

In the Rukh

Of the wheels of public service that turn under the Indian Government, there is none more important than the Department of Woods and Forests. The reboisement of all India is in its hands; or will be when Government has the money to spend. Its servants wrestle with wandering sand-torrents and shifting dunes: wattling them at the sides, damming them in front, and pegging them down atop with coarse grass and spindling pine after the rules of Nancy. They are responsible for all the timber in the State forests of the Himalayas, as well as for the denuded hillsides that the monsoons wash into dry gullies and aching ravines; each cut a mouth crying aloud what carelessness can do. They experiment with battalions of foreign trees, and coax the blue gum to take root and, perhaps, dry up the Canal fever. In the plains the chief part of their duty is to see that the belt fire-lines in the forest reserves are kept clean, so that when drought comes and the cattle starve, they may throw the reserve open to the villager's herds and allow the man himself to gather sticks. They poll and lop for the stacked railway-fuel along the lines that burn no coal; they calculate the profit of their plantations to five points of decimals; they are the doctors and midwives of the huge teak forests of Upper Burma, the rubber of the Eastern Jungles, and the gall-nuts of the South; and they are always hampered

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by lack of funds. But since a Forest Officer's business takes him far from the beaten roads and the regular stations, he learns to grow wise in more than wood-lore alone; to know the people and the polity of the jungle; meeting tiger, bear, leopard, wild-dog, and all the deer, not once or twice after days of beating, but again and again in the execution of his duty. He spends much time in saddle or under canvas—the friend of newly-planted trees, the associate of uncouth rangers and hairy trackers—till the woods, that show his care, in turn set their mark upon him, and he ceases to sing the naughty French songs he learned at Nancy, and grows silent with the silent things of the underbrush.

Gisborne of the Woods and Forests had spent four years in the service. At first he loved it without comprehension, because it led him into the open on horseback and gave him authority. Then he hated it furiously, and would have given a year's pay for one month of such society as India affords. That crisis over, the forests took him back again, and he was content to serve them, to deepen and widen his fire-lines, to watch the green mist of his new plantation against the older foliage, to dredge out the choked stream, and to follow and strengthen the last struggle of the forest where it broke down and died among the long pig-grass. On some still day that grass would be burned off, and a hundred beasts that had their homes there would rush out before the pale flames at high noon. Later, the forest would creep forward over the blackened ground in orderly lines of saplings, and Gisborne, watching, would be well pleased. His bungalow, a thatched white-walled cottage of two rooms, was set at one end of the great *rukh* and overlooking it. He made no pretence at keeping a garden, for the *rukh* swept up to his door, curled over in a

thicket of bamboo, and he rode from his verandah into its heart without the need of any carriage-drive.

Abdul Gafur, his fat Mohammedan butler, fed him when he was at home, and spent the rest of the time gossiping with the little band of native servants whose huts lay behind the bungalow. There were two grooms, a cook, a water-carrier, and a sweeper, and that was all. Gisborne cleaned his own guns and kept no dog. Dogs scared the game, and it pleased the man to be able to say where the subjects of his kingdom would drink at moonrise, eat before dawn, and lie up in the day's heat. The rangers and forest-guards lived in little huts far away in the *rukhs*, only appearing when one of them had been injured by a falling tree or a wild beast. There Gisborne was alone.

In spring the *rukhs* put out few new leaves, but lay dry and still untouched by the finger of the year, waiting for rain. Only there was then more calling and roaring in the dark on a quiet night; the tumult of a battle-royal among the tigers, the bellying of arrogant buck, or the steady wood-chopping of an old boar sharpening his tusks against a bole. Then Gisborne laid aside his little-used gun altogether, for it was to him a sin to kill. In summer, through the furious May heats, the *rukhs* reeled in the haze, and Gisborne watched for the first sign of curling smoke that should betray a forest fire. Then came the Rains with a roar, and the *rukhs* was blotted out in fetch after fetch of warm mist, and the broad leaves drummed the night through under the big drops; and there was a noise of running water, and of juicy green stuff crackling where the wind struck it, and the lightning wove patterns behind the dense matting of the foliage, till the sun broke loose again and the *rukhs* stood with hot flanks smoking to the newly-washed sky. Then the heat and the dry cold subdued everything to tiger-colour again.

So Gisborne learned to know his *rukhs* and was very happy. His pay came month by month, but he had very little need for money. The currency notes accumulated in the drawer where he kept his home-letters and the recapping-machine. If he drew anything, it was to make a purchase from the Calcutta Botanical Gardens, or to pay a ranger's widow a sum that the Government of India would never have sanctioned for her man's death.

Payment was good, but vengeance was also necessary, and he took that when he could. One night of many nights a runner, breathless and gasping, came to him with the news that a forest-guard lay dead by the Kanye stream, the side of his head smashed in as though it had been an egg-shell. Gisborne went out at dawn to look for the murderer. It is only travellers and now and then young soldiers who are known to the world as great hunters. The Forest Officers take their *shikar* as part of the day's work, and no one hears of it. Gisborne went on foot to the place of the kill: the widow was wailing over the corpse as it lay on a bedstead, while two or three men were looking at footprints on the moist ground. "That is the Red One," said a man. "I knew he would turn to man in time, but surely there is game enough even for him. This must have been done for devilry."

"The Red One lies up in the rocks at the back of the *sal* trees," said Gisborne. He knew the tiger under suspicion.

"Not now, Sahib, not now. He will be raging and ranging to and fro. Remember that the first kill is a triple kill always. Our blood makes them mad. He may be behind us even as we speak."

"He may have gone to the next hut," said another. "It is only four *koss*. Wallah, who is this?"

Gisborne turned with the others. A man was walking down



the dried bed of the stream, naked except for the loin-cloth, but crowned with a wreath of the tasselled blossoms of the white convolvulus creeper. So noiselessly did he move over the little pebbles, that even Gisborne, used to the soft-footedness of trackers, started.

"The tiger that killed," he began, without any salute, "has gone to drink, and now he is asleep under a rock beyond that hill." His voice was clear and bell-like, utterly different from the usual whine of the native, and his face as he lifted it in the sunshine might have been that of an angel strayed among the woods. The widow ceased wailing above the corpse and looked round-eyed at the stranger, returning to her duty with double strength.

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"Shall I show the Sahib?" he said simply.

"If thou art sure——" Gisborne began.

"Sure indeed. I saw him only an hour ago—the dog. It is before his time to eat man's flesh. He has yet a dozen sound teeth in his evil head."

The men kneeling above the footprints slunk off quietly, for fear that Gisborne should ask them to go with him, and the young man laughed a little to himself.

"Come, Sahib," he cried, and turned on his heel, walking before his companion.

"Not so fast. I cannot keep that pace," said the white man. "Halt there. Thy face is new to me."

"That may be. I am but newly come into this forest."

"From what village?"

"I am without a village. I came from over there." He flung out his arm towards the north.

"A gipsy then?"

"No, Sahib. I am a man without caste, and for matter of that without a father."

"What do men call thee?"

"Mowgli, Sahib. And what is the Sahib's name?"

"I am the warden of this *rukh*—Gisborne is my name."

"How? Do they number the trees and the blades of grass here?"

"Even so; lest such gipsy fellows as thou set them afire."

"I! I would not hurt the jungle for any gift. That is my home."

He turned to Gisborne with a smile that was irresistible, and held up a warning hand.

"Now, Sahib, we must go a little quietly. There is no need to wake the dog, though he sleeps heavily enough. Perhaps

it were better if I went forward alone and drove him down wind to the Sahib!"

"Allah! Since when have tigers been driven to and fro like cattle by naked men?" said Gisborne, aghast at the man's audacity.

He laughed again softly. "Nay, then, come along with me and shoot him in thy own way with the big English rifle."

Gisborne stepped in his guide's track, twisted, crawled, and clomb and stooped and suffered through all the many agonies of a jungle-stalk. He was purple and dripping with sweat when Mowgli at the last bade him raise his head and peer over a blue baked rock near a tiny hill pool. By the waterside lay the tiger extended and at ease, lazily licking clean again an enormous elbow and forepaw. He was old, yellow-toothed, and not a little mangy, but in that setting and sunshine, imposing enough.

Gisborne had no false ideas of sport where the man-eater was concerned. This thing was vermin, to be killed as speedily as possible. He waited to recover his breath, rested the rifle on the rock and whistled. The brute's head turned slowly not twenty feet from the rifle-mouth, and Gisborne planted his shots, business-like, one behind the shoulder and the other a little below the eye. At that range the heavy bones were no guard against the rending bullets.

"Well, the skin was not worth keeping at any rate," said he, as the smoke cleared away and the beast lay kicking and gasping in the last agony.

"A dog's death for a dog," said Mowgli quietly. "Indeed there is nothing in that carrion worth taking away."

"The whiskers. Dost thou not take the whiskers?" said Gisborne, who knew how the rangers valued such things.

"I? Am I a lousy *shikarri* of the jungle to paddle with a

tiger's muzzle? Let him lie. Here come his friends already."

A dropping kite whistled shrilly overhead, as Gisborne snapped out the empty shells, and wiped his face.

"And if thou art not a *shikarri*, where didst thou learn thy knowledge of the tiger-folk?" said he. "No tracker could have done better."

"I hate all tigers," said Mowgli curtly. "Let the Sahib give me his gun to carry. *Arré*, it is a very fine one. And where does the Sahib go now?"

"To my house."

"May I come? I have never yet looked within a white man's house."

Gisborne returned to his bungalow, Mowgli striding noiselessly before him, his brown skin glistening in the sunlight.

He stared curiously at the verandah and the two chairs there, fingered the split bamboo shade curtains with suspicion, and entered, looking always behind him. Gisborne loosed a curtain to keep out the sun. It dropped with a clatter, but almost before it touched the flagging of the verandah Mowgli had leaped clear, and was standing with heaving chest in the open.

"It is a trap," he said quickly.

Gisborne laughed. "White men do not trap men. Indeed thou art altogether of the jungle."

"I see," said Mowgli, "it has neither catch nor fall. I—I never beheld these things till today."

He came in on tiptoe and stared with large eyes at the furniture of the two rooms. Abdul Gafur, who was laying lunch, looked at him with deep disgust.

"So much trouble to eat, and so much trouble to lie down after you have eaten!" said Mowgli with a grin. "We do better in the jungle. It is very wonderful. There are very many rich things here. Is the Sahib not afraid that he may be robbed?"

I have never seen such wonderful things." He was staring at a dusty Benares brass plate on a rickety bracket.

"Only a thief from the jungle would rob here," said Abdul Gafur, setting down a plate with a clatter. Mowgli opened his eyes wide and stared at the white-bearded Mohammedan.

"In my country when goats bleat very loud we cut their throats," he returned cheerfully. "But have no fear, thou. I am going."

He turned and disappeared into the *ruk*. Gisborne looked after him with a laugh that ended in a little sigh. There was not much outside his regular work to interest the Forest Officer, and this son of the forest, who seemed to know tigers as other people know dogs, would have been a diversion.

"He's a most wonderful chap," thought Gisborne; "he's like the illustrations in the Classical Dictionary. I wish I could have made him a gun-boy. There's no fun in shikarring alone, and this fellow would have been a perfect *shikarri*. I wonder what in the world he is."

That evening he sat on the verandah under the stars smoking as he wondered. A puff of smoke curled from the pipe-bowl. As it cleared he was aware of Mowgli sitting with arms crossed on the verandah edge. A ghost could not have drifted up more noiselessly. Gisborne started and let the pipe drop.

"There is no man to talk to out there in the *ruk*," said Mowgli; "I came here, therefore." He picked up the pipe and returned it to Gisborne.

"Oh," said Gisborne, and after a long pause, "What news is there in the *ruk*? Hast thou found another tiger?"

"The nilghai are changing their feeding-ground against the new moon, as is their custom. The pig are feeding near the Kanye river now, because they will not feed with the nilghai,

and one of their sows has been killed by a leopard in the long grass at the water-head. I do not know any more."

"And how didst thou know all these things?" said Gisborne, leaning forward and looking at the eyes that glittered in the starlight.

"How should I not know? The nilghai has his custom and his use, and a child knows that pig will not feed with him."

"I do not know this," said Gisborne.

"Tck! Tck! And thou art in charge—so the men of the huts tell me—in charge of all this *ruk*." He laughed to himself.

"It is well enough to talk and to tell child's tales," Gisborne retorted, nettled at the chuckle. "To say that this and that goes on in the *ruk*. No man can deny thee."

"As for the sow's carcass, I will show thee her bones tomorrow," Mowgli returned, absolutely unmoved. "Touching the matter of the nilghai, if the Sahib will sit here very still I will drive one nilghai up to this place, and by listening to the sounds carefully, the Sahib can tell whence that nilghai has been driven."

"Mowgli, the jungle has made thee mad," said Gisborne. "Who can drive nilghai?"

"Still—sit still, then. I go."

"Gad, the man's a ghost!" said Gisborne; for Mowgli had faded out into the darkness and there was no sound of feet. The *ruk* lay out in great velvety folds in the uncertain shimmer of the star-dust—so still that the least little wandering wind among the tree-tops came up as the sigh of a child sleeping equably. Abdul Gafur in the cook-house was clicking plates together.

"Be still there!" shouted Gisborne, and composed himself to listen as a man can who is used to the stillness of the *ruk*. It had been his custom, to preserve his self-respect in his isola-

tion, to dress for dinner each night, and the stiff white shirt-front creaked with his regular breathing till he shifted a little sideways. Then the tobacco of a somewhat foul pipe began to purr, and he threw the pipe from him. Now, except for the night-breath in the *ruk*, everything was dumb.

From an inconceivable distance, and drawled through immeasurable darkness, came the faint, faint echo of a wolf's howl. Then silence again for, it seemed, long hours. At last, when his legs below the knees had lost all feeling, Gisborne heard something that might have been a crash far off through the undergrowth. He doubted till it was repeated again and yet again.

"That's from the west," he muttered; "there's something on foot there." The noise increased—crash on crash, plunge on plunge—with the thick grunting of a hotly pressed nilghai, flying in panic terror and taking no heed to his course.

A shadow blundered out from between the tree-trunks, wheeled back, turned again grunting, and with a clatter on the bare ground dashed up almost within reach of his hand. It was a bull nilghai, dripping with dew—his withers hung with a torn trail of creeper, his eyes shining in the light from the house. The creature checked at sight of the man, and fled along the edge of the *ruk* till he melted in the darkness. The first idea in Gisborne's bewildered mind was the indecency of thus dragging out for inspection the big blue bull of the *ruk*—the putting him through his paces in the night which should have been his own.

Then said a smooth voice at his ear as he stood staring: "He came from the water-head where he was leading the herd. From the west he came. Does the Sahib believe now, or shall I bring up the herd to be counted? The Sahib is in charge of this *ruk*."

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Mowgli had reseated himself on the verandah, breathing a little quickly. Gisborne looked at him with open mouth. "How was that accomplished?" he said.

"The Sahib saw. The bull was driven—driven as a buffalo is. Ho! ho! He will have a fine tale to tell when he returns to the herd."

"That is a new trick to me. Canst thou run as swiftly as the nilghai, then?"

"The Sahib has seen. If the Sahib needs more knowledge at any time of the movings of the game, I, Mowgli, am here. This is a good *ruk*, and I shall stay."

"Stay, then, and if thou hast need of a meal at any time my servants shall give thee one."

"Yes, indeed, I am fond of cooked food," Mowgli answered quickly. "No man may say that I do not eat boiled and roast as much as any other man. I will come for that meal. Now, on my part, I promise that the Sahib shall sleep safely in his house by night, and no thief shall break in to carry away his so rich treasures."

The conversation ended itself on Mowgli's abrupt departure. Gisborne sat long smoking, and the upshot of his thoughts was that in Mowgli he had found at last that ideal ranger and forest-guard for whom he and the Department were always looking.

"I must get him into the Government service somehow. A man who can drive nilghai would know more about the *ruk* than fifty men. He's a miracle—a *lusus naturæ*—but a forest-guard he must be if he'll only settle down in one place," said Gisborne.

Abdul Gafur's opinion was less favourable. He confided to Gisborne at bedtime that strangers from God-knew-where were more than likely to be professional thieves, and that he

personally did not approve of naked outcastes who had not the proper manner of addressing white people. Gisborne laughed and bade him go to his quarters, and Abdul Gafur retreated growling. Later in the night he found occasion to rise up and beat his thirteen-year-old daughter. Nobody knew the cause of dispute, but Gisborne heard the cry.

Through the days that followed Mowgli came and went like a shadow. He had established himself and his wild house-keeping close to the bungalow, but on the edge of the *ruk*h, where Gisborne, going out on to the verandah for a breath of cool air, would see him sometimes sitting in the moonlight, his forehead on his knees, or lying out along the fling of a branch, closely pressed to it as some beast of the night. Thence Mowgli would throw him a salutation and bid him sleep at ease, or descending would weave prodigious stories of the manners of the beasts in the *ruk*h. Once he wandered into the stables and was found looking at the horses with deep interest.

"That," said Abdul Gafur pointedly, "is sure sign that some day he will steal one. Why, if he lives about this house, does he not take an honest employment? But no, he must wander up and down like a loose camel, turning the heads of fools and opening the jaws of the unwise to folly." So Abdul Gafur would give harsh orders to Mowgli when they met, would bid him fetch water and pluck fowls, and Mowgli, laughing unconcernedly, would obey.

"He has no caste," said Abdul Gafur. "He will do anything. Look to it, Sahib, that he does not do too much. A snake is a snake, and a jungle-gipsy is a thief till the death."

"Be silent, then," said Gisborne. "I allow thee to correct thy own household if there is not too much noise, because I know thy customs and use. My custom thou dost not know. The man is without doubt a little mad."

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"Very little mad indeed," said Abdul Gafur. "But we shall see what comes thereof."

A few days later on his business took Gisborne into the *ruk*h for three days. Abdul Gafur being old and fat was left at home. He did not approve of lying up in rangers' huts, and was inclined to levy contributions in his master's name of grain and oil and milk from those who could ill afford such benevolences. Gisborne rode off early one dawn a little vexed that his man of the woods was not at the verandah to accompany him. He liked him—liked his strength, fleetness, and silence of foot, and his ever-ready open smile; his ignorance of all forms of ceremony and salutations, and the child-like tales that he would tell (and Gisborne would credit now) of what the game was doing in the *ruk*h. After an hour's riding through the greenery, he heard a rustle behind him, and Mowgli trotted at his stirrup.

"We have a three days' work toward," said Gisborne, "among the new trees."

"Good," said Mowgli. "It is always good to cherish young trees. They make cover if the beasts leave them alone. We must shift the pig again."

"Again? How?" Gisborne smiled.

"Oh, they were rooting and tusking among the young *sal* last night, and I drove them off. Therefore I did not come to the verandah this morning. The pig should not be on this side of the *ruk*h at all. We must keep them below the head of the Kanye river."

"If a man could herd clouds he might do that thing; but, Mowgli, if, as thou sayest, thou art herder in the *ruk*h for no gain and for no pay—"

"It is the Sahib's *ruk*h," said Mowgli, quickly looking up. Gisborne nodded thanks and went on: "Would it not be bet-

ter to work for pay from the Government? There is a pension at the end of long service."

"Of that I have thought," said Mowgli, "but the rangers live in huts with shut doors, and all that is all too much a trap to me. Yet I think——"

"Think well then and tell me later. Here we will stay for breakfast."

Gisborne dismounted, took his morning meal from his homemade saddle-bags, and saw the day open hot above the *ruk*. Mowgli lay in the grass at his side staring up to the sky.

Presently he said in a lazy whisper: "Sahib, is there any order at the bungalow to take out the white mare today?"

"No, she is fat and old and a little lame beside. Why?"

"She is being ridden now and *not* slowly on the road that runs to the railway line."

"Bah, that is two *koss* away. It is a woodpecker."

Mowgli put up his forearm to keep the sun out of his eyes.

"The road curves in with a big curve from the bungalow. It is not more than a *koss*, at the farthest, as the kite goes; and sound flies with the birds. Shall we see?"

"What folly! To run a *koss* in this sun to see a noise in the forest."

"Nay, the pony is the Sahib's pony. I meant only to bring her here. If she is not the Sahib's pony, no matter. If she is, the Sahib can do what he wills. She is certainly being ridden hard."

"And how wilt thou bring her here, madman?"

"Has the Sahib forgotten? By the road of the nilghai and no other."

"Up then and run if thou art so full of zeal."

"Oh, I do not run!" He put out his hand to sign for silence,

and still lying on his back called aloud thrice—with a deep gurgling cry that was new to Gisborne.

"She will come," he said at the end. "Let us wait in the shade." The long eyelashes drooped over the wild eyes as Mowgli began to doze in the morning hush. Gisborne waited patiently: Mowgli was surely mad, but as entertaining a companion as a lonely Forest Officer could desire.

"Ho! ho!" said Mowgli lazily, with shut eyes. "He has dropped off. Well, first the mare will come and then the man." Then he yawned as Gisborne's pony stallion neighed. Three minutes later Gisborne's white mare, saddled, bridled, but riderless, tore into the glade where they were sitting, and hurried to her companion.

"She is not very warm," said Mowgli, "but in this heat the sweat comes easily. Presently we shall see her rider, for a man goes more slowly than a horse—especially if he chance to be a fat man and old."

"Allah! This is the devil's work," cried Gisborne, leaping to his feet, for he heard a yell in the jungle.

"Have no care, Sahib. He will not be hurt. He also will say that it is devil's work. Ah! Listen! Who is that?"

It was the voice of Abdul Gafur in an agony of terror, crying out upon unknown things to spare him and his gray hairs.

"Nay, I cannot move another step," he howled. "I am old and my turban is lost. *Arré! Arré!* But I will move. Indeed I will hasten. I will run! Oh, Devils of the Pit, I am a Musulman!"

The undergrowth parted and gave up Abdul Gafur, turbanless, shoeless, with his waist-cloth unbound, mud and grass in his clutched hands, and his face purple. He saw Gisborne, yelled anew, and pitched forward, exhausted and quivering, at his feet. Mowgli watched him with a sweet smile.

"This is no joke," said Gisborne sternly. "The man is like to die, Mowgli."

"He will not die. He is only afraid. There was no need that he should have come out of a walk."

Abdul Gafur groaned and rose up, shaking in every limb.

"It was witchcraft—witchcraft and devildom!" he sobbed, fumbling with his hand in his breast. "Because of my sin I have been whipped through the woods by devils. It is all finished. I repent. Take them, Sahib!" He held out a roll of dirty paper.

"What is the meaning of this, Abdul Gafur?" said Gisborne, already knowing what would come.

"Put me in the jail-khana—the notes are all here—but lock me up safely that no devils may follow. I have sinned against the Sahib and his salt which I have eaten; and but for those accursed wood-demons, I might have bought land afar off and lived in peace all my days." He beat his head upon the ground in an agony of despair and mortification. Gisborne turned the roll of notes over and over. It was his accumulated back-pay for the last nine months—the roll that lay in the drawer with the home-letters and the recapping-machine. Mowgli watched Abdul Gafur, laughing noiselessly to himself. "There is no need to put me on the horse again. I will walk home slowly with the Sahib, and then he can send me under guard to the jail-khana. The Government gives many years for this offence," said the butler sullenly.

Loneliness in the *ruk* affects very many ideas about very many things. Gisborne stared at Abdul Gafur, remembering that he was a very good servant, and that a new butler must be broken into the ways of the house from the beginning, and at the best would be a new face and a new tongue.

"Listen, Abdul Gafur," he said. "Thou hast done great

wrong, and altogether lost thy *izzat* and thy reputation. But I think that this came upon thee suddenly."

"Allah! I had never desired the notes before. The Evil took me by the throat while I looked."

"That also I can believe. Go then back to my house, and when I return I will send the notes by a runner to the Bank, and there shall be no more said. Thou art too old for the jail-khana. Also thy household is guiltless."

For answer Abdul Gafur sobbed between Gisborne's cow-hide riding-boots.

"Is there no dismissal then?" he gulped.

"That we shall see. It hangs upon thy conduct when we return. Get upon the mare and ride slowly back."

"But the devils! The *ruk* is full of devils."

"No matter, my father. They will do thee no more harm unless, indeed, the Sahib's orders be not obeyed," said Mowgli. "Then, perchance, they may drive thee home—by the road of the nilghai."

Abdul Gafur's lower jaw dropped as he twisted up his waist-cloth, staring at Mowgli.

"Are they *his* devils? His devils! And I had thought to return and lay the blame upon this warlock!"

"That was well thought of, Huzrut; but before we make a trap we see first how big the game is that may fall into it. Now I thought no more than that a man had taken one of the Sahib's horses. I did not know that the design was to make me a thief before the Sahib, or my devils had haled thee here by the leg. It is not too late now."

Mowgli looked inquiringly at Gisborne; but Abdul Gafur waddled hastily to the white mare, scrambled on her back and fled, the woodways crashing and echoing behind him.

"That was well done," said Mowgli. "But he will fall again unless he holds by the mane."

"Now it is time to tell me what these things mean," said Gisborne a little sternly. "What is this talk of thy devils? How can men be driven up and down the *ruk* like cattle? Give answer."

"Is the Sahib angry because I have saved him his money?"

"No, but there is trick-work in this that does not please me."

"Very good. Now if I rose and stepped three paces into the *ruk* there is no one, not even the Sahib, could find me till I choose. As I would not willingly do this, so I would not willingly tell. Have patience a little, Sahib, and some day I will show thee everything, for, if thou wilt, some day we will drive the buck together. There is no devil-work in the matter at all. Only . . . I know the *ruk* as a man knows the cooking-place in his house."

Mowgli was speaking as he would speak to an impatient child. Gisborne, puzzled, baffled, and a great deal annoyed, said nothing, but stared on the ground and thought. When he looked up the man of the woods had gone.

"It is not good," said a level voice from the thicket, "for friends to be angry. Wait till the evening, Sahib, when the air cools."

Left to himself thus, dropped as it were in the heart of the *ruk*, Gisborne swore, then laughed, remounted his pony, and rode on. He visited a ranger's hut, overlooked a couple of new plantations, left some orders as to the burning of a patch of dry grass, and set out for a camping-ground of his own choice, a pile of splintered rocks roughly roofed over with branches and leaves, not far from the banks of the Kanye stream. It was twilight when he came in sight of his resting-place, and the

ruk was waking to the hushed ravenous life of the night.

A campfire flickered on the knoll, and there was the smell of a very good dinner in the wind.

"Um," said Gisborne, "that's better than cold meat at any rate. Now the only man who'd be likely to be here'd be Muller, and, officially, he ought to be looking over the Changamanga *ruk*. I suppose that's why he's on my ground."

The gigantic German who was the head of the Woods and Forests of all India, Head Ranger from Burma to Bombay, had a habit of flitting bat-like without warning from one place to another, and turning up exactly where he was least looked for. His theory was that sudden visitations, the discovery of shortcomings and a word-of-mouth upbraiding of a subordinate were infinitely better than the slow processes of correspondence, which might end in a written and official reprimand—a thing in after years to be counted against a Forest Officer's record. As he explained it: "If I only talk to my boys like a Dutch uncle, dey say, 'It was only dot damned old Muller,' and dey do better next dime. But if my fat-head clerk he write and say dot Muller der Inspektor-General fail to onderstand and is much annoyed, first dot does no goot because I am not dere, and, second, der fool dot comes after me he may say to my best boys: 'Look here, you haf been wigged by my bredecessor.' I tell you der big brass-hat pizness does not make der trees grow."

Muller's deep voice was coming out of the darkness behind the firelight as he bent over the shoulders of his pet cook. "Not so much sauce, you son of Belial! Worcester sauce he is a gondiment and not a fluid. Ah, Gisborne, you haf come to a very bad dinner. Where is your camp?" and he walked up to shake hands.

"I'm the camp, sir," said Gisborne. "I didn't know you were about here."

Muller looked at the young man's trim figure. "Goot! That is very goot! One horse and some cold things to eat. When I was young I did my camp so. Now you shall dine with me. I went into Headquarters to make up my rebort last month. I haf written half—ho! ho!—and der rest I haf leaved to my glerks and come out for a walk. Der Government is mad about dose reborts. I dold der Viceroy so at Simla."

Gisborne chuckled, remembering the many tales that were told of Muller's conflicts with the Supreme Government. He was the chartered libertine of all the offices, for as a Forest Officer he had no equal.

"If I find you, Gisborne, sitting in your bungalow und hatching reborts to me about der blantations instead of riding der blantations, I will dransfer you to der middle of der Bikaner Desert to reforest *him*. I am sick of reborts und chewing paper when we should do our work."

"There's not much danger of my wasting time over my annuals. I hate them as much as you do, sir."

The talk went over at this point to professional matters. Muller had some questions to ask, and Gisborne orders and hints to receive, till dinner was ready. It was the most civilised meal Gisborne had eaten for months. No distance from the base of supplies was allowed to interfere with the work of Muller's cook; and that table spread in the wilderness began with devilled small fresh-water fish, and ended with coffee and cognac.

"Ah!" said Muller at the end, with a sigh of satisfaction as he lighted a cheroot and dropped into his much worn camp-chair. "When I am making reborts I am Freethinker und Atheist, but here in der *ruk*h I am more than Christian. I am Bagan also." He rolled the cheroot-butt luxuriously under his

tongue, dropped his hands on his knees, and stared before him into the dim shifting heart of the *ruk*h, full of stealthy noises; the snapping of twigs like the snapping of the fire behind him; the sigh and rustle of a heat-bended branch recovering her straightness in the cool night; the incessant mutter of the Kanye stream, and the undernote of the many-peopled grass uplands out of sight beyond a swell of hill. He blew out a thick puff of smoke, and began to quote Heine to himself.

"Yes, it is very goot. Very goot. 'Yes, I work miracles, and, by Gott, dey come off too.' I remember when dere was no *ruk*h more big than your knee, from here to der plough-lands, und in drought-time der cattle ate bones of dead cattle up and down. Now der trees haf come back. Dey were planted by a Freethinker, because he know just de cause dot made der effect. But der trees dey had der cult of der old gods—'und der Christian Gods howl loudly.' Dey could not live in der *ruk*h, Gisborne."

A shadow moved in one of the bridle-paths—moved and stepped out into the starlight.

"I haf said true. Hush! Here is Faunus himself come to see der Insbector-General. Himmel, he is der god! Look!"

It was Mowgli, crowned with his wreath of white flowers and walking with a half-peeled branch—Mowgli, very mistrustful of the fire-light and ready to fly back to the thicket on the least alarm.

"That's a friend of mine," said Gisborne. "He's looking for me. Ohé, Mowgli!"

Muller had barely time to gasp before the man was at Gisborne's side, crying: "I was wrong to go. I was wrong, but I did not know then that the mate of him that was killed by this river was awake looking for thee. Else I should not have gone away. She tracked thee from the back-range, Sahib."

"He is a little mad," said Gisborne, "and he speaks of all the beasts about here as if he was a friend of theirs."

"Of course—of course. If Faunus does not know, who should know?" said Muller gravely. "What does he say about tigers—dis god who knows you so well?"

Gisborne relighted his cheroot, and before he had finished the story of Mowgli and his exploits it was burned down to moustache-edge. Muller listened without interruption. "Dot is not madness," he said at last when Gisborne had described the driving of Abdul Gafur. "Dot is not madness at all."

"What is it, then? He left me in a temper this morning because I asked him to tell how he did it. I fancy the chap's possessed in some way."

"No, dere is no bossession, but it is most wonderful. Normally they die young—dese beople. Und you say now dot your thief-servant did not say what drove der pony, and of course der nilghai he could not speak."

"No, but, confound it, there wasn't anything. I listened, and I can hear most things. The bull and the man simply came headlong—mad with fright."

For answer Muller looked Mowgli up and down from head to foot, then beckoned him nearer. He came as a buck treads a tainted trail.

"There is no harm," said Muller in the vernacular. "Hold out an arm."

He ran his hand down to the elbow, felt that, and nodded. "So I thought. Now the knee." Gisborne saw him feel the kneecap and smile. Two or three white scars just above the ankle caught his eye.

"Those came when thou wast very young?" he said.

"Ay," Mowgli answered with a smile. "They were love-to-

kens from the little ones." Then to Gisborne over his shoulder: "This Sahib knows everything. Who is he?"

"That comes after, my friend. Now where are *they*?" said Muller.

Mowgli swept his hand round his head in a circle.

"So! And thou canst drive nilghai? See! There is my mare in her pickets. Canst thou bring her to me without frightening her?"

"Can I bring the mare to the Sahib without frightening her!" Mowgli repeated, raising his voice a little above its normal pitch. "What is more easy if the heel-ropes are loose?"

"Loosen the head and heel-pegs," shouted Muller to the groom. They were hardly out of the ground before the mare, a huge black Australian, flung up her head and cocked her ears.

"Careful! I do not wish her driven into the *rukh*," said Muller.

Mowgli stood still fronting the blaze of the fire—in the very form and likeness of that Greek god who is so lavishly described in the novels. The mare whickered, drew up one hind leg, found that the heel-ropes were free, and moved swiftly to her master, on whose bosom she dropped her head, sweating lightly.

"She came of her own accord. My horses will do that," cried Gisborne.

"Feel if she sweats," said Mowgli.

Gisborne laid a hand on the damp flank.

"It is enough," said Muller.

"It is enough," Mowgli repeated, and a rock behind him threw back the word.

"That's uncanny, isn't it?" said Gisborne.

"No, only wonderful—most wonderful. Still you do not know, Gisborne?"

"I confess I don't."

"Well, then, I shall not tell. He says dot some day he will show you what it is. It would be gruel if I told. But why he is not dead I do not understand. Now listen thou." Muller faced Mowgli, and returned to the vernacular. "I am the head of all the *rukhs* in the country of India and others across the Black Water. I do not know how many men be under me—perhaps five thousand, perhaps ten. Thy business is this—to wander no more up and down the *rukh* and drive beasts for sport or for show, but to take service under me, who am the Government in the matter of Woods and Forests, and to live in this *rukh* as a forest-guard; to drive the villagers' goats away when there is no order to feed them in the *rukh*; to admit them when there is an order; to keep down, as thou canst keep down, the boar and the nilghai when they become too many; to tell Gisborne Sahib how and where tigers move, and what game there is in the forests; and to give sure warning of all fires in the *rukh*, for thou canst give warning more quickly than any other. For that work there is a payment each month in silver, and at the end, when thou hast gathered a wife and cattle and, maybe, children, a pension. What answer?"

"That's just what I—" Gisborne began.

"My Sahib spoke this morning of such a service. I walked all day alone considering the matter, and my answer is ready here. I serve, *if* I serve in this *rukh* and no other: *with* Gisborne Sahib and with no other."

"It shall be so. In a week comes the written order that pledges the honour of the Government for the pension. After that thou wilt take up thy hut where Gisborne Sahib shall appoint."

In the Rukh

"I was going to speak to you about it," said Gisborne.

"I did not want to be told when I saw that man. Dere will never be a forest-guard like him. He is a miracle. I tell you, Gisborne, some day you will find it so. Listen, he is blood-brother to every beast in der *rukhl!*"

"I should be easier in my mind if I could understand him."

"Dot will come. Now I tell you dot only once in my service, and dot is thirty years, haf I met a boy dot began as this man began. Und he died. Sometimes you hear of dem in der census reports, but dey all die. Dis man haf lived, and he is an anachronism, for he is before der Iron Age, and der Stone Age. Look here, he is at der beginnings of der history of man—Adam in der Garden, und now we want only an Eval No! He is older than dot child-tale, shust as der *rukh* is older dan der gods. Gisborne, I am a Bagan now, once for all."

Through the rest of the long evening Muller sat smoking and smoking, and staring and staring into the darkness, his lips moving in multiplied quotations, and great wonder upon his face. He went to his tent, but presently came out again in his majestic pink sleeping-suit, and the last words that Gisborne heard him address to the *rukh* through the deep hush of midnight were these, delivered with immense emphasis:—

"Dough we shivt und dedeck und bedrape us,

Dou art noble und nude und andeek;

Libidina dy moder, Briapus

Dy fader, a God und a Greek.

Now I know dot, Bagan or Christian, I shall nefer know der inwardness of der *rukhl!*"

It was midnight in the bungalow a week later when Abdul

Gafur, ashy gray with rage, stood at the foot of Gisborne's bed and whispering bade him awake.

"Up, Sahib," he stammered. "Up and bring thy gun. Mine honour is gone. Up and kill before any see."

The old man's face had changed, so that Gisborne stared stupidly.

"It was for this, then, that that jungle outcaste helped me to polish the Sahib's table, and drew water and plucked fowls. They have gone off together for all my beatings, and now he sits among his devils dragging her soul to the Pit. Up, Sahib, and come with me!"

He thrust a rifle into Gisborne's half-wakened hand and almost dragged him from the room on to the verandah.

"They are there in the *ruk*; even within gunshot of the house. Come softly with me."

"But what is it? What is the trouble, Abdul?"

"Mowgli, and his devils. Also my own daughter," said Abdul Gafur. Gisborne whistled and followed his guide. Not for nothing, he knew, had Abdul Gafur beaten his daughter of nights, and not for nothing had Mowgli helped in the housework a man whom his own powers, whatever those were, had convicted of theft. Also, a forest wooing goes quickly.

There was the breathing of a flute in the *ruk*, as it might have been the song of some wandering wood-god, and, as they came nearer, a murmur of voices. The path ended in a little semicircular glade walled partly by high grass and partly by trees. In the centre, upon a fallen trunk, his back to the watchers and his arm round the neck of Abdul Gafur's daughter, sat Mowgli, newly crowned with flowers, playing upon a rude bamboo flute, to whose music four huge wolves danced solemnly on their hind legs.

"Those are his devils," Abdul Gafur whispered. He held a

bunch of cartridges in his hand. The beasts dropped to a long-drawn quavering note and lay still with steady green eyes, glaring at the girl.

"Behold," said Mowgli, laying aside the flute. "Is there anything of fear in that? I told thee, little Stoutheart, that there was not, and thou didst believe. Thy father said—and oh, if thou couldst have seen thy father being driven by the road of the nilghai—thy father said that they were devils; and by Allah, who is thy God, I do not wonder that he so believed."

The girl laughed a little rippling laugh, and Gisborne heard Abdul grind his few remaining teeth. This was not at all the girl that Gisborne had seen with a half eye slinking about the compound veiled and silent, but another—a woman full blown in a night as the orchid puts out in an hour's moist heat.

"But they are my playmates and my brothers, children of that mother that gave me suck, as I told thee behind the cook-house," Mowgli went on. "Children of the father that lay between me and the cold at the mouth of the cave when I was a little naked child. Look"—a wolf raised his gray jowl, slaving at Mowgli's knee—"my brother knows that I speak of them. Yes, when I was a little child he was a cub rolling with me on the clay."

"But thou hast said that thou art human-born," cooed the girl, nestling closer to the shoulder. "Thou art human-born?"

"Said! Nay, I know that I am human-born, because my heart is in thy hold, little one." Her head dropped under Mowgli's chin. Gisborne put up a warning hand to restrain Abdul Gafur, who was not in the least impressed by the wonder of the sight.

"But I was a wolf among wolves none the less till a time

came when Those of the Jungle bade me go because I was a man."

"Who bade thee go? That is not like a true man's talk."

"The very beasts themselves. Little one, thou wouldst never believe that telling, but so it was. The beasts of the Jungle bade me go, but these four followed me because I was their brother. Then was I a herder of cattle among men, having learned their language. Ho! ho! The herds paid toll to my brothers, till a woman, an old woman, beloved, saw me playing by night with my brethren in the crops. They said that I was possessed of devils, and drove me from that village with sticks and stones, and the four came with me by stealth and not openly. That was when I had learned to eat cooked meat and to talk boldly. From village to village I went, heart of my heart, a herder of cattle, a tender of buffaloes, a tracker of game, but there was no man that dared lift a finger against me twice." He stooped down and patted one of the heads. "Do thou also like this. There is neither hurt nor magic in them. See, they know thee."

"The woods are full of all manner of devils," said the girl with a shudder.

"A lie. A child's lie," Mowgli returned confidently. "I have lain out in the dew under the stars and in the dark night, and I know. The jungle is my house. Shall a man fear his own roof-beams or a woman her man's hearth? Stoop down and pat them."

"They are dogs and unclean," she murmured, bending forward with averted head.

"Having eaten the fruit, now we remember the Law!" said Abdul Gafur bitterly. "What is the need of this waiting, Sahib? Kill!"

In the Rukh

"H'sh, thou. Let us learn what has happened," said Gisborne.

"That is well done," said Mowgli, slipping his arm round the girl again. "Dogs or no dogs, they were with me through a thousand villages."

"Ahi, and where was thy heart then? Through a thousand villages. Thou hast seen a thousand maids. I—have I thy heart?"

"What shall I swear by? By Allah, of whom thou speakest?"

"Nay, by the life that is in thee, and I am well content. Where was thy heart in those days?"

Mowgli laughed a little. "In my belly, because I was young and always hungry. So I learned to track and to hunt, sending and calling my brothers back and forth as a king calls his armies. Therefore I drove the nilghai for the foolish young Sahib, and the big fat mare for the big fat Sahib, when they questioned my power. It were as easy to have driven the men themselves. Even now," his voice lifted a little—"even now I know that behind me stand thy father and Gisborne Sahib. Nay, do not run, for no ten men dare move a pace forward. Remembering that thy father beat thee more than once, shall I give the word and drive him again in rings through the *rukhs*?" A wolf stood up with bared teeth.

Gisborne felt Abdul Gafur tremble at his side. Next, his place was empty, and the fat man was skimming down the glade.

"Remains only Gisborne Sahib," said Mowgli, still without turning; "but I have eaten Gisborne Sahib's bread, and presently I shall be in his service, and my brothers will be his servants to drive game and carry the news. Hide thou in the grass."

The girl fled, the tall grass closed behind her and the guardian wolf that followed, and Mowgli turning with his three

retainers faced Gisborne as the Forest Officer came forward.

"That is all the magic," he said, pointing to the three. "The fat Sahib knew that we who are bred among wolves run on our elbows and our knees for a season. Feeling my arms and legs, he felt the truth which thou didst not know. Is it so wonderful, Sahib?"

"Indeed it is all more wonderful than magic. These, then, drove the nilghai?"

"Ay, as they would drive Eblis if I gave the order. They are my eyes and feet to me."

"Look to it, then, that Eblis does not carry a double rifle. They have yet something to learn, thy devils, for they stand one behind the other, so that two shots would kill the three."

"Ah, but they know they will be thy servants as soon as I am a forest-guard."

"Guard or no guard, Mowgli, thou hast done a great shame to Abdul Gafur. Thou hast dishonoured his house and blackened his face."

"For that, it was blackened when he took thy money, and made blacker still when he whispered in thy ear a little while since to kill a naked man. I myself will talk to Abdul Gafur, for I am a man of the Government service, with a pension. He shall make the marriage by whatsoever rite he will, or he shall run once more. I will speak to him in the dawn. For the rest, the Sahib has his house and this is mine. It is time to sleep again, Sahib."

Mowgli turned on his heel and disappeared into the grass, leaving Gisborne alone. The hint of the wood-god was not to be mistaken; and Gisborne went back to the bungalow, where Abdul Gafur, torn by rage and fear, was raving in the verandah.

"Peace, peace," said Gisborne, shaking him, for he looked

as though he were going to have a fit. "Muller Sahib has made the man a forest-guard, and as thou knowest there is a pension at the end of that business, and it is Government service."

"He is an outcaste—a *mlech*—a dog among dogs; an eater of carrion! What pension can pay for that?"

"Allah knows; and thou hast heard that the mischief is done. Wouldst thou blaze it to all the other servants? Make the *shadi* swiftly, and the girl will make him a Mussulman. He is very comely. Canst thou wonder that after thy beatings she went to him?"

"Did he say that he would chase me with his beasts?"

"So it seemed to me. If he be a wizard, he is at least a very strong one."

Abdul Gafur thought awhile, and then broke down and howled, forgetting that he was a Mussulman:

"Thou art a Brahmin. I am thy cow. Make thou the matter plain, and save my honour if it can be saved!"

A second time then Gisborne plunged into the *rukh* and called Mowgli. The answer came from high overhead, and in no submissive tones.

"Speak softly," said Gisborne, looking up. "There is yet time to strip thee of thy place and hunt thee with thy wolves. The girl must go back to her father's house tonight. Tomorrow there will be the *shadi*, by the Mussulman law, and then thou canst take her away. Bring her to Abdul Gafur."

"I hear." There was a murmur of two voices conferring among the leaves. "Also, we will obey—for the last time."

A year later Muller and Gisborne were riding through the *rukh* together, talking of their business. They came out among the rocks near the Kanye stream; Muller riding a little in advance. Under the shade of a thorn thicket sprawled a naked brown

baby, and from the brake immediately behind him peered the head of a gray wolf. Gisborne had just time to strike up Muller's rifle, and the bullet tore spattering through the branches above.

"Are you mad?" thundered Muller. "Look!"

"I see," said Gisborne quietly. "The mother's somewhere near. You'll wake the whole pack, by Jove!"

The bushes parted once more, and a woman unveiled snatched up the child.

"Who fired, Sahib?" she cried to Gisborne.

"This Sahib. He had not remembered thy man's people."

"Not remembered? But indeed it may be so, for we who live with them forget that they are strangers at all. Mowgli is down the stream catching fish. Does the Sahib wish to see him? Come out, ye lacking manners. Come out of the bushes, and make your service to the Sahibs."

Muller's eyes grew rounder and rounder. He swung himself off the plunging mare and dismounted, while the jungle gave up four wolves who fawned round Gisborne. The mother stood nursing her child and spurning them aside as they brushed against her bare feet.

"You were quite right about Mowgli," said Gisborne. "I meant to have told you, but I've got so used to these fellows in the last twelve months that it slipped my mind."

"Oh, don't apologise," said Muller. "It's nothing. Gott in Himmel! 'Und I work miracles—und dey come off too!'"

The Only Son

She dropped the bar, she shot the bolt, she fed the fire anew,
For she heard a whimper under the sill and a great gray paw came
through.

The fresh flame comforted the hut and shone on the roof-beam,
And the Only Son lay down again and dreamed that he dreamed a
dream.

The last ash fell from the withered log with the click of a falling
spark,

And the Only Son woke up again, and called across the dark:—

"Now was I born of womankind and laid in a mother's breast?

For I have dreamed of a shaggy hide whereon I went to rest.

And was I born of womankind and laid on a father's arm?

For I have dreamed of clashing teeth that guarded me from harm.

And was I born an Only Son and did I play alone?

For I have dreamed of comrades twain that bit me to the bone.

And did I break the barley-cake and steep it in the tyre?

For I have dreamed of a youngling kid new-riven from the byre:

For I have dreamed of a midnight sky and a midnight call to blood,

And red-mouthed shadows racing by, that thrust me from my food.

'Tis an hour yet and an hour yet to the rising of the moon,

But I can see the black roof-tree as plain as it were noon.

'Tis a league and a league to the Lena Falls where the trooping

blackbuck go,

But I can hear the little fawn that bleats behind the doe.