

WAYS OF THE VELD DWELLERS

by
H. W. D. LONGDEN, F.R.G.S.

*Being eight stories of wild animals and birds
of the African Bush*

*Pen-and-ink sketches by the author
and plates by*
ERNA PINNER

FREDERICK WARNE & CO. INC.
NEW YORK, N.Y.

~~FIRST~~ PUBLISHED 1938

*Made and Printed in Great Britain by
Hazell, Watson & Viney Ltd., London and Aylesbury*

Katete—the Tale of a Baby Rhino

I

KATETE (we will give him his name right away—the name that was bestowed upon him later) was born somewhere south of the mighty Zambezi where she separates the two Rhodesias. To his mother, Nema, the great black rhinoceros, he must have appeared the epitome of beauty and wonder as she gently nosed him at about five o'clock one morning when the mists hung in shroud-like drapery over the veld, cool, gloomy, and grey before they were dispersed by the sun's fierce rays. More like a pig he must have seemed to anyone else, helpless and hornless as he tottered on unsteady stumpy legs by his mother's side as she rested in a clump of thorn bushes and dense undergrowth.

Helpless, indeed, he was, quite dependent upon his mother and utterly incapable of protecting himself; consequently she rarely left him alone, but browsed serenely on the neighbouring trees. She used to hide him carefully before disappearing for a short while to drink at a muddy water-hole, churned and sullied by scores of feet of game who used the same place to slake their thirst in the mornings and evenings or during the blistering heat of the day.

It was a lonely spot, wooded and unfrequented by man, the nearest human habitation being a small native kraal not far from the Zambezi, some twenty-five miles distant.

When his gaunt, imposing mother was near, Katete had no one to fear, for neither lion nor leopard would dare to face the huge savage beast, so his time was spent in feeding and sleeping and making very short explorations of a few yards radius, and when he

KATETE—THE TALE OF A BABY RHINO

showed a tendency, like a naughty child, to wander farther, his mother would nudge him back once more to the thickets. When the noonday sun blazed down relentlessly he lay in some cool sheltered retreat. Rhinos, like elephants, are not fond of the burning sun, frequently seeking shelter at the base of some giant baobab tree, wearing the earth round the foot smooth and hard as they move round the huge friendly trunk to keep it between themselves and the sun.

II

He was nearly a year old when he received his first shock and discovered he was not the self-sufficient little beast he imagined himself. His foremost horn was beginning to make its appearance, a small roundish knob of compressed fibre, quite useless as a weapon either of offence or defence. By now he was able to roam farther afield on evening and morning excursions with his mother, learning the ways of the veld. It was the period of his early schooling, and some things he liked and others he did not. Gradually he became more venturesome, showing a propensity for short explorations on his own. His mother became quite agitated when one day, on returning from a drink and a short spell away from her offspring, she found he had disappeared. She snorted her disapproval and followed up his scent with her keen nose, and found the erring one some distance away, browsing quite contentedly alone.

She showed her resentment of his disobedience by butting him sharply in the ribs with her snout, driving him back home, while he emitted small puffs of piggish annoyance as he attempted to evade her. But there was no gainsaying her determination, and it was just as well she made her appearance when she did, for from a clump of bushes close by his infantile behaviour had been keenly watched by another—a wandering lion! Not daring to attack when

WAYS OF THE VELD DWELLERS

the great morose mother was present, he withdrew to await a more favourable opportunity. Very wisely he slunk back into the bushes to remain hidden, but the presence of the baby rhino set him thinking ; he could bide his time.

Therefore he remained in the vicinity during the heat of the day, calmly reconnoitring with the knowledge that sooner or later the grown animal would again leave her young while she went for a drink at the pool.

It was nearly evening when she did finally leave him, and she plugged her way through the bushes and along a tortuous game path to the water-hole. Cunningly the lion watched her retreat, then cautiously commenced to slink closer and closer, his yellow body blending with the grass, till presently he saw Katete, all unconscious of his peril, calmly resting beneath a tall tree.

Silently he gathered his great limbs, muscles taut—then rushed. Had his attack been true, this tale would never have been written and another tragedy of the veld would have been recorded in her annals. But Katete caught the strange scent, rose to his feet, and gazed suspiciously with short-sighted eyes in the direction of the hidden danger. An unknown fear gripped him. He snorted his terror, making a sound like a miniature steam-engine, and trotted round in a half-circle. It was then the lion charged, a short savage rush. Katete saw him and blundered frantically into the bushes, and, as luck would have it, straight in the direction from which Nema was peacefully returning. Just in the nick of time she was, but not soon enough to prevent him from being bowled over by the yellow avalanche. A great paw raked his left side, blazing a deep red gash. The sudden pain galvanised him into an activity he had never previously displayed, and he whipped to his feet. A few moments more and his fate would have been sealed.

But Nema heard the turmoil, paused a second, her ears upright,

KATETE—THE TALE OF A BABY RHINO

head raised, appearing like some huge primeval monster of ancient forests ; then through the bushes she crashed, tearing them aside as if they were so much straw, her small eyes alight with fury. The lion heard her not a fraction of a second too soon, and barely had time to avoid several tons of irresistible grey brute force. Lightly he bounded aside, snarling his disgust, ears flattened while a great head with its impaling horn viciously swept over his back. Had he been a trifle less agile, his body would have been tossed to the sky, pierced through and through, to fall with a thud and become a mangled mass of skin and flesh, trampled under huge feet, and gored out of all semblance of a lion. There was no time to dally and, vanquished, he leapt into the undergrowth, philosophically deciding that in future he would leave severely alone any baby rhino guarded by an infuriated mother.

But it taught Katete a lesson—that slash down his side left a deep grey scar which he carried throughout his lifetime. After that episode he showed more reluctance to explore on his own and no great desire to leave his mother's side. When night fell, the pair of rhinos left the pool and wandered on to a place many miles farther in the direction of the Zambezi.

III

During the ensuing year Katete grew apace ; though he was not old enough to leave his mother, he was able to accompany her without fatigue wherever she wandered through that lone stretch of country, the haunt of game, south of the Zambezi, through bush and open country, through forest and across rugged hills, till finally she found herself a trifle north of that range of half-kopjes and half-mountains, the Sijalila Hills, running some twenty-odd miles parallel to the great river on its south side.

WAYS OF THE VELD DWELLERS

A land of contrasts is Africa since she is a land of extremes. In summer the Sijalilas are clothed in rich raiment, but during the dry months before the summer rains the region is harsh, a blistered landscape of rocks and bushes, dry water-courses, and pools reluctant to part with their moisture to an ever-thirsty sun. And there one night the pair came to a small retiring water-hole in a shallow sandy water-course.

IV

It was then that the fates stepped into Katete's life and decided to alter his entire destiny. For man is ever greedy, ever hankering for something novel. Even the creatures of the wild, the birds and beasts and fishes in the sea, must be gathered from their wild free life to be transported many miles distant to strange lands, dank climates, and there inevitably die—that man, the ever enquiring, may glut his curiosity in comfort on “something new.”

But Nature is reluctant to part with her children, and man must suffer hardships—perhaps be killed—in the endeavours to snatch them from her. Yet there are men always willing to undertake the task. Some make it a pastime—they are the favoured rich ones, who travel in comfort with a retinue of followers, a hundred carriers with the amenities of civilisation brought with them. Then there are others—men to whom the routine of city life is a soul-destroying thing. They must live alone in the wilds, seldom heard of, but to them few secrets of the veld are unrevealed.

You will not find their likeness in the front pages of society papers, surrounded by crates of birds and beasts and reptiles. But sometimes you may open a paper and find an epitaph, a few curt lines relating how such a one was killed. Like a shooting-star, he has sprung into prominence for many careless eyes to read merely the tale of his passing. Perhaps the readers may pause a minute to

KATETE—THE TALE OF A BABY RHINO

ponder on the lives of men such as he. Then, like the shooting-star, he is forgotten.

But these are the men who keep the zoos well stocked. They travel alone but for a few trusty natives, bearing a small tent or piece of sail as a shelter, food-boxes ingeniously made from paraffin tins, and ropes and halters cut for service from the hides of wild game. Their battery is not the latest in modern weapons, for these are costly. Often it may be a serviceable second-hand small-calibre gun, since the owner, whose fingers have long ago worn the grip smooth, does not need a fieldpiece to bring some huge beast crashing to the earth. You will find him lean and tanned, clothed perhaps in khaki slacks and an old jacket, a pair of "veldschoen" boots, and slouch hat drawn over keen eyes. Perhaps he may be nearer sixty than forty, but his endurance will more than tax many a younger man. Such was M——, who for thirty years had been a trapper of dangerous beasts.

It happened some years ago that he contracted to capture a trio of baby rhinos. To him it meant little more than catching a trio of domestic pigs. He had long ceased to regard game-capturing as an adventure, and looked upon it merely as a job to be done—and one that he had already accomplished successfully for many years. His one-time charges will be found in zoological gardens scattered over the face of the globe, from Melbourne to London, from Buenos Aires to New York, Paris or Berlin, but his name is known to but a few.

V

It was late in the year when he set out, when a reluctant rainy season refused to drench the earth, when the sun pressed the barometer to a hundred and twenty in the shade, and dazzling

WAYS OF THE VELD DWELLERS

heat-waves only died with the setting of the sun, when trees were parched and stones fiery to the touch.

His first object when he made camp in the Zambezi Valley was to locate the habitats of rhino cows. Therefore he despatched several of his " boys " to discover where such could be found with youngsters about two years old or so—not too young to be taken from their mothers, not too old to be unmanageable or too big to be transported. And the land stretched round many hundreds of square miles—to many it would have seemed an almost impossible task to accomplish in the limited time at his disposal before the heavy rains set in and made the country a quagmire and the rivers roaring torrents.

But two days later the messengers returned with the necessary information. Far out in the bushes, unseen and unknown, were two rhino mothers with young. One lived by a spruit near some hills, but the calf was a trifle too big. But the calf of the other was nearly two years old, with a tiny stump horn, and he lived with his parent near a muddy pool by the Sijalila Hills. His range was more restricted, since he was still young, but his mother was huge and powerful—so the black men read the spoor in the hot sand. In the noonday sun she took shelter, usually where some tall baobab trees arrogantly reared above the scrub of lesser trees and thorn. This little one was Katete.

VI

About three o'clock on the following morning M—— left his camp with the two trackers who had traced Katete to his home. An unclouded moon cast her clear white beams over a hushed veld, where tall trees and grey grass rustled in gentle protest at the passage of human feet as the men set off in the direction of the pool, some score of miles away.

KATETE—THE TALE OF A BABY RHINO

Six natives followed in the rear with “camp” on their heads, since events could not be forecast, and M—— knew it was better to have his equipment with him than to trudge many weary miles back. It was five hours later, long after the sun had risen, that the party reached the muddy water-hole. Only that morning, in the sombre cool of the bush, Katete and his great grey mother had drunk their fill and then bathed in a small mud wallow where water seeped through the dry earth from some subterranean stream which rose to the barren surface and then disappeared once more to the unfathomed earth below.

Since water was scarce, the men rested in the shade of some trees until “camp” arrived, smoking to keep away the irritating tiny “mopani” flies that persisted in clustering around the corners of their eyes. Camp was pitched close by some trees which bravely refused to wither away, forming an alleviating shade, and tackle was prepared for the task that was at hand. Halters were coiled, specially constructed head-collars were overhauled, “riems”—ropes made from game hides—were tested, and then off they set once more : but now following the tracks in the sand.

For several more hours they continued along the spoor, that twisted through bushes where broken branches and chewed twigs bore silent witness, treacherously giving away their secrets, or through sandy patches that hid but little. Now and then, as if repenting, the hard earth endeavoured to retain its mysteries, but the black human bloodhounds and the well-versed white man deciphered the puzzle. To the uninitiated the tracks would soon have been lost, or, mingling with old spoor, would have formed but a bewildering maze of footprints that crossed and intermingled, leading nowhere.

It was nigh on midday, when shirts had become clinging damp cloths and perspiration rolled down black skin and white alike, that

WAYS OF THE VELD DWELLERS

the men gradually overtook the unsuspecting rhinos. Now and then the beasts had paused to browse and rest, and then continued a steady course to a place where baobabs looked down upon a tangle of thorns. There Nema had made a detour downwind and then a half-circle back through the thick growth to the worn base round a selected tree. By so doing she knew that any pursuer keeping to her spoor would soon be scented before he came in sight, and then all that would be heard by the disappointed hunter would be a crash of broken twigs and thudding of heavy feet.

But she was not to know that super-trackers were grimly following her. Here M—— felt pretty confident that the rhinos had eventually decided to rest up for the day. He called a halt and rested a few minutes, testing the wind, and listened for the chirrup of the wary rhino bird, that accompanies its uncouth companions. But the veld kept silence—no kindly puff of wind brought a taint to drowsing beasts, and the rhino bird rested heedless; only the drone of cicadas broke the stillness of the bush.

But M—— knew it would be fatal to his project to follow the spoor any longer, so before it turned downwind he decided to cut straight through the bush, keeping as a guide the tall sentinel baobab tree. Very cautiously the men trod, making no disturbance and placing each foot down with the quietness that comes from constant practice, till the mighty tree stood not forty yards away, but the quarry were still unsighted.

Suddenly a rhino bird chirruped a warning. Peering ahead, M—— saw Katete and his mother, standing motionless as dull grey termite hillocks. Slowly Nema turned her ponderous head from side to side to listen, ears erect, debating in her dull mind the best course to take. If she decided to bolt, M—— knew she would travel many miles before she settled down again, and he could afford to take no chances. Suddenly Nema wheeled to crash away in



"But before she could gather speed a bullet struck her shoulder. It shook her but failed to bring her down."

KATETE—THE TALE OF A BABY RHINO

precipitous flight, but before she could gather speed a bullet struck her in the shoulder. It shook her, but failed to bring her down. She wobbled a moment, pawed the ground, scattering earth and twigs, then, whipping round, blundered furiously down her tracks in vicious search for her assailant. But it was too late. She pitched forward as another shot rang out—then silence once more, broken only by the sound of lesser snorts as Katete, puzzled and bewildered, turned and gazed in the direction of the man who, in response to a commission from many thousands of miles away, had come to bring him shackled to his doom. His freedom was fast slipping away and another unknown chapter lay before him.

But Katete was no coward as he stood at bay by the great silent carcass of his mother. Up went his head, and then, snorting puffs of rage, active as a bush-pig, he charged his enemies, scattering them or forcing them to safety up the trees. Sometimes he came so close that a stumble would have brought the not inconsiderable weight of a young rhino into the small of a man's back, to snap it as easily as a stick. Time and again he would trot back, thwarted, to make his stand, once more defying his enemies to drop the fatal noose over his head.

But perhaps in his slow brain he gradually realised the futility of it all. He could not defend all sides at once, and the men were closing in. Suddenly he turned and stampeded off into the bush, deviating momentarily to hustle an agile black figure that eluded him in the nick of time. Then away he bolted as fast as his sturdy stumpy legs would carry him and M—— and his followers stood listening in the mocking silence of the bush.

VII

But Katete was still young, and M—— knew it. Brave as the baby rhino's defence had been, a time would come when he would

WAYS OF THE VELD DWELLERS

feel lonely, when the darkness would close round him and he would miss the great staunch battleship form that had guarded him through two years of peril, through his babyhood, to the day when the lion had scarred his flanks, even until now, when, at length, she had been defeated.

Katete still feared the unknown, and he missed his mother sorely. The moon was high in the starry heavens when he overcame his terror and cautiously sniffed his way unerringly through the bush till he came to the vast hulk that glistened in the moonlight. The taint of man was still heavy in the air, and he hesitated—but also he was lonely. For some minutes he stood, nose raised—listening ; but the only sound that reached him was the whine of a jackal and the chuckle of a night bird. How could he tell that scarce a quarter of a mile away, by a tiny fire, lay human beings, also listening—listening?

Then, casting discretion aside, he strode forward boldly. His mother must be asleep, but even at rest he knew he could always rely on her. He walked round and touched her with his nose, and at that moment his right forefoot sank into a small circular pit, cunningly covered, a tough rope closed round his leg, a sapling that had been held down by a trigger sprang upright, and he was trapped.

The men back in the bushes, hearing his stormy protests, came hurrying up, and though Katete struggled and snorted and fought that night under a cold moon, for the first time in his life he felt the touch of human hands. He was fortunate in his ignorance that he would see the boundless veld for only a little longer. Perhaps there is kindness as well as method in Nature's seeming madness in giving some of her children a limited intelligence and a short-lived memory.

Until dawn he remained, held for the first time by halters arranged to prevent him from damaging himself, since he persisted

KATETE—THE TALE OF A BABY RHINO

in blind futile struggles, with none of the resignation that a more intelligent animal would have exhibited.

VIII

Next morning brought its problems, for the only water was near the camp by Katete's one-time drinking-pool. Actually it was only a few miles distant, for the course the two rhinos had taken the previous day, long in itself, was really only a comparatively short distance away in a direct line. But to move a virile baby rhino weighing several hundredweights in a direction he had not the slightest intention of taking was no easy matter. The only interest he displayed was in his captors, and he made no pretence about his intense dislike of them. He fought and strained in his endeavours to get loose and pin at least one of them to the ground. If Katete had been a young elephant it would have been a far more simple thing, since an elephant is infinitely more intelligent and tractable. But Katete belonged to a species noted, at least, for a peculiar temperament.

Finally M—— decided on the only practical course, and Katete's hatred of his captors was to be the basis of the method whereby he would unwittingly be made to do exactly what M—— desired. To one of his hind legs a strong riem was attached, the other end being held by a couple of stalwart natives, who had been summoned from the camp. They were to act as brakes. Then another riem was attached to his head-collar and the end passed to a third native. He was to be the decoy. And so Katete's ingrained pugnacity was used against himself, for every time he charged the decoy, the brakes firmly took the strain, and so gradually he came nearer and nearer his captivity.

Sometimes the brakes nearly gave way; then a raging baby rhino was all but precipitously deposited in the ribs of the decoy, whose

WAYS OF THE VELD DWELLERS

fluency of language and exhibition of lightness of limb became quite out of keeping with his usual demeanour! So the strange procession proceeded through the veld on a zigzag, tacking course, so that by the time their goal was reached everyone was glad of a rest. Even Katete, with his abundant vitality, was weary as he lay down, securely tied, in the shade of a tree.

IX

The next task was nursing, and a young rhino needs constant care in its first stages of captivity. He had to be kept from the sun, and since he could no longer seek his own shade, it had to be adequately provided. Moreover, it was necessary for him to be given the kind of leaves he was accustomed to in his wild state, water to drink, and an occasional sousing to keep him cool, since he could no longer indulge in a mud wallow.

To augment his food he was given a meal of gruel administered from a large bottle, in the side of which a hole had been drilled. By keeping a finger over the hole and occasionally removing it, both the entry of air and the flow of food could be controlled. But feeding a human baby is child's play compared with feeding a perverse young rhino who was quite capable of causing a casualty in the nursery!

He had to be forcibly fed, and it required three nurses to insert the neck of the bottle into his mouth, and when finally he realised that it really was food he was being given, he swallowed the contents of four large bottles at one meal. As this procedure had to be repeated at regular intervals, sometimes in the early hours of the morning, Katete was far from being a model child.

To protect him from the sun a small strong hut made of poles was built, with a half-door, too high for him to see over, but allowing

KATETE—THE TALE OF A BABY RHINO

easy passage for a nurse should he be forced to make a hasty exit. To facilitate operations a loose halter remained attached to his head-collar, so, by inserting a hand through the pole walls, the end could be grasped and Katete held securely from outside, while others could then freely enter. But Katete never could be made to realise that these operations were for his benefit, and he seldom failed to stub his nose against the walls of his enclosure in an effort to get at his captors. It must have caused him some sort of satisfaction when one day he managed to pin a hand of one of his black nurses against the poles of his shelter and break two fingers.

However, as the days passed when M—— was away in search of another baby rhino, Katete became more tame and began to take some interest in his new surroundings. No better watch-dog ever guarded a camp. No matter the hour of day or night, should some strange scent drift to his nose, or a peculiar sound strike his ears, he would be on the alert. Should he be lying down, he would jump to his feet, puff like a little engine, and charge the walls of his hut. And Katete was never wrong. Perhaps a few minutes later some stray natives would appear through the trees, and he would go into transports of fury till they passed to the leeward and the obnoxious scent no longer troubled him. Occasionally in the middle of the night M—— would be disturbed after a hard day by the snorts of his young charge. Perhaps it was a prowling lion or leopard or a hyena seeking scraps, but whatever it was, only Katete was certain, and the prowler, realising that he had awakened a rhino, discreetly moved away.

X

Later on he became more accustomed to being handled, and his meal-times were attended with less discomfort to all parties. His temper was always uncertain, but M—— discovered there was one

WAYS OF THE VELD DWELLERS

thing he definitely enjoyed, and that was a back-scratch with a stick, and the bigger and thicker the stick and the more vigour with which it was applied, the more Katete seemed to enjoy it, usually standing quite still with every sign of obvious enjoyment at the rough tickling. It rarely failed to achieve its object in calming his tempestuous outbursts of rage when anything annoyed him.

When he became more manageable he was allowed outside, tied to a tree, where he would laze, apparently quite content and resigned to his new life. Perhaps he began to enjoy it, with plenty to eat and no worries, for he soon lost the slight leanness which he had shown during the first week of his capture. Like most young creatures, he would have his outbreaks of animal spirits, as if he would dearly love a gambol. But as his idea of fun was of the most robust type, liberties could not be taken. On one occasion he caught one of the "boys" just as the unfortunate individual was bending down to remove a thorn from under his foot. As Katete never learned to exercise restraint, the blow, treacherously delivered from behind, stretched the native flat on his face, and it was noticeable that for several days his movements were even more lethargic than those of the average native!

XI

A few weeks later M—— made another capture and a second young rhino joined the party. Katete instantly recognised one of his own species, and the pair were soon happy in each other's company. The new-comer proved far more docile, perhaps because he was not lonely, and since Katete apparently did not particularly object to the presence of the queer two-legged creatures, the new arrival soon gained confidence.

Shortly afterwards M—— realised that the rains showed signs of

KATETE—THE TALE OF A BABY RHINO

putting in a belated appearance and it was time to move. A couple of large wooden crates were constructed, and Katete and his companion were borne on the backs of the natives to the Zambezi; then followed a canoe crossing, and so by stages they drew nearer to civilisation. Soon the young rhinos became so tame that they needed neither hut nor tethering riem, but could be allowed to wander loose. Finally Katete became so docile, indeed, that he would allow children to sit astride his broad back.

Not long afterwards he made his first train journey, and then a long sea trip. To-day he is in a Zoo, and a hundred thousand faces have passed before his eyes as he stands behind a railing receiving tit-bits from visitors. If only anyone knew it, a child could ride him barebacked, and if he could speak he would ask them to scratch his back with a stick.

The walk within the railings is no doubt worn smooth by heavy feet, as he has covered many miles within that small area, worn smooth as the base round a baobab tree. No doubt all memories of his veld life have long since faded, and he is probably quite happy. Should you ever visit that Zoo, you will recognise Katete by a grey scar down his left flank, a relic of his former life, free and unfettered in the wilderness by the Sijalila Hills.

