

AN ANXIOUS TWENTY MINUTES

By K. M. T.

'It is not safe to go up the Ghaut-road now' said in Kanarese, a well-meaning Badaga inhabitant of the neighbouring village when I alighted at about 6-30 p.m. from the bus which took me to the foot of the hills. 'What is the matter?' I enquired 'There are elephants on the road' said he. I smiled to thank him for the information, but possibly there was in my smile an unconscious contempt for elephant stories of which one hears a good many during one's travels in the hill districts. 'You may stay the night in the bungalow and go early in the morning', he pleaded pointing to the Forest dak bungalow on the side of the road. I paused to think. The bungalow was familiar to me. I had the misfortune on a previous occasion to make an enforced stay there one night and the experience was fresh in my memory. The prospect of semi-starvation and a sleepless night in a vermin infested building in a notoriously malarial tract was far from inviting. I had programmed to conduct some field experiments on Capt. M's Coffee Estate the next day and a night's stay meant a day's delay in starting the work. The Ford which Capt. M. had sent down to the foot of the Ghaut to convey me and my luggage was there awaiting my arrival. From my supposed knowledge of the habits of elephants, I felt that it was too early an hour for them to leave their haunts for a stroll on the road. The chauffeur who was familiar with the road held the same view and assured me that we could cover the distance of 18 miles before 8 o'clock. Throwing discretion to the winds I made up my mind to proceed on my journey. The car drew alongside the bus, my belongings were soon transferred to it and taking leave of the small group of inquisitive villagers who had collected round the car, we burred off.

I had my D.B.B.L. by my side, one barrel loaded with ball and the other with shot, ready for contingencies. A jungle cock who was less discreet than his wife, proudly strutted on the roadside unmindful of the approaching car and paid the penalty for his indiscretion. It was soon dark and the headlights were switched on. Before we proceeded a couple of miles an innocent rabbit was caught in the glare of the headlights a few yards ahead of the car and I meekly yielded to the tempting offer. The driver who was evidently pleased with the evening's bag told me that further up the Ghaut there was a cheetah which roamed about on the road after night-fall. I kept a keen look-out for him expecting to meet him at every curve on the serpentine road, only to be disappointed. About halfway, we came to a fairly flat country which was the supposed haunts of elephants. We passed two heaps of elephant's droppings which were apparently some days old; but according to my calculations, it was too early an hour of the night to entertain any hope of meeting the criminal who had committed this nuisance on the highway. I kept a sharp look-out, however, for the smaller fauna of the jungle which are frequently confronted with on such roads. We negotiated a sharp curve and were approaching another, when lo! there stood a few paces in front of us a huge earth-strewn figure with his back towards us. I realised the danger, cautioned the driver and grabbed at the trigger of my gun. The brakes were applied. The car stood still. The monster of the woods was there in the full blaze of

the lights hardly 20 yards ahead of the car and apparently unperturbed Realisation, for once, proved immensely more thrilling than imagination. The doubtful utility of the smooth-bored barrels against a five-tonner flashed through my mind. There was no provocation and a cool-head was all that was needed. The brute moved forward and vanished from our view into the bend of the road. His disappearance was some momentary relief, but ignorance of his movements was the cause of grave anxiety. I repented my disregard of the Badaga gentleman's warning. It was too late to mend. There was no human habitation in a five-mile radius. Where did the elephant go? There was complete stillness in the air. He was a solitary fellow. Could he be a rogue? Did he move forward to turn round at a position of better vantage? The road was too narrow to turn the car round and beat a hasty retreat. Surely the best thing was to keep cool and try to scare him away. The horns sounded; the electric hooter trumpeted; the engine roared; the driver whistled at the top of his voice. The incessant noise which was continued for about ten minutes was enough to scare the dullest beast within a half-mile radius. But would a rogue take exception to it and question our right to disturb his equanimity? In such an eventuality we had only to 'trust in God and keep our powder dry.' We stopped the noise and listened. The crash of a broken bough or a crushed bamboo in the nullah below would have relieved the tension. But there was dead stillness in the air. *Encore* the stream of noises went on for another ten minutes. Again there was complete silence. We decided to move on. The car moved on low gear, creeping at a snail's pace at every irritating curve. The Krupp-Kynock alliance was mobilized and kept in readiness for eventualities. But the rest of the journey was fortunately uneventful. As we learnt subsequently, the beast had proceeded some distance further up along the road and got down into the nullah below giving us room to pass through. Whether it was an act of courtesy, contempt or cowardice it is not possible to say. It was, however, a piece of good fortune that we met him moving in the same direction as ourselves. Were he facing us on that extremely narrow-strip of road and had he in a mood of frightfulness or mischief taken the silly idea of making a mad rush downhill, one cannot say what fate would have awaited the tin Lizzie and her precious contents! I reached my objective, however, without any mishap where Mrs. M's very inviting cup of coffee served to restore my nerves to me. I slept over the eventful experience with a feeling of relief: 'All's well that ends well.'

Salesman.—These shirts simply laugh at the laundry, Sir.

Customer.—I know, I have had some come back with their sides split.