to put it on this—this morning…' Judy began.

And suddenly the thought of the sunlight through the little casement window of her bedroom at La Terrasse, and the smell of the pines blowing in through it as she had lain in bed that morning—was it only that morning, or days, or years ago?—was too much for her. She turned her head away from the tell-tale glimmer of the torch while the tears slid silently down her face.

Luckily, Trev didn't notice anything. He was saying, 'It must be night-time by now.' And then, 'I think, while we're resting I ought to put out the torch, Ju. Just while we're resting, you know. D'you mind?'

'No,' said Judy in a muffled voice. And then, 'But hold my hand, Trev, so that I know you're there.'

Trev didn't answer but seized her muddy, ice-cold hand in one equally chill and muddy, and held it hard. Then he switched off the torch and they were alone with the vast darkness.

So they sat for some time in silence. Judy had her eyes closed, but she could feel the blackness pressing on her eyeballs, and all the time her body shook with cold and her teeth chattered like typewriter keys. From somewhere a chill current of air blew upon her face and dried the tears in stiff salt runlets upon her cheeks. But there was something else about this little wind, something familiar—something… Hovering, in her exhaustion, on the borders of consciousness, she spoke without knowing what she said, 'I smell pine trees.'

Trev sat bolt upright in dismay. What could this mean? Was Judy's mind wandering? 'What did you say, Ju?' he asked her anxiously.

Judy opened her eyes dreamily and lay staring upwards through the darkness that suddenly no longer seemed to weigh on her. 'I smell pine trees,' she repeated. And up there—up—up, I see the sky—and a star!'

Now convinced that she was delirious, yet compelled by the strange conviction in her voice, Trev looked upwards too, straining his eyes through the darkness. And then he saw it too—a tiny prick of light far, far above them in a darkness that was by the merest fraction less solid than the surrounding blackness. And, at that, the truth flashed upon him.

‘You’re right, Ju!’ he croaked. ‘It is a star! That is the sky! We are—we must be at the bottom of that pit Marc calls “Le Grand Trou”—the Big Hole!’

‘Oh, Trev, then we aren’t underground any more!’ whispered Judy.

‘Well no. Not exactly. We’re way down, but we aren’t underneath.’

‘I’m so glad! Oh, I’m so glad!’ Judy’s voice was the mere ghost of a whisper now. ‘I don’t mind anything with the sky up there. I don’t mind—dying…’ Her voice trailed away and Trev felt the cold little hand in his relax.

‘Ju!’ he cried desperately. ‘Ju!’ He fumbled for the torch and switched it on with trembling fingers and as it came on its rays fell full on the smooth face of the rock-wall beside him. In his distracted state he saw, but did not take in, what it revealed—a picture of a cart, strangely drawn with no perspective so that its wheels were spread flat, and the oxen that drew it lay flat on either side of their shaft, and little flat men ran alongside it. He swivelled the torch to light Judy’s face and saw it ashen and with closed eyes. At first he had an awful fear that she was dead. ‘Ju!’ he called wildly. ‘Ju!’ She did not stir or answer; and when, with a sick feeling of dread, he shifted his fingers from her hand to her wrist, searching for her pulse, he could not at first find it. Then suddenly he found the place and, with a surge of relief, he felt it beating feebly but steadily under his fingers.

And yet what was the use? Here they were at the bottom of the ‘Grand Trou’; a thousand-feet deep Marc had said it was, and unclimbable, except with steel ladders and all sorts of complicated apparatus. And no one knew they were here. How did the open sky and that tantalizing star above them help? They might just as well be under a thousand feet of solid rock. They would die anyway, of exhaustion and cold or thirst and starvation; it did not really make much odds which.

If that were so, wasn’t it better that Ju was already unconscious and going the easy way. Trev dropped his head on her breast, and now his teeth chattered unrestrainedly and sobs shook him; not only for Ju, dear as she was to him, but for himself too. To be alone in the darkness; to die alone there…

But he only let go for a minute or so. Then he sat up and wiped away the tears determinedly. While there was life, there was hope. That was the truest thing anybody ever said, and he’d got to concentrate on it. He’d not got to give; he’d got to do everything he could to keep life in them for as long as possible in the hope that—in the hope that—well, better not dwell on exactly what hope; that wasn’t his end of the business.

Resolutely, he set about making his puny arrangements. He checked

his pockets and Judy's to see if there was any scrap of food that had been overlooked. An odd biscuit in the breast-pocket of his wind-breaker was a major find. He put it away carefully for future use, but meantime he meticulously divided the small piece of chocolate in two and ate his share, putting Judy's by with the biscuit. There was little enough else he could do, except to try and conserve what strength and warmth they still had in their bodies as long as possible, and to save the torch for emergency use by putting it out in the meantime. He slid his arm under Judy and drew her into a bear-like hug, hoping thus to warm them both. And then, after only a slight hesitation, he put out the torch.

At first, after the torch went out, it was very bad there alone in the thick darkness. Then he turned his head and looked upwards, and after a time he saw again the patch of lighter darkness that might be the sky, and the tiny prick of light that was a star. On this he fixed his eyes—and his mind. Time passed. Trev did not know whether it was hours or minutes. Perhaps he sank into sleep or unconsciousness and was roused again by some sound. Then suddenly it seemed to him that where there had been only one star there was now more than one. Then all the stars seemed to be moving, and very faintly, ricocheting down the immense rock walls, came the echo of a human voice.

With a supreme effort Trev dragged himself back from the cold mist into which he was drifting. He sat up, fumbled in his pocket for the torch, and switched it on and signalled over and over again—SOS SOS SOS. He gathered his breath and gave one of the penetrating tremolo eagle-hawk cries that an Australian friend had taught him. It seemed to leave his lips as no more than a croak, but somehow the rocks took it up, magnifying it and hurling it up, up to the searchers on the heights above. Over and over again Trev croaked out the call. Then, his effort made, he sank back into the grip of cold exhaustion, from which he was only half-roused as he was hoisted on to the back of a rescuer and perilously conveyed up the swaying steel ladders to safety.

Several days later a very subdued Marc sat talking to Trev in the meadows above La Terrasse. The 'Cataracte du Diable', having been in full spate for more than three days, had once more fallen to a trickle, but the devastation where it had run still showed on the hillside, not far from where they sat. Trev was still looking a bit pale, and Judy had only that day been declared out of danger. It had been a near thing, and she was still not allowed to see anyone.

'My father is very angry with me. He blames me absolutely,' admitted Marc. 'He says I should not have neglected to warn you how the Cataract

can rise in an instant after rain.'

'I believe you did say something about it, you know, but I didn't take it in properly,' Trev excused him. 'But what beats me is how you knew where to come and look for us.'

'Oh, that! But it is known that the Cave of the Cataract connects with the "Grand Trou",' explained Marc.

'Yes, but how did you know we'd gone to the Cave of the Cataract in the first place,' Trev persisted.

At that moment Le Chevrier passed them driving his goats home from pasture. He pointed at Trev and then up the hill at the Cave of the Cataract, and gabbled something incomprehensible before slouching off after his flock. Marc jerked his head in the direction of the uncouth figure. 'You have him to thank for your lives,' he said soberly.

'Gosh! He saw us go in!' remembered Trev. 'In fact—wait a minute—yes, of course, he tried to stop us.'

'Yes, and then when the Cataract burst out after the storm, he rushed about looking for me—you were my friends he knew. We didn't lose a minute. But it takes time, you understand, to assemble the men and the equipment.' Trev nodded.

'What we didn't expect was to find you in the "Grand Trou". We thought we'd have to work through to the Painted Cave and get you out from there.'

'I see,' said Trev. 'By the way, I thought you said there weren't any paintings there in the "Grand Trou"? I saw a perfectly good painting there of a sort of spread—eagled cartwheels and oxen and…' But before he could get any further Marc grabbed his arm.

'What did you say? Wheels! A cart! Come to my father and tell him at once. This is what he has dreamed of for years—that he will find a rock-painting of a cart like the ones in Spain!'

Later, when an expedition to the bottom of the 'Grand Trou' had verified Trev's find, the Professor was in high feather at the proof of his favourite theory that prehistoric Frenchmen knew just as much as their prehistoric Spanish neighbours across the border. Moreover, with a Gallic flourish, he announced that the recess where the painting had been found would be named the Hamilton Recess, in honour of Judy and Trev.

But Judy was not impressed:

'Ugh, horrible place! I don't want anything to do with it ever again,' she declared. And then with the irritableness permitted to a convalescent, she added crossly, 'You know I loathe crawling about in caves, Trev, so why did you let him go and call his old cave after us!'

The Beast Tamer

Nikolai S. Leskov

My father was a well-known investigator for the law courts. He handled many important cases and often his work took him away from home; on these occasions my mother and I stayed behind with the servants. In those days mother was still young and I was only a small boy. In fact I was barely five years old when I had the experience which I am going to tell you about.

It was during the winter, when the frost was so heavy that the sheep froze in the stables during the nights. The sparrows and the pigeons fell from the trees to the hard earth, frozen to death. At that particular time my father's business commitments kept him in Jelec, and as he was unable to return home for Christmas, mother, anxious not to spend the festive season alone, decided to join him. Because of the bitter cold and the long journey involved, mother did not take me with her, and instead I stayed with my aunt, her sister, who was married to a notorious land owner.

He was a rich old man, but a man without mercy. His character was ruled by hardness and cruelty; and, far from being ashamed, he would boast of these qualities. In his opinion, such characteristics were the proof of manly strength and unbending courage. He raised his children with unrelenting firmness and strict discipline. I was the same age as one of his sons.

Many people feared my uncle, but no one more than I, for he used his merciless strictness to force me to be brave. I remember well, how once, when I was only three years old and very frightened of a fierce thunderstorm, my uncle pushed me on to the balcony and locked me out, to cure me of my fear.

So you can imagine how reluctant and afraid I was to return to this

household, to stay, but being so young I was not consulted, and, in fact, had no say in the matter.

On my uncle's estate stood a huge building, that looked like a castle. It was an imposing, but unattractive, one-storied house, with a dome and a tower about which many gruesome, and terrifying tales were told. Once it had been occupied by the demented father of the present owner, who had made drugs and medicines. For some reason even this was considered horrific. The greatest source of fear however was caused by what went on in the very top of the tower, where, across a high, paneless window, harp strings were tightly sprung. This was called Aeol's harp. When the wind played upon the strings of this capricious instrument, it made the weirdest noise, changing from a quiet, haunting whisper into an uneasy, plaintive wail, and then turning into a shrill, deafening roar. It sounded as if a whole crowd of persecuted spirits, maddened with terror, were caught in the harp's strings.

No one in the whole household could bear to hear the eerie sounds of the harp. But they all thought that this instrument gave orders to its hard-hearted master, and that this accounted for his merciless cruelty. Everyone was well aware that when thunder raged in the night and the harp screeched so piercingly that it was heard all over the village, its lord and master would be unable to sleep and would rise in the morning, ill-tempered and frowning. He would issue impossible orders to his servants, who would be dreadfully nervous and frightened all day.

It was the custom of this household that no crime or misdeed ever went unpunished, and there were no exceptions to this rule. It applied to one and all—human beings, animals, even insects. My uncle showed no mercy, hating the very word, as to him it was a mark of weakness. He preferred to be ruthless and unforgiving, and would not tolerate any form of leniency. It was therefore not surprising that his household and all the villages which belonged to his large, wealthy estate, were overshadowed by gloom and sadness, which even spread to the animals.

Uncle's greatest love was to go on a hunt with his dogs. He hunted wolves, hares and foxes with his greyhounds, and he raised a special breed of dogs for bear hunting. These were called leecher-dogs, probably because once their sharp teeth fastened themselves into the bear's flesh, they would cling to the beast like leeches, refusing to let go. Sometimes the bear crushed them with one blow of his massive paw, or tore the hound in half, but the leecher-dog would never let go while it was still living and breathing.

Nowadays different methods are used for baiting the bears, and this

particular breed of dogs no longer exists in Russia, but at the time of which I am talking, leecher-dogs were always present in a good hunting party. Many bears used to roam this part of the country, and the bear hunt always provided excitement and amusement.

Whenever the hunters found a bear's lair with cubs, they would take them alive and bring them back home. Usually they kept the cubs in a large, stone outhouse, where the tiny windows were built high under the roof. Thick, heavy bars spanned the windows and the only way the bear cubs could reach them, was by standing one on top of the other and by clinging to the bars with their claws. This was the only way they could get a glimpse at the world outside their prison. Before lunch, we always went for a walk, and we liked to go past the outhouse to see the claws of the comical cubs protruding from the windows. Our German tutor, Kolberg, sometimes gave them pieces of bread saved from breakfast, on the end of a stick.

The bears were placed in the charge of young Ferapont, who also took care of the kennels. I remember him well; he was a young man of medium height, and about twenty-five years old. He was muscular, strong and daring. Everyone thought him to be very handsome with his white complexion, red cheeks, thick locks of black, curly hair and enormous, deep eyes. Quite apart from his good looks, he was very brave.

Ferapont had a sister called Anna, who used to come to help our nurse, and she told us many interesting stories about her brother's bravery and his unusual friendship with the bears. Summer and winter alike, Ferapont slept with the beasts inside their outhouse. They would lie all around him, and often would use his head or a shoulder as a cushion. Colourful flower gardens stretched in front of uncle's house, surrounded by ornamental fencing that had wide gates in the centre. A tall, smooth pole stood on a green lawn, beyond these gates, and we called this the Perch of the Privileged. At the very top of the pole a small shelter had been firmly fixed.

It was the custom to choose the most intelligent and dependable bear from the captured cubs, and allow it to move quite freely in the gardens and parks. But the privileged beast was assigned a special duty—namely to be on guard by the pole in front of the gates. So it would spend most of its time there, either relaxing on the lawn under the pole or else, having climbed up the pole into the shelter, dozing or sleeping undisturbed by people or hounds.

Only the exceptionally tame and the exceptionally wise bears were allowed to live such a free existence, and their liberty ended abruptly as

soon as they showed their natural animal instincts. As long as they took no notice of chickens, geese, calves and of people, they were safe. But the bear who disturbed the peace of the inhabitants, or showed his true animal nature by turning into a hunter, was immediately sentenced to death and nothing could save him.

Such an unfortunate bear would be thrown into a deep pit in a field between the village and the forest. After a few days, a long wooden plank would be pushed into the hollow and he would be forced to climb out. As soon as the bear appeared, my uncle's leecher-dogs would pounce upon him. If these hounds proved no match for the bear, failing to kill him, and there was a danger that he might escape into the forest, two expert huntsmen would take up the hunt; they would set a pair of the most experienced and vicious hounds on to the beast to finish him.

If by some freak of nature however, even these skilful dogs could not kill the bear or prevent him from breaking through to the small area of woodland connected to the thick forests, then an experienced marksman would come forward with his long, heavy, Kuchenreiter rifle, to fire the deadly shot into the bear's heart.

It seemed impossible for a bear to escape all these dangers, but if, by some chance he did get away, the consequences for those involved with the hunt would have been terrible. Their punishment would have been death. The selection of the most trustworthy cub was left to Ferapont, because he spent so much time among them and because he was considered something of an expert. He was warned he would be held responsible if he made a bad choice, but he did not hesitate and chose a bear cub who was amazingly clever and wise. Nearly all the bears in Russia are called Myshka, but this bear was called Sganarel, which is a most unusual Spanish name. Sganarel grew from a cub into a big, healthy bear of tremendous strength. He was also quite handsome and quite an acrobat. With his short round nose and a graceful, slight figure, he was more like a giant poodle or a bloodhound than a bear. His hind quarters were rather skinny, with short, shiny fur, but he had the most magnificent, broad chest and back, which was covered with thick, long fur. He was quick-witted and learnt many tricks, which was unusual for an animal of his breed. For example, he could walk forward and backwards on his hind legs quite easily, he could play the drum, and march with a stick carved in the shape of a gun under his arm. Sganarel was also always happy and willing to help the peasants carry their heavy sacks to the mill. For such trips, he would cheekily put a widerimmed straw hat with a peacock's feather on his head.

But the fateful day came when the strong natural animal instincts overpowered even the good-natured, friendly Sganarel. Shortly before my arrival at uncle's house, the no longer dependable Sganarel was found guilty of several lapses, which got progressively worse.

The things he did wrong were typical of his breed. First he tore a wing off a goose; then he placed his paw upon the spine of a young foal and broke its back; and finally, he took a dislike to a blind beggar and his guide, and rolled them over and over in the snow, hurting their hands and legs so badly they had to be taken to hospital. At this point Ferapont was ordered to lead Sganarel into the pit; the pit which had only one way out, and that was the way to the execution.

That evening, when Anna was putting my cousin and me to bed, she told us how sad and touching it was when her brother took Sganarel to the pit to await the killing. Ferapont did not even have to put rings through his mouth, nor use iron chains; it had not been necessary to take the bear by force. As soon as Ferapont said, 'Come with me, bear,' the trusting beast got up and followed him. Funnily enough he even placed his old straw hat upon his head, and put his arm around Ferapont's waist as they walked towards the concealed pit, so they looked just like a pair of good friends.

And that is exactly what they were. Ferapont felt dreadfully sorry for his furry friend, but there was no way in which he could help him. I must remind you, that in the district where this happened, it was unknown for anyone to be forgiven for any wrongdoing, so now the degraded Sganarel had to pay for his misdemeanours with his life.

It was decided the killing should take place during the afternoon, to amuse the numerous visitors who had gathered as usual at uncle's house to spend Christmas with him. The order for the preparation of the bear-baiting had gone out the minute Ferapont had left to put the guilty Sganarel into the pit.

It was easy to make the bears walk into the pits, which were usually camouflaged by brushwood thrown on top of thin branches strewn across the opening. Then this roof was covered with snow. The trap was so well disguised, the bears were unaware of danger. They were taken to the edge of the pit and then—one or two more paces—and the unsuspecting animals fell into the deep hollow, from which it was impossible to escape. They had no other choice but to await their terrible fate.

When the time came for the chase and the killing, a narrow plank, five metres long, was placed in the pit for the bear to climb out. If by any chance the beast was clever enough to sense the danger and refused to come up, he was prodded with long, spiked rods, handfuls of burning

straw were thrown upon him, or blank cartridges were fired into the pit, to force him out.

When Ferapont had left Sganarel inside his deep, cold prison, he was feeling terribly unhappy and sad. Unfortunately he confided in his sister, telling her how friendly the bear's behaviour had been towards him, how willingly he accompanied him to the trap and that, when he finally fell through the brushwood to the bottom of the pit, he squatted upon his hind quarters, put his front paws together as if he was pleading, and whimpered pitifully.

Ferapont also told Anna how he had run away from the pit, because his heart could not bear to hear Sganarel's heartrending cries.

'Thank God it is not my task to shoot him, if he starts to run towards the woods,' he sighed. 'I could not carry out such an order, I would rather undergo the greatest torture, than shoot Sganarel,'

Anna told us all this, and we in turn told our tutor, Kolberg. In an effort to amuse uncle, Kolberg passed the whole story on to him. Uncle said, 'We shall test that fellow Ferapont,' and clapped his hands three times. This was the signal to summon his valet—Ustin Petrovich—an old Frenchman, who had been in uncle's service since his capture many years before. Ustin Petrovich, or Justin, as he was called for short, entered the room, wearing his purple valet's cloak with the gold buttons. Uncle ordered him to inform the celebrated Flegont, the famous marksman who never missed his target, and Ferapont, that they would be the selected pair of riflemen. It would be their duty to hide in the woods and kill the doomed bear if he tried to escape during the chase. Uncle probably hoped to be further entertained by watching the terrible struggle by the unfortunate man between his loyalty to his master and his love for the beast. If Ferapont refused to fire upon Sganarel, or if he purposely missed when firing, he would be punished ruthlessly and the bear would be slain with the second shot from Flegont, who was not only acurate, but perfectly reliable. As soon as this order had been given and Justin had left the room, we children realized what a terrible thing we had done. If only we had not repeated what we had heard! Only God knew how this nightmare would end. We were so upset, that though we had not eaten for the whole day, we failed to enjoy the delicious Christmas Eve feast, which began the moment the first star lit up the sky. We did not even take an interest in the other children among the guests, and continually worried about Sganarel and Ferapont; unable to make up our minds which one of them we pitied the most.

My cousin and I tossed and turned in our bed late into the night. When

we finally fell asleep, our bad dreams about Ferapont and Sganarel made us restless and we slept fitfully. The nurse, not understanding, tried to comfort us by saying we need not be frightened of the bear, as he was secure in the pit and would be killed the next day. I was even more upset and disturbed at this.

I even asked the nurse if I could pray for Sganarel, but such a question was above the old woman's religious understanding. She yawned, made the sign of the cross and said she didn't know about that, that she had never asked her spiritual father such a question, but that the bear was, after all, also one of God's creatures, who had found shelter on Noah's Ark.

Christmas day finally arrived and, all dressed up in our Sunday best, we were waiting to take tea with our tutors and governesses. The drawing room was packed with relatives and other guests; including the priest, the deacon and two choir soloists from our church. When uncle entered, the representatives of the church raised their voices with: 'Jesus Christ was born today.' Then everyone drank tea, which was followed by a small breakfast and, at two o'clock, we sat down to a festive dinner.

As soon as the meal was over, everybody went quickly to get ready to watch Sganarel's killing. They had to hurry, for dusk descends swiftly at that time of the year, and it would have been impossible to proceed with the bear-baiting in darkness, when the bear could easily escape from sight.

Everything went according to plan. So we would not miss a thing, we rushed to dress straight from the dinner table. Wrapped in our warm, rabbit-fur coats, and shod in high, furry boots with thick, goat-skin soles, we were taken outside and placed in one of the sledges. By the gates stood a line of luxurious, roomy sledges, padded with colourful carpets and warm rugs, and each harnessed to a team of horses. Two grooms held the reins of uncle's high-spirited English hunting horse, Monden. At last uncle came out, wearing a fox-skin fur coat and a fur pointed cap. As soon as he had mounted his horse and sat astride his bearskin saddle decorated with snake heads, our long procession started to move. Ten or fifteen minutes later, we reached the chosen scene for the proceedings and, forming a semicircle, came to a halt. All the sledges were turned to face the wide, snow-covered field, which was surrounded by the chain of huntsmen on horseback. The wood formed a border at the far side of the field. Near the trees, behind some bushes, Flegont and Ferapont were hidden in trenches.

No one could see their hiding-places; only a few sharpsighted people pointed to the hardly visible gun rests, supporting the heavy rifles of the marksmen. One of these rifles was to shoot Sganarel…

As the bear's pit was also out of our sight, we gazed with at the

magnificent huntsmen; who all carried very imposing looking rifles of Swedish, German and English makes.

Uncle positioned himself at the head of his company. He held the leads of the most vicious pair of leecher-dogs, and in front of him, upon the ornate saddle, a white scarf had been placed.

The young dogs, for whom the baiting of Sganarel would be a part of their training, were present in great numbers. They lacked discipline and showed their burning impatience and craving for blood. They barked, and whined, jumping up constantly, disturbing the horses and their uniformed riders, who cracked their whips in an effort to make the young, restless hounds behave. Everyone was now impatient for the chase to begin. The dogs, of course, with their highly developed sense of smell, were well aware of the nearness of the beast and longed to pounce upon it.

It was time to bring Sganarel out from the pit and to give him to the bloodthirsty hounds. Uncle waved the white scarf and shouted, ‘Begin!’

Ten riders came forward out of the main group of the huntsmen and galloped across the field. After about two hundred paces they stopped and took hold of a long, wooden plank which, being so far away, we could not see. They were now right by the pit where Sganarel was imprisoned, but this was also out of sight.

The men lifted the plank and pushed one end down into the pit, placing it at such an angle, that the beast would have no difficulty in climbing out.

The top part of the plank was placed against the edge of the pit and we could just see the tip of it sticking out into the air.

All eyes were glued to these preparations, for they were the overture to the real drama to come. Everyone expected that Sganarel would emerge fairly quickly, but he obviously sensed what was to come and remained well out of sight.

The riders tried to force him out by bombarding him with balls and prodding him with sharp, spiked poles; loud cries were heard, but Sganarel did not appear. The sound of blank shots fired into the pit echoed into the air, but even this did not force the animal out into the open. Sganarel growled crossly, but remained firmly where he was. Before long a battered, horse-pulled sledge sped into the field. Normally it was used for manure, but now it contained a load of dry, brittle straw The horse was tall and emaciated, as were all the horses kept to carry heavy loads from the fields. But although he was worn and old and looked half-starved, he raced with his tail high and his mane flying. Maybe his friskiness was caused by the remembered high spirits of his lost youth. I think, however, that his nervous agility was more likely to have been brought on by the sheer terror

which had seized him when he sensed the bear's nearness. He darted across the white surface with such frenzy, that the driver had great difficulty in steering him in a straight line; he pulled the reins tighter and tighter, till the horse's head was forced right back, and the rough iron bit under his tongue cut his mouth and made it bleed. All the time the whip lashed mercilessly into the frightened animal's hide.

The three separate piles of straw were set alight and thrown down into the pit from three sides, so that the only part which was not burning, was the small area by the bottom end of the plank. The air exploded with the deafening, furious roar and frenzied cries from.the maddened animal, but still he did not climb to the surface. We heard rumours that Sganarel had been badly burnt, and that he had covered his eyes with his paws and was cowering in a corner, where no one could get at him.

The old nag with the torn mouth galloped away from the pit. Thinking that he had been sent for another load of hay, some of the spectators complained in whispers. Why, they asked, had not the organizers of the chase ordered a larger load of hay in the first place, so that there would have been some to spare? Uncle looked angry and was shouting crossly, but I was unable to hear the words, for there was a great deal of commotion. People were talking loudly, the dogs were snarling and barking even more frantically, and the crack of the whips whistled through the air.

Then, suddenly, the mood changed; the crowds grew quiet again, as the old nag, snorting heavily, was racing back towards the deep hollow. But the sledge was not carrying the expected second load of straw; it was bringing Ferapont, the bear's friend. My furious uncle had given the order for Ferapont to be lowered into the pit, to lead out his four-legged friend to his execution. Ferapont seemed very agitated, but he acted firmly and without hesitation. He carried out his master's orders to the letter. Taking a piece of rope which had been used for tying the hay from the sledge, he fastened it securely round a notch in the plank. Then, taking the free end of the rope into his hand, he descended into the pit.

Sganarel's dreadful cries stopped and changed into muffled grumbling, rather as if he was complaining to his friend about the cruel behaviour of the people. Eventually all was quiet.

'He is embracing and licking Ferapont!' shouted somebody, standing by the edge of the pit. Some of the spectators inside their sledges sighed, while others frowned. Many of them suddenly felt sorry for the bear and they no longer found pleasure in the thought of the killing. But such fleeting sentiments were swiftly pushed out of mind by the next

unexpected, frightful development.

Ferapont's curly head emerged from the pit as he climbed upwards along the plank, with the aid of the rope. He was not alone; Sganarel, locked in a fond embrace with his friend, his furry head upon Ferapont's shoulder, was coming up close behind him. The bear was clearly unhappy and looked a very sorry sight. He looked exhausted and hurt, and we felt this to be caused not so much by his physical suffering, but more by the shock of his morale. The angry gleam of his blood-shot eyes reflected his anger and irritation, and his whole appearance reminded us of King Lear.

His fur was dishevelled, scorched in places and knotted with blades of straw. And, like King Lear, Sganarel too, had his own kind of a crown.

The bear had refused to be parted from his old straw hat, and had been wearing it when he was led into the pit. Perhaps it was just a coincidence or perhaps it was because Sganarel really treasured this gift from his beloved friend; but whatever the reason, he was still clutching the battered straw hat as he came out into the open. As he stood once again upon solid ground, momentarily secure and content in the nearness of his friend, he took the crushed, battered hat from under his arm and put it on his head.

Many of the crowd saw the funny side of this scene and roared with laughter, but others, as they watched the beast, were filled with a sudden surge of compassion. Some of them even turned their backs to the spectacle, no longer wanting to witness the cruel ending. While all this was going on, the leecher-dogs forgot completely the meaning of the word obedience; snarling and growling they jumped up with vicious frenzy. The whips no longer had any effect upon them. As soon as the young hounds and the old experienced leecher-dogs saw Sganarel come out of the pit, they nearly suffocated as they strained at their iron collars. By then Ferapont was speeding in the old sledge back to his hiding-place near the edge of the wood.

Once again Sganarel was left alone. He was jerking his paw with some impatience, for it was caught up in the rope fastened to the plank. He obviously wanted to release his paw from the loop so he could run after his friend, but even the most intelligent bear is still only a bear, and Sganarel, instead of managing to loosen the loop, merely tightened it even further.

When he realized his efforts were getting him nowhere, he tugged at the rope with all his strength to try and break it, but it was exceptionally strong and held fast. The movement had jerked the plank from its original position, and Sganarel looked towards the pit to see what was happening. Just then, two leecher-dogs, released from the pack, pounced upon his back and the sharp teeth of one bit deeply into his flesh. Sganarel had been

so preoccupied with the rope, that the hounds had taken him completely by surprise; at first he was more surprised by their audacity, than angry; but a second or two later, when the leecher-dog extracted its teeth so it could sink them even deeper into his flesh, the bear tore the dog from his back and flung it away from him with such force, it slit its stomach. The white snow where the hound landed was marked immediately with a pool of fresh blood. With one sharp blow of his back paw, the bear then crushed the body of the second dog.

But the most amazing and frightening thing of all was what happened with the plank. When Sganarel hurled the first leecher-dog into the air, the powerful movement pulled the plank right out of the pit. It flew upwards, the rope, to which it was still attached, became taut, and then the long piece of wood started to circle round and round Sganarel, as if he was its axis. The far end of the plank skimmed the snowy ground, knocking down and crushing not just a dog or two, but a full pack of hounds. Some whimpered with pain, their paws jerking in the snow, others turned over and remained motionless and silent.

Either the bear was of such exceptional intelligence that he realized he held the deadliest weapon—or the rope was cutting into his paw and inflicting pain, but he let out a warlike roar, seized the rope even more firmly with his paw and swung it even more ferociously. The powerful weapon swished through the air, knocking down all that stood in its way. If, God forbid, the rope had snapped, the plank would have soared away from its axis, bringing utter destruction to all alive and breathing in its path.

All of us, who were grouped together on the field—the spectators, the huntsmen, the horses and the hounds—were now placed in great danger and we prayed that the rope wrapped around Sganarel’s paw would remain intact. But how would it all end? Most of us were no longer interested. With the exception of the two marksmen hidden by the wood, and a handful of huntsmen, the rest of the crowd turned away from the scene, very much afraid, and ordered their drivers to race with the wind from this dangerous place. They flew back to the house in panic and commotion.

Because of this hasty retreat and the resulting chaos, several slight crashes and falls occurred along the route, causing some laughter and some alarm. Those who fell out of the sledges into the snow were quite sure that they could see the plank whistling over their heads and the outraged beast racing towards them. The guests, who returned to the house, were able to calm down, but to those who remained at the scene of the chase, the horror was not yet at an end.

It was impossible to set other dogs upon Sganarel. It was clear to everybody watching, that as he was so adequately armed, he would be capable of mowing down all the packs of hounds without any damage to himself. So the bear, without interference, continued to swing the plank round and round, turning with it at the same time; and made his way towards the wood, unaware that death was waiting for him there. Ferapont, and the infallible marksman, Flegont, were ready for him in their separate hiding-places.

One accurate shot was all that was needed to end it all. But it seemed that fate was on Sganarel's side, for it intervened again to save the bear's life.

Just when Sganarel neared the barriers, behind which the two marksmen were taking aim with just the muzzles of their guns showing, the rope suddenly snapped, and the plank flew sideways like an arrow fired from a bow. The bear lost his balance and fell over in the snow.

The handful of spectators left on the field were in for yet another surprise. The plank, in its flight, knocked down the gun rest and the barrier which was protecting Flegont, then it shot over his head and became embedded in a distant snow-drift. Sganarel also did not waste his time. He rolled over and over in the snow, till he landed behind Ferapont's barrier.

Recognizing his good friend, he breathed on him with his hot breath and began to lick him all over. Just then there was the sound of a shot from the direction of Flegont's hideout, but it was Ferapont who fell unconscious to the ground, while the bear ran off into the woods, unhurt.

People rushed over to Ferapont to see how badly he was hurt; the bullet had struck his hand and passed right through it. A few stray hairs from Sganarel's fur were lodged in the wound.

Flegont's reputation for excellent marksmanship did not really suffer. The circumstances had forced him to shoot in haste and without using the gun rest. Daylight too had been failing fast and Ferapont and the bear were standing very closely together. In fact under such unfavourable conditions, it was a wonder the shot struck so near to its intended target.

Nevertheless Sganarel had escaped and it was futile to pursue him in the gathering dusk. By the time the following day began, their lord and master, whose word was law, had very different thoughts, from the chase, on his mind.

As the chase had such an unsatisfactory ending, uncle returned home angrier and more ill-humoured then ever. Even before dismounting his horse, he was issuing orders to track the beast down at sunrise and to surround him in such a manner that an escape would be impossible.

A properly conducted hunt would surely have a better result than the afternoon's fiasco. All of us were wondering and worrying what punishment would be given to the poor wounded Ferapont, and it was the general opinion that a cruel fate would be in store for him. He had, after all, committed a crime by not plunging his hunting knife into the bear's heart when he had the chance, and by allowing him to escape unhurt from the hideout. The suspicion that during that fateful moment Ferapont had purposely refused to raise his hand against his furry friend and had deliberately sent him off to freedom, was more damning still. It seemed very likely that Ferapont had chosen to be loyal to Sganarel, for their firm friendship was common knowledge.

We children listened to the discussions of the grown-ups, who had gathered that evening in the spacious drawingroom, where the tall, beautifully decorated and illuminated Christmas tree was the centre of attraction. And, like our elders, we too were worried about Ferapont.

A rumour reached us from the hall, and quickly spread through the whole room, that as yet no decision had been made as to what was to be done with Ferapont.

'Can this be a good, or a bad omen?' someone whispered, and this whisper made us even more anxious and miserable.

Father Alexei, the old village priest, had also heared the muffled question. He sighed deeply and murmured, 'Let us pray to Jesus.'

Then he made the sign of the Cross, and all those present followed his example—relatives, guests, free men, serfs, rich men, poor men and children alike. It was the right time to pray for help. Before our arms had fallen back to our sides, the doors opened and uncle entered, a walking stick in hand, his two favourite hounds at his heel. Justin followed him, carrying his pipe and the ornate tobacco pouch on a silver tray.

Uncle's carved armchair stood on a Persian rug in the centre of the room, right in front of the Christmas tree. In silence he sat down, and in silence he took his pipe and pouch from his valet. The hounds settled themselves at his feet, stretching their long noses on the carpet.

Uncle was wearing a silk, dark-blue dressing-gown, beautifully and heavily embroidered. His hand clutched the thin, but strong walking stick, made from the branch of a Caucasian cherry-tree.

He was using the walking stick, for during the recent panic at the bear-baiting, his frisky mount, Monden, had also been nervous; the horse had reared wildly, and side-stepped, pressing uncle's leg against a tree. The injury caused him severe pain and made him limp slightly. We thought that such an incident could only add fire to his anger and fury. The fact

that we all remained perfectly and utterly silent after his arrival in the room also did not help matters, because, like so many suspicious people, uncle detested silence. Father Alexei, who knew uncle well, hastened forward to break the ominous hush and to save the situation as best as he could. As we children had gathered around him, he turned to us, asking if we knew the meaning of the hymn: ‘Our Saviour is Born’. It soon became obvious, that not only us young ones, but many of the grown-ups did not understand the words fully. The priest then went on to explain the true significance of phrases such as ‘Praise Him’, ‘Welcome Him’ and ‘Lift up your hearts and souls’.

As the Father talked of the last expression, he quietly and simply offered his heart and soul to God. And he told us about the gift which now, as always, even the poorest beggar can offer to Baby Jesus. This gift would be more precious than the presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh, brought to him by the wise men from the East. We could offer him our hearts, bettered and reformed by his teaching. The elderly priest talked of love, mercy and forgiveness, of the duty of each one of us to help and comfort friend and foe alike ‘in the name of Christ’.

His words were sincere and convincing, and we all listened intently, in the profound hope that they would reach the heart and soul of the one for whom we knew they were intended. Tears of compassion were glistening in many eyes.

Something fell to the floor with a clatter. It was uncle’s cane. Someone picked it up and handed it back, but uncle did not touch it; instead he sat, slumped to one side, a hand hanging limply over the arm of the chair. His forgotten pipe slid from his grasp, but no one rushed forth to pick it up. Instead everyone’s gaze was glued upon his face, for something unbelievable was happening: Uncle was crying!

The priest quietly stepped through the circle of us children, walked up to uncle and silently blessed him. Uncle raised his head, clasped the frail Father by his hand, kissed it fervently in front of us all and whispered, ‘Thank you.’ Then he turned to Justin and ordered him to bring Ferapont to him. Ferapont appeared and stood in front of uncle, white-faced, and with a bandaged hand.

‘Stand over here!’ uncle commanded, pointing to the Persian rug, directly in front of his feet. Ferapont obeyed and fell to his knees. ‘Rise!… on your feet!’ uncle said. ‘I forgive you.’

Ferapont once again fell to his knees, but uncle spoke to him in a strange, passionate voice, ‘You gave a beast deeper love than many of us are capable of giving another human being. Your loyal affection has

moved me to generosity. To show my admiration, I am giving you your freedom and one hundred roubles for your journey. Go to wherever you wish.'

'Thank you, but I shall not go away!' Ferapont said.

'What is it that you want?' his master asked.

'Because you have shown me kindness, I wish to remain with you; I will serve you more faithfully now when I am a free man, than when I was a serf under your rule of terror.'

Uncle dabbed his eyes with his white handkerchief, then, leaning forward, embraced Ferapont; all of us present also stood up and there was not a dry eye amongst us. We could not help but feel that the Lord's name had been praised in this very room, and that a reign of happiness and peace had taken over from the former reign of terror.

The good news spread into the village with the barrels of mead, which were sent as a token of goodwill. Soon the sky was lit with the glow of fires, as merriment and happiness entered every heart. People said to one another, 'This Christmas even the beast has celebrated the birth of our Christ.'

They did not search for Sganarel in the forest. Ferapont, as he was promised, was given his freedom, and before long took over Justin's duties to become not just a faithful servant, but also a trusted friend. When uncle died, it was Ferapont who closed his eyes for the last time and who buried his remains in the Vagankov cemetery in Moscow. A memorial in his honour stands there to this very day, and there, by uncle's feet, lies Ferapont.

No one places flowers upon their resting-place now, but in some far corners of Moscow there are still some people left who remember the erect, white-haired man, who had the gift of recognizing true sorrow and who was always ready to help. Sometimes he sent his good, faithful servant to help the needy; but neither of them ever came empty-handed. These two good people, about whose deeds so much more could be told, were my uncle and his loyal servant Ferapont, whom the old master jokingly called: 'the Beast Tamer'.