

The Temple Tiger

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It is not possible for those who have never lived in the upper reaches of the Himalayas to have any conception of the stranglehold that superstition has on the people who inhabit that sparsely populated region. The dividing line between the superstitions of simple uneducated people who live on high mountains, and the beliefs of sophisticated educated people who live at lesser heights, is so faint that it is difficult to determine where the one ends and the other begins. If therefore you are tempted to laugh at the credulity of the actors in the tale I am going to tell, I would ask you to pause for a moment and try to define the difference between superstition as exemplified in my tale, and your beliefs in the faith you have been brought up in.

Shortly after the Kaiser's war Robert Bellairs and I were on a shooting trip in the interior of Kumaon and we camped one September evening at the foot of Trisul, where we were informed that 800 goats were sacrificed each year to the demon of Trisul. With us we had fifteen of the keenest and the most cheerful hillmen I have ever been associated with on *shikar*. One of these men, Bala Singh, a Garhwali, had been with me for years and had accompanied me on many expeditions. It was his pride and pleasure when on *shikar* to select and carry the

heaviest of my loads and, striding at the head of the other men, enliven the march with snatches of song. Round the campfire at night the men always sang part-songs before going to sleep, and during that first night, at the foot of Tresule, the singing lasted longer than usual and was accompanied by clapping of hands, shouting, and the beating of tin cans.

It had been our intention to camp at this spot and explore the country round for *baral* and *thar*, and we were very surprised as we sat down to breakfast next morning to see our men making preparations to strike camp. On asking for an explanation we were told that the site we had camped on was not suitable: that it was damp; that the drinking water was bad; that fuel was difficult to get; and, finally, that there was a better site two miles away.

I had six Garhwalis to carry my luggage and I noticed that it was being made up into five head-loads, and that Bala Singh was sitting apart near the camp fire with a blanket over his head and shoulders. After breakfast I walked over to him, and noted as I did so that all the other men had stopped work and were watching me very intently. Bala Singh saw me coming and made no attempt to greet me, which was very unusual, and to all my questions he returned the one answer—that he was not ill. That day we did our two-mile march in silence, Bala Singh bringing up the rear and moving like a man who was walking in his sleep, or who was under the influence of drugs.

It was now quite apparent that whatever had happened to Bala Singh was affecting the other fourteen men, for they were performing their duties without their usual cheerfulness, and all of them had a strained and frightened

look on their faces. While the 40-lb. tent Robert and I shared was being erected I took my Garhwali servant Mothi Singh—who had been with me for twenty-five years—aside and demanded to be told what was wrong with Bala Singh. After a lot of hedging and evasive answers I eventually got Mothi Singh's story which, when it came, was short and direct. 'While we were sitting round the campfire last night and singing,' Mothi Singh said, 'the demon of Tresule entered Bala Singh's mouth and he swallowed him.' Mothi Singh went on to say that they had shouted and beaten tin cans to try to drive the demon out of Bala Singh, but that they had not succeeded in doing so, and that now nothing could be done about it.

Bala Singh was sitting apart, with the blanket still draped over his head. He was out of earshot of the other men, so, going over to him, I asked him to tell me what had happened the previous night. For a long minute Bala Singh looked up at me with eyes full of distress, and then in a hopeless tone of voice he said: 'Of what use is it, Sahib, for me to tell you what happened last night, for you will not believe me.' 'Have I ever,' I asked, 'disbelieved you?' 'No,' he said, 'no, you have never disbelieved me, but this is a matter that you will not understand.' 'Whether I understand it or not,' I said, 'I want you to tell me exactly what happened.' After a long silence Bala Singh said: 'Very well, Sahib, I will tell you what happened. You know that in our hill songs it is customary for one man to sing the verse, and for all the other men present to join in the chorus. Well, while I was singing a verse of one of our songs last night the demon of Tresule jumped into my mouth, and though I tried to eject him, he slipped down my throat into my stomach.

The other men saw my struggle with the demon, for the fire was burning brightly, and they tried to drive him away by shouting and beating tin cans; but,' he added with a sob, 'the demon would not go.' 'Where is the demon now?' I asked. Placing his hand on the pit of his stomach Bala Singh answered with great conviction, 'He is here, Sahib, here, I can feel him moving about.'

Robert had spent the day prospecting the ground to the west of our camp and had shot a *thar*, of which he had seen several. After dinner we sat long into the night reviewing the situation. We had planned for, and looked forward to, this shoot for many months. It had taken Robert seven days and me ten days hard walking to reach our shooting ground, and on the night of our arrival Bala Singh had swallowed the demon of Tresule. What our personal opinions were on this subject did not matter, but what did matter was that every man in camp was convinced that Bala Singh had a demon in his stomach, and they were frightened of him and were shunning his company. To carry on a month's shoot under these conditions was not possible, and Robert very reluctantly agreed with me that the only thing to be done was for me to return to Naini Tal with Bala Singh, while he carried on with the shoot alone. So next morning I packed up my things, and after an early breakfast with Robert, set off on my ten days' walk back to Naini Tal.

Bala Singh, a perfect specimen of a man of about thirty years of age, had left Naini Tal full of the joy of life; now he returned silent, with a strained look in his eyes, and with the appearance of one who had lost all interest in

life. My sisters, one of whom had been a medical missionary, did all they could for him. Friends from far and near came to visit him, but he just sat at the door of his house never speaking unless spoken to. The Civil Surgeon of Naini Tal, Colonel Cooke, a man of great experience and a close friend of the family, came to visit Bala Singh at my request. His verdict after a long and painstaking examination was, that Bala Singh was in perfect physical condition, and that he could ascribe no reason for the man's apparent depression.

A few days later I had a brain wave. There was in Naini Tal at that time a very eminent Indian doctor and I thought if I could get him to examine Bala Singh and, after he had done so, tell him about the demon and persuade him to assure Bala Singh that there was no demon in his stomach he would be able to cure him of his trouble, for in addition to being a Hindu the doctor was himself a hillman. My brain wave, however, did not work out as I had hoped and anticipated, for as soon as he saw the sick man the doctor appeared to get suspicious and when in reply to some shrewd questions he learnt from Bala Singh that the demon of Tresule was in his stomach, he stepped away from him hurriedly and, turning to me, said 'I am sorry you sent for me, for I can do nothing for this man.'

There were two men from Bala Singh's village in Naini Tal. Next day I sent for them. They knew what was wrong with Bala Singh for they had come to see him several times, and at my request they agreed to take him home. Provided with funds the three men started on their eight days' journey next morning. Three weeks later the two men returned and made their report to me.

Bala Singh had accomplished the journey without any trouble. On the night of his arrival home, and while his relatives and friends were gathered round him, he had suddenly announced to the assembly that the demon wanted to be released to return to Tresule, and that the only way this could be accomplished was for him to die. 'So', my informants concluded, 'Bala Singh just lay down and died, and next morning we assisted at his cremation.'

Superstition, I am convinced, is a mental complaint similar to measles in that it attacks an individual or a community while leaving others immune. I therefore do not claim any credit for not contracting, while living on the upper reaches of the Himalayas, the virulent type of superstition that Bala Singh died of. But though I claim I am not superstitious I can give no explanation for the experience I met with at the bungalow while hunting the Champawat tiger, and the scream I heard coming from the deserted Thak village. Nor can I give any explanation for my repeated failures while engaged in one of the most interesting tiger hunts I have ever indulged in, and which I shall now relate.

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No one who has visited Dabidhura is ever likely to forget the view that is to be obtained from the Rest House built near the summit of 'God's Mountain' by one who, quite evidently, was a lover of scenery. From the veranda of the little three-roomed house the hill falls steeply away to the valley of the Panar river. Beyond this valley the hills rise ridge upon ridge until they merge into the eternal snows which, until the advent of aircraft, formed an impenetrable

barrier between India and her hungry northern neighbours.

A bridle road running from Naini Tal, the administrative headquarters of Kumaon, to Loharghat an outlying sub-division on her eastern border, passes through Dabidhura and a branch of this road connects Dabidhura with Almora. I was hunting the Panar man-eating leopard—about which I shall tell you later—in the vicinity of this latter road when I was informed by a road overseer, on his way to Almora, that the leopard had killed a man at Dabidhura. So to Dabidhura I went.

The western approach to Dabidhura is up one of the steepest roads in Kumaon. The object the man who designed this road had in view was to get to the top by the shortest route possible, and this he accomplished by dispensing with hairpin bends and running his road straight up the face of the 8,000-foot mountain. After panting up this road on a hot afternoon in April I was sitting on the veranda of the Rest House drinking gallons of tea and feasting my eyes on the breath-taking view, when the priest of Dabidhura came to see me. When two years previously I had been hunting the Champawat man-eater, I had made friends with this frail old man, who officiated at the little temple nestling in the shadow of the great rock that had made Dabidhura a place of pilgrimage, and for whose presence in that unusual place I shall hazard no guess. When passing the temple a few minutes earlier I had made the customary offering which had been acknowledged by a nod by the old priest who was at his devotions. These devotions finished, the priest had crossed the road that runs between the temple and the Rest House and accepting a cigarette sat down on the floor of