

# TRAVELS WITH A JUDGE

It is not often that one is invited to travel with a Judge. I never dreamt of doing so. Till one morning the Financial Commissioner of a neighbouring State, telephoned me. Would I come for a walk, and shoot in the Dhaura Dhar? His Lordship had invited the Financial Commissioner, of whose patridge shooting capabilities he approved, to his annual jaunt in the Kangra Hills. The Financial Commissioner, who did not altogether disapprove of mine, thought he would stretch the invitation a bit, and take me along! So, off we went to Baijnath. The drive through Hoshiarpur, over the Beas at Dehra, and through the open green Kangra valley, is always a joy. Perhaps Kulu is talked of a little more than is fair. The lower Kangra valley is as delectable.

His Lordship's party had already gone up the mountains. Two porters and a message had been left for us, with the local Headmaster. Early next morning, we started for the High hills. A pleasant walk through terraced fields brought us to a village at the foot of the mountains. It was hot and dry, as we started the real climb. The lower hills were full of scrub and thorny bushes. We were both physically unfit on account of leading sedentary lives in the Secretariat; I more than the Financial Commissioner. We puffed up the slope, the guns proving most unpleasant encumbrances. The shot gun is not the best carry in the hills. By

by M. S. GILL

afternoon, we had climbed up the dry, eroded, goat eaten, parts of the valley. The natural greenery of the mountains was beginning to assert itself. Our climb lay in sun and shade, by a clear stream, that tumbled down the valley. We sat by a placed pool, and ate our old Alu Parathas. In the hot lower reaches of the valley, I was sweating profusely. Soon it was cool, and the aspect took on an alpine look—fir and pine forests, and snow on the distant peaks. Rotting tree trunks lay by the side of the stream. The sky darkened and a thunderstorm came on, though Baijnath, away below us lay in sunshine. We were soaked, and in one spot had to negotiate steep wet rocks, which were rather slippery. It continued to rain, and light clouds floated about above us.

The valley opened a bit, and we found the party camped on a pleasant sloping meadow. People were moving about in the misty drizzle. We were hailed in lusty Punjabi, by a small group standing on one side. His Lordship was holding court as usual. He had of course deviated slightly from the approved apparel. Instead of the starched cravat, gown and gold pince-nez, he now sported a soggy pair of Khaki trousers, check sports shirt, Bala Clava cap, and a week's white razzle on the chin. The severe court demeanour had given way to a ready smile. We were welcomed with hot mugs of tea, but the evening was anything but pleasant. The rain continued, and the cook had a hard time. We all huddled under an overhanging rock, while the kitchen staff wrestled with the wet fire wood. His Lordship seemed oblivious of our miseries. He sauntered about the meadow, as if he was in his Chamber. Fortunately the clouds floated away, and the stars shone bright and clear. We spread our Sleeping bags in the open, and slept under god's own canopy.

A few hours later, or so it seemed to me, his Lordship was up. Time to move, he said. The pheasants would be coming down to the edges of the forest. I thought, they could wait for us! He thought, they would not. We swallowed some tea,

and followed his Lordship. Once the sleep was gone, we began to see the beauties of the walk, but unfortunately no pheasants. The Financial Commissioner thought we had chosen the wrong valley; Dharamsala was better. The Judge said the birds were around the corner! I preferred silence. At the day's end, we camped on a lovely alp in sight of the snows.

The third day took us to the high pastures at the tree line, and the home of the monals. A gaddi hut stood in the middle of the meadow. We cleaned it of the dung, and made sure of a dry night. The Financial Commissioner had a mountain tent. He had been carrying it all these days, and was keen to prove the wisdom of having brought it. He pitched it on the hut roof. The Judge held that he was being fussy about the dung's smell in the hut. The Financial Commissioner suggested that we learn the art of camping from him! We were pitching camp when a host of monals came sailing high over our heads. They had been disturbed by our Shikaris. We fired off our blunderbusses knowing fully well, they were too high. At least we felt like Shikaris. The Judge suggested that I climb to the ridge line, as I was sure to find many birds. For me, the suggestion was a command. I enjoyed the exercise but saw no monals. In the evening a light snow carpeted the slope, and the high peaks. The view was enchanting.

Next morning, the shoot was to start in earnest. We were up early, and at the edge of the trees at dawn. We were supposed to move in an extended line. For a while it held, but soon

the vagaries of the slope, the nullans, and the ridges, broke up our formation. Each was now on his own. I heard a few shots, and saw a startled monal came my way, and sit on a tree. I crept up towards it, and took a flying shot, as it streaked down the valley. No luck. Pushing on, I got into a snow gully full of last night's fall. All around were rhododendron bushes. I could neither climb up nor down. These bushes have tentacles like an octopus, and equally effective. Struggling up through the maze, I suddenly came upon his Lordship — also in grim battle with the closely packed rhododendron bushes, on a steep slope. I thought I heard him curse, but surely I was mistaken. Not his Lordship! He was however, extremely annoyed, and I thought the rhododendrons were in imminent danger of committing contempt, if they did not give way immediately. Fortunately, they realised their peril, and did. We came out high up on the ridges. The meadows went rolling on. Oh! What a lovely golf course there could be, in the site of the snows. To be in the high hills of Kangra, on a fine autumn day, is surely one of the great joys of existence. I was not the least sorry for not having shot a bird. The Financial Commissioner differed. We had come for a shoot, and not to climb mountains. In Dharamsala, one could shoot them, sitting in the Truind Rest House verandah. Here we had climbed half way to Everest, and not glimpsed a bird. His Lordship maintained that the birds were around the next ridge!

Another day we tried the other side of the ridge. We

saw a few monals but shot none. They were too far away. For me, however, to have seen one of these beautiful birds streaking down the valley in a dazzle of colours, was a never to be forgotten joy in itself. His Lordship had taken a fancy to me. He bestowed on me, the honour of being his companion, in all the excursions. While this ensured for me, the maximum share of the cream crackers, and even some 'Mewas' from the great man's private store, it had its disadvantages. Early in the morning, he would shout "Gill, let us go." And go we would. Whenever we saw a monal flying high over the ridge, he was sure, there were more to come. I would be advised to climb up the cliff, to what he thought was the best butt. Coming down from these high perches, was even more difficult than puffing up to them. Of course, I never shot a bird. But the walks were superb and will live in my memory for life.

We had been up for almost a week and none of the party had shot a bird. The Shikaris, of course, had. It snowed every afternoon, and the Financial Commissioner's patience was wearing thin. He was convinced, the judiciary could not organise practical matters, such as a Shikar trip. His Lordship did not lose hope. As soon as the snowfall stopped, he would shoulder his gun, shout "Gill", as if I were his favourite retriever, and walk off. No amount of walking seemed to tire him, and he reminded me of Kipling's Lama in 'Kim'.

On our final afternoon, he decided to make one more effort. Off we went, our steps making beautiful patterns in the new fallen snow. We got into the trees, and headed for a snow gully. Suddenly, his Lordship's sharp eye, spotted a pattern on the snow. Two birds had apparently just gone up the slope. Taking position, he sent a porter up around the shoulder, to disturb them. A monal hurtled down on us,



The Financial Commissioner pitches his tent on a Gaddi hut.

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out of the trees, chirping excitedly. His Lordship fired both barrels. I fired one. But it sailed away down the valley no doubt, a little frightened. Then the second one came, and I dropped it. For the rest of the evening, my exploit was related with much glee by his Lordship. The protests of the others, that they never got within shooting distance of a monal, were summarily rejected. I also got a special helping of 'Mewas'! I was sure I had gained a life long asset. We executive-wallahs keep getting into trouble, and ending up in the high court. I was convinced, that if ever I was thrown on his Lordship's mercy, the judgement would run something like this:

"Recently the defendant has brought down a snow pheasant, stone death, before my eyes, and at my very feet. Henceforth, he can do more wrong. Therefore notwithstanding the evidence I honourably acquit him!"

The next day we stuck camp, and walked down a gaddi track to Baijnath. We walked straight down a sharp ridge. The path was narrow, but I was told the Gujjars managed to take even buffaloes, up this way in summer. By night-fall we were having the first bath in a week in the Rest House. Monday saw me in my office. On Tuesday, I was in his Lordship's Court answering for the misdemeanours of the Executive. His cravat shone like snow. The pince-nez twinkled in the lamp light. His Lordship appeared to be concentrating on the arguments with closed eyes! Once he opened them, ever so little. I thought perhaps he looked at me, and winked, but I was surely mistaken.

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