
Afghanistan

Some time in 1935 my ornithologist friend Hugh Whistler wrote to me from England that Colonel R. Meinertzhagen, the noted British ornithologist, was planning a collecting trip to Afghanistan and was on the lookout for a companion to help him with the birds. Whistler asked if I would be prepared to go. I said I would be only too happy, since Afghanistan was an adjoining area to our own, yet so little known ornithologically. However, I said that as my own particular interest was ecology and I would not enjoy skinning birds etc. all the time, additional help would be needed. Whistler cautioned me: 'He is a great stickler—and rightly so—for the perfect preparation of all specimens in whatever branch of science, so you would need to keep a careful eye on the skinners.' The expedition didn't come off till 1937 as Meinertzhagen was preoccupied with another one in Kenya in 1936.

Richard Meinertzhagen was one of the most colourful, original and, in many ways, likeable characters that ornithology introduced me to. As an officer in the British army he had spent most of his military service in East Africa. His exploits as a soldier and big-game hunter and ornithologist make fascinating reading in his *Kenya Diary* and the several other books he wrote about Kenya and Tanganyika under colonial rule. He had a passing acquaintance with India, where he had done temporary stints of service and convalescence during the First World War. When asked if he had managed to pick up any Hindi or Urdu while in India he replied that he had only learnt the useful term *sooar ka bacha* (swine), which he had encoded

as 'SKB' and frequently used in private conversation when referring to 'opposition' folk. He was a man completely devoid of sentimentalism and impervious to personal danger, and almost so to physical pain.

In one of his exploits in Africa while a young lieutenant, accompanied by six askaris against the rebellious Nandi tribe, he crawled into the Laibon's (chief's) village at night and captured the Laibon. He was removing the chief when a large force of warriors attacked. Meinertzhagen warned them that unless they withdrew immediately he would be compelled to shoot the captive. As they continued to advance threateningly, and there was imminent danger of himself and his small force being overwhelmed, he coolly raised his revolver and shot the man dead, an action that won him a DSO for gallantry and led to the unconditional surrender of the tribe.

Another of his oft recounted daredevil exploits was during the Middle East campaign in World War I. He rode out all by himself to a Turkish camp that was reported to be preparing a massive attack on a thinly defended British position which would most certainly have been overwhelmed. According to a deliberately planned strategy to mislead the enemy, Meinertzhagen carried with him a despatch case containing a fake plan of a major British offensive in an entirely different sector. As he came in sight the sentries raised the alarm and a fusillade started. He spun round and started the retreat at full gallop, with the Turkish bullets whizzing by, raising the dust all around. In the hasty retreat he contrived to drop the despatch case containing the 'secret' document. He managed to get back safely to the British lines but the ruse worked and the Turks were successfully foxed. They redirected their forces in accordance with the intercepted secret intelligence, and the British position was saved from being disastrously overrun.

Meinertzhagen narrated to me how at one stage in the Middle East campaign his job was to fly over Mesopotamian villages along with a pilot and drop propaganda leaflets to the 'oppressed' local population, assuring them of British altruism in fighting the Turks for *their* liberation. The aircraft used for the purpose was a frail looking single-engined two-seater biplane with

linen-stretched wings. At the air base the young devil-may-care pilot started piling into the plane bundle upon bundle of the propaganda leaflets until even RM, silently watching, felt slightly perturbed. Finally, when perturbation began to give way to mild alarm, he casually enquired of the man how much load they were supposed to carry. The pilot looked back amused and nonchalantly quipped 'O they will decide that at the inquest' as he merrily continued stacking bundle upon bundle till the plane could hold no more!

Meinertzhagen seemed to be as indifferent to physical pain as to personal danger. While we were collecting in a reedy marsh near Kabul, he, wearing khaki shorts with legs uncovered, accidentally stepped on a barb-pointed reed which broke off, leaving about three-quarters of an inch of its length within his flesh. Regardless of this, he continued splodging through the marsh while his blood flowed freely. Finally, after some persuasion, he agreed to return. As he was limping back to the car to get back and have the barb removed by the embassy doctor, he noticed a Bearded Vulture—a wanted species—some 300 yards away in a different direction. Ignoring the projecting reed and the flowing blood he limped up to the bird and shot it before getting back to the car.

Following our first meeting at Bombay where he arrived on 11 February 1937, Meinertzhagen's meticulously kept diary, which he kindly permitted me to read 'At your risk(!)' shortly before his death, when our earlier shaky contact had ripened into abiding friendship, says 'I then went on to the Bombay Natural History Society where I met Prater and Sálím Ali. I was favourably impressed by the latter and liked what I saw of him. It is as well if we have to travel together for the next few months. He seemed intelligent, but is hideously ugly, not unlike Gandhi.'

For the additional help in skinning birds I selected N.G. Pillai, who had been seconded to my Travancore bird survey in 1933-4 by the Trivandrum museum. Pillai was a competent zoologist, a good worker, and above all a soft spoken, gentlemanly individual who I knew would get on well in a mixed party of imponderables. His only failing was that he was

perhaps too meek and mild for this Afghanistan set-up, on account of which he had sometimes to pay in petty humiliations. Besides Pillai, I had hired as skinner a local Christian scamp named Dyson from Dehra Dun. I knew Dyson from several previous expeditions as a congenital shirker and malingerer. But he was a useful drudge and a good worker if one kept twisting his tail, which I was sure Meinertzhagen was capable of doing, and more. In addition to these two we had with us a burly, handsome Pathan 'bearer', picked up en route in Peshawar. He was a competent man who had worked with foreigners before and knew the ways of the sahibs (for which he undisguisedly didn't much care!). Meinertzhagen had asked me to look out for a suitable botanist to take along with us on the Afghan expedition. A competent young student, K.N. Kaul, was recommended by my friend Birbal Sahni, F.R.S., then Professor of Botany at Lucknow University. Meinertzhagen interviewed Kaul, was well impressed but finally turned him down, I couldn't understand why. I know the reason now. The relevant entry in his diary says: 'Lucknow 8.3.1937. A young Hindu student, Kailash Nath Kaul, geologist [*sic*] wanting to accompany me to Afghanistan. He is a young man, nice mannered and intelligent, but I am a little doubtful whether I can stomach two seditionists for three months all day and every day. Sálim is a rank seditionist and communist, so is Kaul (a brother of Jawaharlal Nehru's wife) and it would probably end in disaster.'

We had hired a rickety old open Chevrolet truck in Peshawar for the journey to Kabul, and into it we piled our tents and camping gear, specimen boxes, stores, rations and personal baggage. The Sikh driver, Meinertzhagen and I sat on the front seat; Pillai, Dyson, the Pathan bearer, the cleaner, and one or two nondescript hangers-on, rode with the luggage behind. It was early April and the winter snow had just started melting. The untarred mountain road was slushy and with numerous hairpin bends and fearsome vertical drops of hundreds of feet on the *khud* side. The Sardarji at the wheel turned out to be a veritable Jehu. He revelled in cutting corners at speed and skidding his vehicle round greasy bends in spite of repeated

remonstrances, and kept our fingers crossed and hair on end. We got to Kabul after dark, rather shaken but thankful that the ordeal had ended. The journey through the Khyber Pass to Jalalabad and on to Kabul took two days. Thanks to the hospitality of the British Minister in Kabul (Colonel Sir Kerr Fraser-Tytler), we were lodged in the luxurious Legation Building (built with Indian government money) which, at that time, must surely have been one of the grandest of its kind anywhere in the world (all to uphold the prestige and majesty of the Raj, no doubt), and it was perhaps more lavishly appointed than any international 5-star hotel today. Our entire expedition in the country north of Kabul as far as the Oxus river (the boundary of the USSR) lasted about eight weeks. It happened during the regime of Nadir Shah who had displaced the legendary upstart Bachcha-e-Saqqa who had earlier displaced the all-too-hastily reforming zealot king Amanullah. The Afghan government was hospitably co-operative throughout, and had even assigned a *mehmandar*—a sort of liaison officer—(easy-going, comfortable-shaped) to travel with our party and help clear all official and other hurdles, procure local assistance and supplies, and generally to see to it that we had complete freedom to move about in the countryside. And, as Meinertzhagen so aptly put it later, 'these many duties he carried out with indolent efficiency'.

My experience of the type of Englishman one normally came across in the heyday of the Raj was that he was a bully where one lower in the 'peck order' was concerned. Indians as a rule are too mild and submissive and thus lend themselves readily to being bullied. Another peculiarity of the British character I have found is that if you stand up to the bully and hit back, you command his respect. So it has been with me and so it was with Meinertzhagen. One of his biographers has described him as 'physically a powerful, violent and ruthless man'—a description which, happily, is only partly true. Though possessed also of many admirable qualities, he had a distinct streak of the bully in his make-up and could be unreasonable to the point of brutality at times. Due to his excessive meekness, Pillai was a perfect foil for a bully and he lived in obvious terror of

Meinertzhagen because, in the latter's estimation, Pillai could do nothing right or in the way it should be done—neither could I, as I later discovered from his diary—and I had often to intervene when the hectoring got too far.

As it happened, Meinertzhagen had brought out with him two small tents of green Willesden waterproof canvas which had evidently been his camping companions for many years in Kenya, and which he loved dearly. So dearly indeed that he would trust no one to put them up or take down but himself. One day, on a greasy road after a rainstorm, our expedition truck driven by the Flying Sardarji skidded and turned over on its side, catapulting all the kit from the roof into a roadside canal. It had all to be fished out as soon as we managed to extricate ourselves. Among the lot were the precious tents which got thoroughly soaked. As it was late evening and help to straighten the truck was not available, we decided to bivouac in an adjoining meadow and the tents were opened up and pitched. It continued drizzling all night so that the wet tents were wetter in the morning. The *mehmandar* who had gone off at dawn to fetch help from a village a couple of miles away had returned and the truck was back on its wheels once more. The wet tents were hurriedly taken down and rolled up in that condition and we reached our next dak bungalow, where they would not be needed, at 9 on a fine, sunny morning. Meinertzhagen and I set off immediately to explore the area and collect, leaving Pillai and the rest to set up camp. When we returned after a couple of hours Meinertzhagen found his beloved tents opened up and spread in the sun. The morning's collection may have been disappointing or the hurriedly bolted breakfast may have disagreed with his inside, I cannot tell, but the sight of those tents suddenly sent him off the deep end into a paroxysm of insensate rage.

Pillai was called up and mercilessly barked at: Who asked him to meddle with his tents? Why did he touch them without instructions? And so forth and so on. I could no longer remain a silent spectator of this extraordinary exhibition of unjustified bullying and felt compelled to protect the poor terrified Pillai who was struck dumb with fright. I told Meinertzhagen that he

was being thoroughly unreasonable and unfair, and that in Pillai's place I couldn't imagine myself or any other sensible person doing anything different. Here were two tents that had had to be rolled up in a hurry when soaking wet, and here was a warm, sunny morning for drying them. If Pillai, sitting in camp, hadn't had the sense to spread them out to dry Meinertzhagen would surely, and with justification, have pounced on him for his stupidity in not doing so. So how had he deserved all this blame and shouting? Meinertzhagen fretted and fumed at my intervention, but then perhaps realized the absurdity of the situation and soon calmed down.

Our daily routine of work was for Meinertzhagen and I to start out after breakfast, around 7.30, in different directions, accompanied by a local shikari as guide, and collect and bird-watch till about noon. Back in camp the specimens were sorted out and readied for delousing. Meinertzhagen's special interest on the expedition, in addition to birds, was to collect the mallophaga (or feather lice) infesting them. These insects are not blood-sucking like the vulgar little creatures we know by that name; they live within the plumage of a bird and feed on the decaying portions of the feathers. They are so narrowly host-specific that a species found on an oriole, say, will not be found on a myna. Thus if the same species of mallophaga is found on two different species of bird, that indicates their probable phylogenetic relationship. In this way mallophaga are of great importance for the study of evolution and taxonomy.

Our indoor activities commenced after lunch and often continued till after dark. To collect mallophaga the bird is wrapped in a piece of white muslin and put into a tightly closing box along with a swab of cotton wool soaked in chloroform. The bird is taken out after a few minutes and the dead mallophaga picked off the linen wrapper and shaken out of the bird's plumage, forcepped into vials containing alcohol and carefully labelled as to host, date, locality and other relevant particulars. While Meinertzhagen was busy with this I weighed the birds, made notes of the moults and colours of bare parts, and dissected the skinned ones for sex, stomach and crop

contents and internal parasites. When finished with delousing Meinertzhagen joined the skimmers while I wrote up my field notes of the morning. Here I am reminded of an amusing incident which was rather typical of Meinertzhagen. Before the expedition started, looking over the list of stores and equipment I had brought, he was jeeringly contemptuous about my having been so sybaritic as to bring two Petromax lamps when he himself had managed well enough without this luxury and with only hurricane lanterns all the forty years or more he had been collecting. I said that the Petromaxes were really meant for myself because I was used to them and could not work at night in poor light. He made some snooty remarks about people getting soft and so on, and there the matter ended. When we got going in our first camp and the Petromaxes were lit, what did I find on return from the evening round of collecting but that Meinertzhagen had calmly monopolized both the lamps for himself, one on either side, seeming to enjoy their brightness rather than missing his old accustomed hurricane lanterns. This set the pattern; thenceforth, and all through the expedition, if I wished to work after dark I had to nestle up to the Petromaxes which had become inseparable from him.

The expedition party consisted of two Christians, one Hindu, one Sikh and three Muslims of two varieties. Doom-sayers had prognosticated that none of us, particularly the *kafirs* (unbelievers), would come back alive: the Afghans were such bigotted Muslims and the country so overrun by brigands that we would be looted, murdered, etc., etc. In the event not once in the entire trip were we ever asked our religion, and we found the Afghan country folk extremely friendly and hospitable. Frequently, when out collecting, villagers working in the fields would run up to us saying, 'You are our welcome guests: you must come to our house and drink some tea.' The open truck with all our personal belongings, rations and even ammunition was left on the roadside wherever we were camping, and we never lost a thing and no one ever bothered us. Except the flies! So much for the prognostications and their perpetrators: it was perhaps the frontier tribesmen our well wishers were thinking of.

Much time was lost in travelling. From Kabul we drove north, camping in six to eight localities for five or six days each. We sometimes stayed in tents, but mostly in sheds, as there were usually no proper dak bungalows except for the fairly posh one at Bamian. Bamian, a centre of ancient Buddhist civilization, is a place of great archaeological and historical interest, with a colossal Buddha, some fifty feet or more in height, carved out of living rock. The place is visited by large numbers of foreign tourists. In the matter of accommodation the *mehmandar* was a great help. When necessary he would go in advance and fix up a place for us to stay in. Communication between two camps was maintained by telephone through police stations and outposts, or other government offices, which were all interconnected by an official network, and with Kabul, the 'nerve centre'. Thus the *mehmandar* could send information beforehand of our movements and get arrangements made.

It was in the Danaghori plain of north Afghanistan that we had our first meeting with the Common Pheasant in its ancestral Central Asian homeland, and I was surprised to find that its natural habitat here was the extensive swampy reed-beds, with practically no trees to roost in. Our Afghan bird collection was especially interesting for me as it contained several species which, till then, I had never come across in my life, such as Snowcock and Seese Partridge. However, for me the highlight of the whole expedition was the spring (northward) migration that was in visual progress all the time we were in the country, like that of the Redlegged Falcon (*Falco vespertinus*) and Lesser Kestrel (*Falco naumanni*) from Africa to East Asia, and the unbelievable hordes of Rosy Pastor from the Indian plains to their nesting grounds in Turkestan. It was at Danaghori that we struck their main migration. Many thousands of these birds, known as *Saach* in Afghanistan, were feeding and resting en route between 4 and 10 May, their numbers being constantly added to by arrivals from the south. Meinertzhagen estimated that on 6 May they were arriving at the rate of 15,400 in seven hours. During the first week in May there must have been close on half a million Pastors on the Danaghori plain, most of them

roosting in the marshy reed-beds. There were no crops available at the time and the birds seemed to be subsisting entirely on beetles and other insects. The Afghans recognize the *Saach* as beneficial to agriculture and do not molest them even when little other 'lawful meat' is safe from the pot. Another spectacular instance of visual mass migration of Marsh Harriers (*Circus aeruginosus*) was encountered at Bamian on 24 April. The birds, all adult males, suddenly commenced arriving at 6 p.m. from a south-eastern and southern direction, which could mean from the Indian subcontinent. They were obviously exhausted, for they came down and settled in a ploughed field for the night. We counted some sixty-six birds, and more were still arriving when it got too dark to see. One rarely sees more than one or two adult male Marsh Harriers during the course of a day on a large marsh in India, therefore to see such a concentration, and all adults of the same sex bound for their northern breeding grounds, was a truly memorable and thrilling experience. These Harriers must have moved on early, for there was no sign of them in the valley soon after daybreak. On the following day and at the same time about ten adult males arrived from the same direction, roosted in the identical ploughed field and were gone again next morning.

I recall another couple of incidents during the Afghanistan expedition which will round off the record. One morning as usual I went out collecting, accompanied by a local man provided by the *mehmandar*. On a cliff nearby I found the nest of a Rock Nuthatch that was new to me. So I climbed up to a ledge within photographing distance and focussed the camera on the nest. After a long and patient wait the bird returned, but just as I was about to click the man said photography was forbidden there and stepped in front of the lens. I angrily pushed him aside and got my picture all right. However, I felt this man's behaviour was extraordinary, so when we returned to camp I related the incident to the *mehmandar*. The *mehmandar* listened without a word, only looked rather annoyed. I was speaking to him in Urdu, so the Persian-speaking guide had not understood what was being said. When I had done, the *mehmandar* casually asked the man to fetch some paper and a

pencil. Without uttering a word he wrote a couple of lines, folded the sheet and gave it to the man to take to the police station. In half an hour the man was back weeping and wailing, and fell at my feet begging forgiveness. At first I couldn't make out at all what this meant, till I learnt that what the *mehmandar* had written was, in effect, 'This man has insulted our guests. Deliver unto him three of the best.' The scamp weepingly begged pardon and explained that he was only trying to save the *dargah* from desecration. It seems there was a holy shrine half a mile away in that direction which I hadn't even noticed.

Another time the whole bungalow at Haibak was stinking to high heaven. Dead rat we thought. We looked around everywhere for dead rats—under the carpets, behind the cupboards, in the corners of every room and all sorts of improbable places. No rat, but stench continuing. Then I suddenly remembered that three or four days earlier we had got a surfeit of specimens and Meinertzhagen had unstrung one bird from the carrying stick and stuffed it into his breast pocket. When I reminded him of that shirt he scornfully pooh-poohed the suggestion and the search continued. A couple of days later (we didn't change our shirts too often) when he went back to that shirt he felt something wet on his chest. Apparently that Bluethroat had been 'seasoning' in the pocket and had now reached prime condition. Meinertzhagen came up to me sheepishly and said 'Sálim you were right. Here it is!' as he pulled out the stinking mangled little carcass. And all the while he had been grumbling and cursing at the *chowkidar* and everyone else and turning the establishment upside down!

Motorcycling in Europe

I have been an ardent motorcycle addict ever since I first rode the 3.5 h.p. NSU belonging to a Zerbadi friend, L.M. Madar, in Tavoy, soon after I arrived there in late 1914. My passion for motorcycles and motorcycling has grown with the years. Even after I was finally persuaded to retire from this form of exhilaration in 1964 at the age of sixty-eight, following upon several narrow shaves in the mounting chaos of Bombay traffic, and even after the wrench of parting with my last machine—a 1949 model 500 c.c. twin cylinder shaft-driven Sunbeam—I have never ceased to be thrilled by the sight and music of a BMW streaking past. Alas, owing to restrictions on the import of foreign-made automobiles and motorcycles soon after Independence, it is now rarely that one sees the more aristocratic thoroughbreds on Indian roads, except for an occasional vintage model. The plebeian lesser breeds, the Rajdoots, Jawas, and even their big brothers of the Enfield family, fail to touch the chord. It is therefore only on the rare occasion when I travel abroad that I am able to satisfy the craving, and then I make every effort not to miss any motorcycle shows that might be on. In my callower days in Burma practically all my reading consisted of motorcycle journals and books and periodicals on birds, general natural history and big-game hunting, especially relating to India.

The first motorcycle I actually possessed—at least partly, since it was the property of our Tavoy business firm J.A. Ali Bros. & Co.—was in 1915. It was a 3.5 h.p. twin cylinder 'Zenith', a belt-driven machine without a gear box but with a

clever device known as Gradua Gear, advertised as 'Invincible, All-conquering'. The device was intended to reduce the diameter of the driving pulley on the engine, by which a wide sliding range of gear ratios could be obtained between the high and low. It was operated by winding a horizontal arm with a knob situated above the petrol tank in the manner of a tramcar's brake handle. Since then I have had Harley Davidsons (three models of different horsepowers), a Douglas, Scott (twin-cylinder water-cooled two-stroke), a New Hudson, and others for short periods, and last and most beloved of all the Sunbeam on which I closed my motorcycling career. It is my everlasting regret that I never managed to possess a BMW to die happy! I was deeply absorbed in the refinements and improvements in the designs of motorcycle engines from year to year, and avidly followed the specifications and road-test reports in the specialist journals and manufacturers' catalogues. In the early days I revelled in tinkering with my machines, tuning up or otherwise needlessly meddling with the engine instead of leaving well alone, often taking it apart completely on holidays and putting it back again, getting besmeared with grime and oil and grease in the process. And I often wondered in the end, when left with a handful of extra bolts and screws and cotter pins and washers, why the manufacturers had been so generous as to put them in at all when they seemed so obviously dispensable. I prided myself greatly on the maintenance of my machines, both the engine and the exterior, spending long hours every weekend by way of relaxation in the spit and polish of shiny metal parts and waxing the paint, and deriving considerable satisfaction from the envy of less finicky but perhaps wiser fellow enthusiasts.

In 1950 the BNHS, as whose curator and editor of publications I functioned since Prater and McCann emigrated abroad soon after Independence—the former to settle in the UK and the latter in New Zealand—raised a fund from amongst its members to meet the cost of sending me as India's unofficial delegate to the International Ornithological Congress in Uppsala, Sweden. This was the first to be held after World War II, which had badly disrupted international contacts between ornithologists, and the reunion was looked forward to with joyful anticipation.

The Congress was to take place in June in Sweden since it was one of the few European countries that had escaped practically unscathed from the devastation of the War. The venue was the beautiful university town of Uppsala, the birthplace of Carl Linnaeus, the father of the modern system of biological nomenclature. I left Bombay by the P. & O. SS *Stratheden* on 4 May 1950, accompanied by the Sunbeam. On the latter I planned to do a grand tour of England and the Continent, visiting widely scattered friends retired from India, as well as nature reserves and places of natural history and conservation interest, especially related to birds. In spite of the gratuitous advice of well-wishers and the forebodings of doomsayers, the plan proved to be a wise decision, thoroughly worthwhile and enjoyable in every way, and above all a far less expensive and more convenient method of getting around than any other—especially under the rather chaotic post-War conditions of public transport at the time. It left me independent of time-bound itineraries and forward booking of hotels, railways and buses, etc. that render last-minute changes difficult or impossible, and bind one down to the slavery of time-schedules. On steaming into Liverpool Street Railway Station from Tilbury Docks, where I had expected to be met by my ornithological friend and prospective London host, Meinertzhagen, I was positively bewildered by the sea of humanity that surged on the platform to receive the train-load, and was wondering to myself how the two needles would ever find each other in this vast human haystack.

Pushing and elbowing my way rather aimlessly through this motley crowd I noticed in the distance a tall thin figure, erect like a flagstaff, head and shoulders above the jostling throng. With his usual thoughtfulness and originality Meinertzhagen had hired a soapbox and installed himself prominently upon it; this is how we discovered each other! Meinertzhagen lived in a three-storeyed semi-detached Victorian building bordering Kensington Park Gardens, a once aristocratic locality, with his magnificent research collection of several thousand bird skins made in practically every corner of the world during more than half a century. The majority of the skins, prepared with his

own hands with characteristic thoroughness and excellence, all meticulously labelled and catalogued, are a joy to handle and study. Meinertzhagen's wife, Annie Jackson, also an ornithologist of some distinction, had died in a revolver accident (evil minds find it thinkable it may have been contrived!) in 1928 or thereabouts, and at the time of my visit he had living with him a very attractive young niece, Theresa Clay, about thirty, an entomologist working in the South Kensington Museum and later to become an internationally recognized authority on mallophaga.

No. 17 Kensington Park Gardens formed part of a row of connected buildings of uniform baroque architecture, a style fashionable in London in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its colonnaded front entrance was on the street and the back entrance led from an enclosed courtyard-like garden, commonly shared by all the residents of the rows of similar semi-detached houses on the other three sides. It was early in the month of June and the famous annual Derby race was imminent. It was apparently a traditional ritual with Meinertzhagen to invite a number of his closest friends to picnic lunch and merrymaking with him at Epsom on Derby Day, and I was lucky to be in London in time to be included. Some twenty or thirty of us, young and not so young, male and female, were driven to Epsom Downs in a chartered charabanc and spent the day in sybaritic feasting and jollity, watching the races from the roof of the vehicle and cheering and shouting with the thousands of other spectators similarly positioned on bus tops and similar vantage points. There was a veritable sea of vehicles crowded cheek by jowl in the vast parking paddock, and an amusement park was attached, with gambling games of 'skill' and chance of every sort. I wouldn't have imagined till then how light-hearted and jolly Meinertzhagen could be: he led in all the fun, rode on the merry-go-round horses, slapped his thighs in delight and seemed to enjoy himself thoroughly.

One thing about this Derby junket that is vividly fixed in my memory and with a sense of outrage, almost, is the brutally primitive toilet arrangements that were in operation. As can be imagined, on a cold windy day in the open there was a great

demand for this facility. There was a large unpartitioned *shamiana*-like marquee tent to which you got admission by paying 6d at the entrance. Within, you were faced with the unedifying sight of twenty or more men all lined up and unbuttoned, no semblance of privacy, and many more queued up behind, along a shallow runnel in the turf, all getting their money's worth of relief. Due to the briskness of business the runnel was overflowing its edges and by midday had already formed a snipe marsh of human urine through which all comers had to splash their way to the line of action. This would be a disgusting exhibition of barbarism even among the most backward civilizations, and I must admit that it gave me a rude shock to see this in the homeland of the Englishman, who, in India, is usually so snooty about the unhygienic habits of the 'natives'. No, we couldn't beat this in India.

Apart from the superb collection of bird and natural history and big-game hunting books in Meinertzhagen's library—many of them first editions and collectors' items—I was particularly impressed by the unbroken series of his meticulously kept diaries since 1890 or thereabouts, each annual volume uniformly typed in an italic fount and handsomely bound in leather. The diaries record in detail not only Meinertzhagen's personal experiences and adventures as a wide-awake colonial military officer in the British colonies in Africa, but also his lively impressions of his contemporaries, official as well as non-official. The political and social conditions of the period, and candid—often pungent and not always charitable or unbiased—views and opinions on men and matters are also on record here. The diaries, moreover, contain a vast store of scientific facts and data gathered during his long military service, and on numerous scientific and hunting expeditions in Africa and elsewhere, which are invaluable as coming firsthand from an exceptionally keen and observant individual with a distinctly original mind.

These diaries have formed the basis of Meinertzhagen's *A Kenya Diary*, and several other outstanding books. They have been exploited to good advantage by his biographers, for instance by John Lord in *Duty, Honor, Empire* (New York,

Random House, 1970). Meinertzhagen's adventures in Africa and the stories of his bravery and courage earned him widespread fame as well as notoriety. The awe in which he was held by people 'on the other side' is brought out in one of Gavin Maxwell's books. In his boyhood recollections of his uncle, Lord William Percy, himself a keen ornithologist, Maxwell says, 'He [Lord William] was a close friend of Colonel Dick Meinertzhagen whose exploits in Kenya were famous; he was a legendary figure to me, made even more ogre-like by Uncle Willie's reply to some particularly inane remark of mine, "Gavin—Dick Meinertzhagen's coming to stay next week. I wouldn't say things like that in front of him if I was you—he's *killed men with his bare hands!*"'

Meinertzhagen was a close friend and admirer of Dr Chaim Weizmann, the propagator of the idea of a homeland for the Jews. After World War I, when Meinertzhagen was military governor of Palestine for a time, the two were actively engaged in scheming for the implementation of the Balfour Declaration. After Israel became a reality Meinertzhagen visited the country frequently and was an ardent champion of the Jews who had immigrated from all over to settle in the Promised Land, and full of praises of their dedication, industry and 'patriotism'. By contrast he saw little good in the Muslim Arabs, for whom he had an undisguised contempt. The Israelites, it is true, had achieved wonders in the material development of the land during the short period of their occupancy, making the waterless desert bloom in agricultural self-sufficiency and hum with galloping industrialization. In response to one of his panegyrics I had expressed a keenness to visit the country but doubted if with a Muslim name I would be welcome. In a letter written on his return from a visit to Israel in May 1953, Meinertzhagen says:

I had a wonderful time watching migration of hawks, storks and seagulls on the Gulf of Aqaba, over the Dead Sea and up the Jordan Valley. You need have no doubt about visiting Israel: there is no class distinction, no religious persecution, no political persecution. It is the purest form of communism without any of the objectionable elements of dictatorship. The whole population is loyal to the Israeli Government whether they are

communist or right-wing conservative. I have never seen a country in five years achieve so much under such harmful conditions of encirclement by six Moslem Arab states. The whole atmosphere is one of enthusiasm, progress and patriotism, without a trace of aggressive nationalism or boast. In fact humility, such a rare human attribute, dominates everyone. I believe Israel is the only stable factor in the Middle East. Go there and see! . . . In what part of the world is the worst mess? Is there any part of the world where there is not a mess? Both Africa and Asia are awakening: they have passed the yawning stage and are now getting on their feet, but I wish they would not make such a noise about it.

After a week or so in England, during which I motorcycled out to a number of far-flung friends in the country in the fabulous springtime which is the glory of the English scene, I took a Swedish tourist ship to Gothenburg. After a night with friends of friends in the industrial city of Orebro, I arrived in Uppsala in the afternoon, just in time for the opening session of the Congress, to a mild sensation among the delegates and my friends at my wonderful timing, having ridden out all the way from India! I had fitted out the solo machine with two bulky canvas pannier bags which carried an all-purpose wardrobe—including a black *sherwani* for formal occasions—much of which I realized too late was just redundant ballast. The bags could be unstrapped and carried to the hotel room on the night halts, but while convenient as containers, their weight disturbed the balance and produced a disconcerting tail-wobble which became quite dangerous when travelling at speed on the slippery cobbled road surfaces found in many small European towns and country villages. Among several unscheduled tosses on this account I recall a particularly nasty one before entering war-shattered Münster in Germany. The skid spun the motorcycle completely round and landed me sprawling in the middle of the road, luckily with only minor physical damage, not serious enough to interfere with the resumption of the journey. Luckily also, there was little following road traffic at the time to make matters worse: one of those gigantic delivery trucks, each carrying a dozen or more automobiles from factory to distributor, which always shook my composure as they thundered past on the autobahns, could at that moment of truth well have wound up the enterprise abruptly!



49. R. Meinertzhagen,
Theresa Clay, E.P. Gee.
Doyang Tea Estate,
Assam, 1952.

The Fall of a Sparrow

*... there's a special providence
in the fall of a sparrow.*

Hamlet, V.ii.232-3

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