SPORT.

LOTUS AND BLACK BEAR: SOME ADVENTURES IN KASHMIR: AN ACCOUNT OF THE SLAYING OF THE RECORD BLACK BEAR.

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(Continued from p. 58.)

Two days later I was encamped at a height of ten thousand feet at the head of a long boat-shaped valley which was hedged in on all sides by prodigious jungle of firs and pines. In the lower fields rice was growing in vivid green patches, and in others Indian corn, now tall and near to ripening. A small village lay hard by, with the lambadar of which I made arrangements to draw milk and eggs and rice for myself and my servants.

Next evening I was out again with my shikari and we took our station among some rocks at the top of a steep declivity, down the sides of which there spread a thick growth of brushwood, leaving a clear ride open to our view. The ants were troublesome in the extreme, and we tried vainly to sit quiet. For the black bear has wonderfully acute powers of smell and hearing, though his eyesight is poor. It is the poor quality of his sight, so the natives assured me, that leads him to his savage unprovoked attacks on men whom he meets on the forest paths where he happens to be wandering, for he comes on them suddenly as on vague threatening shadows, and in sudden access of terror rushes in and strikes. And he is a truly terrible monster when he does strike, for rising erect with his huge ironclad paw upraised he towers far above the head of the tallest man, and the paw with its immense musculature of forearm can, with a single blow, smash in the skull of a cow. Howbeit, for two hours we sat there and continued to keep still enough, picking the ants off our clothes, and often from the back of our necks, until at last through the utter stillness which pervaded the heavily drooping jungle, we heard the well-known surging in the bushes and the rattle of snapping twigs. Once again our pulses were set beating, for these great beasts do not appear and disappear, but merely come into being and fade away, a great glossy, coal-black patch, framed in a thicket of wild thorns. It was eighty yards away down the khud, and there it stuck immovable. Slowly I rose erect, my shikari grimacing at me the while, for we dare not speak, and having braced myself with my feet among the loose rocks, I drew a bead on the
black patch and pulled. The crash of the heavy rifle rang through the ravine like that of a gun, the recoil nearly knocking me off my feet. I was conscious of a vast silence, for though the jungle had seemed still enough, it had been in reality vocal with countless small noises, the hum of insects, cooing of doves, twittering of small birds. But as the report rang out every creature stood dead still.

"Load, sahib, load quick!" cried my shikari.

But I was already doing so, expecting every moment to see the fierce black face with its flashing rows of teeth dashing up towards me. For a full two minutes I stood at the ready, watching every bush in front of me, but the stillness held. Not a twig stirred. At last we made a move and began cautiously to descend. Amir Khan assured me that I had hit the beast, which was an old she-bear with a cub, and when we arrived where she had been we found it true enough, for the bushes were trampled wildly and both the leaves and the grass were covered with great gouts of blood. It was now dusk and Amir Khan said it was too late and too dangerous to follow up the beast that night. As it was clearly badly hit it would not go far and we should find it dead in the morning.

I cannot detail here the day-to-day chase of that animal, for though we started early next morning and followed all day we got never a sight of her. The blood marks were clear and later on gave place to splashes of serum and pus. More than once we came to soft patches in the soil where the beast had scooped out the damp, cool earth to apply to its wound. I was inclined to laugh when my shikari first told me this, but from what I saw later I had no reason to doubt the truth of it. He also asserted that wounded bears make themselves plasters of leaves which they stick into the wounds with their paws. This also I now believe to be true. At first, however, I was moved to mild sarcasm, finding suggested that the animal showing so much medical sense had probably gone into Srinagar to have its wound dressed. The track led us to the most infernal scrambles through brush and thorns and up the beds of water courses amongst heaped-up boulders. The third day we met a gujar, a wild excited fellow with long hair, who told us that only an hour ago he had been driving a buffalo over the hill above us when he was attacked by a wounded she-bear which the buffalo had driven off. We were off at once, and reaching a sort of grassy plateau high up, sure enough, we saw Mistress Bruin. But not before she saw us, and while we were yet a hundred and fifty yards distant, she was off with a long lumbering canter into some dense scrub. She had been sitting by a solitary pond where the marks in the soft marginal mud showed that many wild creatures came to drink. Here, too, she had scraped out a great hole in the black moist earth, in which she appeared to have been sitting. She was very thin, and the great wound in her shoulder was plain. The gujar had described it also. And now the puzzle was how she could have received my heavy bullet in a spot where it should have been immediately fatal and should yet be running.
about. It was not for four more days that we found the solution of the mystery, and a very strange one it was. At the time it disconcerted me, as it made me have doubts of my rifle and its stopping powers.

From our camp, morning and evening, before we went on with the search, which had become arduous and wearisome by this, we searched the skies above the surrounding crags and forest-clad peaks for signs of kites gathering. For wherever a thing dies in the jungle they learn quickly of its presence, and assemble above it, screaming and wheeling in the air before they descend. The crows, too, which fill even the jungle retreats with their impudence, often guide a hunter to a wounded beast, as with fiendish cruelty they chase it from bush to bush, from hiding place to hiding place, screaming and cawing the while, like a mob of Bolsheviks hounding down an aristocrat. One whole afternoon I followed a gang of crows which led me a fine dance with their wild cawing; but I could not come up with my quarry nevertheless.

Nearly a week had now passed, and as a last resort I determined to beat the jungle, when either I should at last find the poor brute and put an end to it or, perchance, should come across a fresh one.

One morning fifty villagers of all ages, from lads of fifteen to spindle-shanked old greybeards, gathered before my camp and were duly counted. Their various duties were assigned to them, some acting as beaters, some as "stops." The tracks of jungle and the ravines which we intended to beat were described to them in detail, and an hour or so after dawn we set out.

The first beat was over and had yielded nothing save a fox and jackal and a great number of bewildered owls, when two coolies came up with the exciting news that they had found the wounded bear. They had not seen it but knew where it was. It was vague, but highly elated I followed them as they led the way through thick growths of young firs. At last an awful odour smote my nostrils, which rapidly grew until it was sickening, and then all of a sudden I came on the scene of the last great jungle tragedy. In a bit of jungle on a steep slope lay a scattered collection of bones with bits of hide and black fur. The whole earth was teeming with black ants which were asprawl over ugly patches of dried blood. The bones, still moist and juicy, were also black with the insects. Beside me lay a skull pan, also damp, which was plainly that of a young, half-grown bear. All around were the broad footmarks, deep sunken in the soil, of at least a half dozen bears, and their foul droppings lay in heaps. The whole story was clear at a glance. I could not help thinking that our plight had been a perilous one indeed had we come unexpectedly on that shaggy crew at work on their cannibal feast.

Amir Khan said when a young bear was ill or wounded the old ones always slew and ate it. Here they had eaten the mother, too. And now the whole story was clear. When I fired Amir Khan had fancied the cub was standing alongside its mother. What had happened, then, was that
my bullet had gone through the cub, probably about the nape of its neck, and had then hit the mother in the shoulder. It is not often one shoots two bears with one bullet; my shikari said that in his experience it was unique. I expect he was right.

I was greatly cut up by the loss of the bear after my arduous search of a week, for, of course, the skins of both mother and cub were ruined, all that was left of either being a few shaggy tufts. Even the skulls were so broken as to be useless to bring away.

It was with some depression, then, that I resumed the beating, and we continued all day till the very last nullah which remained. Had I known what was to happen in that, I might have thought twice before I started, for we came within an ace of tragedy, just missing it by that small margin which nearly always seems to be just, and only just, interposed between the hunter and steep death. We sat down on the side of a watercourse, the dry, rocky bed of a stream which had an island-like ridge in the middle. The sides of the nullah were steep, and the jungle was very thick all round us. From where we had seated ourselves we had a view of open space over the watercourse and amongst the bushes across it. We heard the beat begin. The shrieks and yells of the beaters began to ring through the forest, whilst the clatter of their sticks on the tree trunks was like the rattling of machine guns. Some owls dashed out half blind and heavy winged; then a pretty little fox, whose quaint air of surprise made me gurgle with mirth as he stopped and turned his head in puzzlement in every direction, half curious and half annoyed.

At last, at last, wild shrieks of “Bhalu! Bhalu!” began to resound and the beaters went half mad with excitement. They were, indeed, yelling for their lives, for they had sighted a bear, and if the brute broke back, some of them would get a mauling. The thrill of that minute passes belief; all my nerves were tense as I watched the watercourse before me, thinking to see every second that shaggy, snarling form break forth.

My shikari was sitting close by me on my left with my shot-gun in reserve, holding it between his knees. Of a sudden I heard “bang! bang!” right in my ears, and a terrified “My God!” It was the only English I ever heard him speak, and he must have heard it from some other sahib in another tight place.

I jumped, and looked, and was just in time to see the huge, erect form of the bear right beside us, with one paw in the air about to strike. It happened by great good fortune that there was the trunk of a small sapling about as thick as an arm which interposed between us. Had it not been for that, that great paw would have been on us like a lightning stroke; Amir Khan would have had his head smashed in like an eggshell, and the rifle would have been dashed from my hands leaving me defenceless. The two shots in the air turned the brute, and it broke back into the bushes. Instantly Amir Khan was on his feet crying: “It will kill three men! It will kill three men!” I sprang up with him and dashed back after the
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bear, for the beaters were within a few yards of us and it seemed inevitable there would be a terrible accident.

For a minute, I suppose, I stood in a small open space no bigger than the floor of a room with the brush all round it, and I felt a sort of despair as I realized the trap I was in, for the brute would be on me with a single rush, and how could I stop him in the short space there would be between us? I cursed myself for having come out with a single barrel. Till then I had not realized the foolishness of it.

Then a yell from a coolie summoned me to my first place, and from there I just caught a glimpse of a big black back trying to slink past behind the ridge-like island I have mentioned. I ran and ran, then, he on one side of the watercourse, I on the other. At last I dropped into the bed of the stream where it was like a tunnel with over-arching bushes, and here he came up level with me, so that I saw a great patch of black shining fur through an opening about on a level with my head, and not three yards distant. I fired at it point blank, and it was off and away whilst I stood recovering from the heavy recoil. The coolies now came up hearing the shot, for I had ordered them to keep behind me. They were fairly wild with excitement, and why none of them were mauled is a mystery. Probably their yelling confused the brute and, savage as he was, scared him.

We followed the splashes of blood which were heavy, for, as I found afterwards, my bullet had gone clean through his loins, and soon I was so dead beat I had to lean against trees and then stagger on again. For some twenty minutes we kept it up and then, during a check, Amir Khan at last called to me, "Quick, sahib, quick!"

He dropped behind me and I went forward with my rifle, and, at last, I and my enemy were fairly face to face. Never shall I forget his glare and the fury of his savage, black, wrinkled face. He lay up a hillside some thirty yards above me among some young firs. I threw up the rifle and fired again, hitting him at the root of the neck. Even then he staggered up on his feet, glaring the while, and began to scramble down the hill towards me. I lost no time in throwing in another cartridge, and he had just begun to find his legs and gather speed towards me, when I fired again. It was a shot on which my life depended, but I managed to take it deliberately, aiming for his ear, and by good fortune that is where I got him. His great head dropped to the ground, and what with the momentum he had already gained and the steepness of the declivity, he turned a complete somersault and so came bouncing down over and over, rolled into a ball like a hedgehog. He would have knocked me over had I not leapt out of his way. As it was, he did not stop till he had gone something like sixty yards down the khud, and there he was brought up at last against a stout fir sapling.

By this the coolies were up with us and immediately gathered round the dead beast in spite of the angry shouts of warning of the shikari. He
picked up stones and clods and pelted it, but the huge creature that had been the terror of the jungle for so long was fairly defunct. When they were assured of this, the villagers’ delight became delirious. They screamed and spat at the carcass, kicked it, and crowded round me, naming me a great bahadur, and even grabbing my hand to shake.

For myself, I may be pardoned if I say I felt something like emotion as the multiplied years slipped behind me and I was back again in the days of my boyhood, when I had dreamed of some moment like this. And for a space I could hardly believe that huge black ball of fur lying huddled and senseless before me had been my quarry, had sought my life as I had his, and now was dead. For a moment I felt, too, the dramatic force of this tragedy of the wild jungle, which was heightened by the fact that it was thundering, and the heavy reverberations were resounding from ravine to ravine like the ululation of a mighty organ pouring out a lament for the dead.

We carried the beast back to camp, and there I photographed it, and we skinned it. The huge carcass with the skin off looked appallingly like that of a gigantic man, a wondrous study of anatomy.

Monkeys were very numerous all round our camp, and two days later, which chanced to be my birthday, the villagers brought me a present of a young one. It was a savage little devil at first. I kept it tied by a long cord to an apple tree just outside my tent. Eventually I took it back into India. It had enough adventures on the way to make a monkey Odyssey, if it had ever got back to its kind and told them the story. Its favourite food was apples, and it ate so many of these that its little stomach grew swollen and tight as a drum. It would then fold its arms behind its head and lie back with a comical air of repletion and content. On this account I named it the Nawab Sahib, a name which tickled my servants hugely.

Another present they brought me was a large chunk of honey of three or four pounds weight. It is a great delicacy in Kashmir, where people invite the bees to build in the walls of their houses by making little borings in the outer walls. The hive is then fixed within and the honey is withdrawn from the interior of the house.

It may seem that I have disparaged the Kashmiris in some ways, and of a truth I could not help comparing them at times with the more sturdy, independent races of the Punjab. They live in a land potentially one of the richest imaginable, yet they are miserably poor and slavish. It was odd to hear them lamenting and longing with all their hearts to be made a portion of British India, whilst in the Punjab, which I had lately left, the ignorant populace, led by the malcontents, now so well-to-do that they had forgotten altogether who was responsible for their prosperity, were gassing about independence and the restoration of native rule.

But I have a word to say for my shikari, Amir Khan, who was a truly brave man, hardy and reliable. I made him a present of a hunting knife, which greatly delighted him: I did not realize until he came with me
what a gamble the life of a big game shikari must be, how much his life lies in the keeping of the sahib who engages him. I know he questioned my bearer closely about me, and my bearer, of course, told him I was a good shot; and when I hit the first bear down the khud and obeyed his injunctions by reloading at once without looking round, his relief was palpable. Often I had noticed him closely scrutinizing my face, as if to read it, with quick, half-anxious glances. His duty is to sit by whilst the sahib shoots; he has no weapon himself unless he carries spare rifle or gun, and even that he is not supposed to fire unless his master is knocked down and being actually mauled. If he goes with a jumpy or very excitable individual, or one who fiddles about with his weapon or treats the whole business as a joke, the poor man is, of course, in a very evil case, for he knows all too well the grim possibilities that underlie fooling about with big game hunting. Probably it is in these cases that he cannot find the game and has to go away with a bad "chit," which is, however, better than not going away at all, or with half his face torn off. Amir Khan was a bit of a naturalist, too, and full of forest lore. We became tacit friends who understood one another perfectly and, later on, when I was suddenly taken ill, his grief that our hunting together must cease was sore, and he never ceased to talk of the time when I should be restored and rejoin him in another trek.

Echoes of the Past

"A VOYAGE TO CHINA OVERLAND."

INTRODUCTION BY FLEET SURGEON W. E. HOME, R.N.

The writer, Dr. W. Home, Staff Surgeon, 2nd Class, was the youngest son of Dr. James Home, Professor of Practice of Physic in Edinburgh. He graduated in 1837, and after a period of study in Paris, joined the Medical Department of the Army. He was sent to Canada and lived at Kingston, Ont., with the P.M.O., Dr. John Smith, who afterwards was head of the Department in the Crimean War. At Kingston (as later at Hong Kong and Mauritius) he established a dispensary for the treatment of poor civilians, because he recognized there were at that time few well-trained doctors abroad except in the Army. On his return from Canada he was appointed Assistant Surgeon to the 26th Cameronians, then at Edinburgh. He left the regiment a year and a half later, on his promotion to Staff Surgeon, 2nd Class, amid expressions of regret, twenty officers of the regiment uniting to give him as a memento a family Bible with a suitable inscription. Shortly after he was sent to Hong Kong, whence he was