

THE
LIFE OF
Joseph Wolf

ANIMAL PAINTER

By A. H. Palmer
(Author of *The Life of Samuel Palmer*)

ILLUSTRATED.

"WE SEE DISTINCTLY ONLY WHAT WE KNOW THOROUGHLY."

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Madagascar animals, an auto-lithograph illustrating an article by Mr. Sclater in the first volume of *The Quarterly Journal of Science*. A careful life-size chalk sketch of the Aye Aye after death, which the artist kindly gave me, is perhaps even more interesting than the other representations.

The last of Wolf's drawings to be found in *The Transactions* (lithographed by Mr. Smit), were from life, and are accompanied by a paper "On the Rhinoceroses now or lately living in the Society's Menagerie" by Mr. Sclater, who says, "The main object of my remarks on the present occasion is to illustrate the very beautiful drawings by Mr. Wolf now before us." The first of these represents *Rhinoceros unicornis*:—

"Of this huge animal the first specimen obtained by the Society was a male purchased on the 28th of May, 1834, from Captain Fergusson for the sum of £1050. . . . It died in November 1849 and was dissected by Professor Owen. . . . The second male was got in exchange for an African elephant from the Jardin des Plantes in 1865 and was the original of the water-colour drawing taken by Mr. Wolf in 1872. He is of enormous size, and measures about 5' 3" in height at the shoulder and 10' 6" in length along the back from the top of the nose to the root of the tail."

Of his drawing of the Black Rhinoceros Wolf says, "I had secured one day's work; and, on coming next day, to my great astonishment I found the animal really black. They had oiled him all over! Luckily I had got most of the colouring the previous day."

The last of the four drawings is a portrait of one

of the most interesting sitters which Wolf ever had—a female *R. lasiotis*; and it was executed in 1872, from the only specimen then known. Mr. Selater quotes from a Calcutta newspaper an account of her capture. Found in a quicksand completely exhausted with her efforts to escape, she was dragged out by some two hundred men, by means of ropes made fast to her neck, and was then tied to a tree. Next morning the now vigorous Rhinoceros made such efforts to escape that her captors were frightened, and sent for help. Accordingly a Captain Hood and another started with eight Elephants, and after a march of sixteen hours came up with the animal. She proved to be rather more than four feet high, with a smooth skin like a pig, and two horns; and she proved also to be a tartar. After a general stampede of the terrified Elephants, a rope was with difficulty made fast to the Rhinoceros's hind leg, and secured to one of them. At this juncture she roared, and the whole of the Elephants fled once more, the noose, fortunately, slipping. She was, however, eventually secured between them, and began her march to Chittagong. Two large rivers had to be crossed, over which the Rhinoceros was towed between Elephants, for she could not swim, and could only just keep her head above water by paddling like a pig. Thousands of natives thronged the march in; the temporary bamboo bridges invariably falling in with the crowds which collected upon them to watch the Rhinoceros crossing

the stream below. Arrived at the end of her journey effectually tamed, the captive was freed in an enclosure; soon fed from the hand, and might have been led about by a string.

The Council of The Society, after some unsuccessful negotiations, purchased the animal on its arrival in England, for 1250*l.*; and as it was ultimately found to be a distinct variety, it was named *R. lasiotis*, from the fringe of long hairs on the edges of its ears.

It was not for many years that Wolf was asked to draw another Rhinoceros; and then the request came from so eminent a hunter that there must have been a strong reason for declining. "I was asked," says the artist, "to draw an almost extinct animal, the White African Rhinoceros. The man who asked me said that the only difference between that species and other Rhinoceroses was that it had a mouth like a cow—a broad muzzle; whilst the others had overhanging, pointed lips. But I was sure that the animal must have had other distinctions in the body, which were not noticed, and in which the difference was more striking. I declined to do it because I did not know enough about the animal."

Similar in size and treatment to his auto-lithographs in *The Proceedings*, Wolf's contributions to *The Ibis* range from the first number in 1859, to 1869, and include some seventy-five drawings of new or rare species.

Illustrating a paper by Messrs. A. and E. Newton

author, so that he enjoyed the work. Indeed, so good were his opportunities, that on one occasion the traveller actually crawled upon the studio floor with his rifle, that some sketches might be made quite truthful in detail, for his figure in "Unwelcome Hunting Companions."

Among the most interesting illustrations are the furious charge of a Black Rhinoceros, a night scene; and a perfect contrast to this is a group of browsing Koodoos.¹ But perhaps the best of these striking pictures of African wild animals is that representing the approach of a herd of thirsty Elephants to a pool already thronged with other game:—

"The accompanying plate," says the author, "represents one of those numerous and exciting scenes that I have witnessed at night, at the water, when lying in ambush for game. There is one fact—a fact that has hitherto escaped the attention of the African sportsman—connected with this illustration that makes it particularly interesting, and which induced me to designate it 'The Approach of Elephants.' The animals are just appearing above the distant hill. If the spring or pool, as the case may be, be of small extent, all the animals present will invariably retire from the water as soon as they are aware of the presence of the elephants, of whom they appear to have an instinctive dread, and will remain at a respectful distance until the giants have quenched their thirst. Thus, long before I have seen or even heard the elephants, I have been warned of their approach by symptoms of uneasiness displayed by

¹ Koodoos by a pool in the evening, with a few Zebras, form the subject of a charming composition painted in water-colour for one of the artist's many kindly and appreciative sportsman friends, who writes to him as follows: "Mr. — is very much taken with the drawing and told me he tried in vain to find faults, and congratulated me on being the happy possessor of 'the only good picture of the most beautiful animal in the world;' which I quite endorse."

“such animals as happened to be drinking at the time. The giraffe, for instance, begins to sway his long neck to and fro; the zebra utters subdued, plaintive cries; the gnou glides away with a noiseless step; and even the ponderous and quarrelsome black rhinoceros, when he has time for reflection, will pull up short in his walk to listen; then, turning round, he listens again, and if he feel satisfied that his suspicions are correct, he invariably makes off, usually giving vent to his fear or ire by one of his vicious and peculiar snorts.”

The subject is one after Wolf's own heart; who, always fond of night scenes or twilight, must have entered enthusiastically into the pleasure of depicting such a romantic episode.

There is a passage or two in *Tropical South Africa* by Galton, Andersson's companion, dealing with nocturnal sport, which so happily and exactly suggest the kind of nocturnal subjects Wolf would have loved to design, had he come across them, that I will quote them:—

“It is one of the most strangely exciting positions that a sportsman can find himself in, to lie behind one of these screens or holes by the side of a path leading to a watering place so thronged with game as Tunobis. Herds of gnus glide along the neighbouring paths in almost endless files: here standing out in bold relief against the sky, there a moving line, just visible in the deep shades; and all as noiseless as a dream. Now and then a slight pattering over the stones makes you start. It jars painfully on the strained ear, and a troop of zebras pass frolicking by. All at once you observe twenty or thirty yards off, two huge ears pricked up among the brushwood; another few seconds and a sharp solid horn indicates the cautious and noiseless approach of the great rhinoceros. Then the rifle or gun is pushed slowly over the wall . . . and you keep a sharp and anxious look out through some cranny in your screen. . . .”

"A rhinoceros is a sulky, morose brute, and it is very ridiculous to watch a sedate herd of gnus bullied by one of them. He runs among them and pokes about with his horn while they scamper and scurry away from him in great alarm. He surely must often kill them.

"For my own taste I should like to spend nights perched up in some tree with a powerful night glass watching these night frolics and attacks. I really do not much care about shooting the animals, though it makes a consummation to the night work, as the death of the fox does to a fox hunt, but it is the least pleasurable part of the whole. Great fun seems to go on among the different animals; jackals are always seen and are always amusing; their impudence is intolerable; they know that you do not want to shoot them; and will often sit in front of your screen and stare you in the face. Sometimes, whilst straining your eyes at the dimly seen bushes around you, the branched stem of one gradually forms itself into the graceful head of some small antelope. The change is like that of a dissolving view, the object being under your notice for a minute, yet you could not tell when it ceased to be a bush and became an animal. . . ."

When I read these passages to Wolf he said, "Simply *splendid!* I have had the same sensation watching for deer just before the morning twilight. You hear the click, click, click, of the hoofs, gradually approaching, or passing by, just as the case may be, until the deer gets your wind and stands still. It is curious how they will stand at night even close to a road, perfectly still, and relying on not being seen. They come very near before you see well enough to shoot, and then you try to get the broadside, and fire with your heart in your mouth, for fear of missing."

Wolf did not always find authors so pleasant and

that I have known a child of nine greet it as the original.

Partaking in some degree of the same qualities as those of "An African Serenade," and thrilling as well as delighting the mind, "Night Shooting" takes its place among the smallest and the best of Wolf's auto-lithographs. A Rhinoceros has already dropped in its tracks to the hunter's rifle on the margin of the pool; besides one or two other dimly seen animals. A huge Lion comes prowling round them, and, shot through the heart, vaults, with a great roar, high into the air, where he is seen against a faintly luminous sky. I have had this little lithograph hanging up, amongst works of other veteran artists, for several years; and it seems to me (like all Wolf's works on my walls), to gain in beauty and suggestiveness literally every day. Some people who have seen it have remarked on the improbability of the greatness of the leap (forgetting the very low horizon), and a few have been touched by the singular poetry of the subject.

In the two designs I have just described (and in many others), the artist proves himself as notable a master of the Indefinite, and the glamour that lurks in the Indefinite, as, in other works, he shows an equal power over the Definite, even to the verge of photographic minuteness. A third design is noteworthy as being the idealization of an African river-scene and as showing how Wolf will sometimes give his imagination plenty of rein. The myriads of Flamingoes which

assumed grand proportions, and the others were not far behind. At last the subject given out for the next "composition" was "Farewell to Hanway Street," and Wolf's version represented one of the members, Dr. Strübing, grave and spectacled, with a fine large umbrella under his arm, turning out the gas for the last time.

Having thus outgrown the old room, the Society migrated to permanent quarters in Mortimer Street, where the monthly "Composition" evenings soon rivalled those devoted to music. The subjects were often suggested by a lover of antithesis, which in some cases appears to have presented no difficulties to Wolf, though in others it forced him to design two separate subjects, as in the case of "Prosperity and Adversity." To bring these into contrast, he painted companion water-colours. In the first, two Goldfinches are shown in the midst of an abundance of hemp-seed, vigorously quarrelling. In the second, hunger and cold have settled their grievances, and they sit close together on a dead thistle, while the snow falls around them. Sometimes, says Wolf, the subjects were so foggy that the artists could make nothing of them. It was otherwise with "Strength and Weakness," which he brings into striking contrast by a playful fight between two huge Rhinoceroses in the jungle, close to an Indian Axis Deer, and two tiny fawns in the foreground. "Tame and Wild" shows a fight in earnest. A bull Buffalo, roaming across the prairie

ment of colour and light and shade should be carefully thought out in the first instance. He thinks also (as other intellectual artists have done), that a picture should be a homogeneous creation of the intellect and the imagination ; not a more or less fortuitous selection of facts patched and pieced together, partly out of doors, partly in the studio, with a dash of photography and a rummage in the property-box. This being his belief, he has escaped those incongruities of perspective and light and shade which are often found in works of the opposite kind, beautiful though they may be with a rule-of-thumb beauty.

"I find," says my guest, speaking low for the sake of an inquisitive Moorhen a few yards away, "that the "landscape studies I have done will never form a "proper background or foreground, and I have always "to modify and adapt them. When you see a nice "thing in nature, you sit down and make a study ; and "when it is finished there is no room left for any animal "which you had intended to put in. It is a composi- "tion in itself. As a rule I find that everything has to "be simplified. If you want to do justice to your "principal animal or figure, you ought to put the back- "ground, as it were, out of focus. According to the "figure of the animal which forms the principal object "in the picture, you must avoid getting into your "accessories similar forms and objects of the same "degree of solidity. For instance, in 'Strength and "Weakness' [Rhinoceroses and Indian Axis Deer]

"I avoided anything in the shape of a tree-trunk or
"rock—anything which would rival the solidity of
"the Rhinoceroses. Instead of that, I chose loose,
"feathery stuff, and bamboo with elegant willow-like
"leaves. . . . In doing birds—simply a bird on a twig,¹
"I always used to avoid getting the same size of leaf as
"the bird, or the same shape. The fact is that ninety-
"nine per cent. of what you see in nature is of no use
"to you, and should be avoided." He learned com-
position, he says, by illustrating. "The thing has to
"be finished by a certain time, and you go far more
"free and easy to work than in the case of a commis-
"sion." He disliked illustrations so arranged that the
book had to be turned round to look at them, and so
he gradually got into the way of composing, and I think
preferring, upright subjects.

He says, "Excessive knowledge of detail hampers
"me very often in doing things picturesquely, and in
"trying to work broadly. It has a tendency to inter-
"fere very often in art. For instance, in the case of
"Hippopotami, I know very well that they come up
"with hardly a ripple—yet everybody thinks there
"would be a great commotion in the water. It is
"far more difficult to get breadth in a composition
"when you are hampered by detail, than if you
"do not know the detail, and slur it over." The trouble-
some nature of excessive knowledge of detail is one

¹ Wolf's "bird on a twig" is often a perfect paragon of skilful arrange-
ment and grace.

reason why he likes nocturnal subjects. "My preference for night scenes is due to there being more poetry about them than when everything is seen clearly. At night the detail disappears altogether. An ugly animal, particularly, like a Wild Boar, makes a far better picture by moonlight." He even avoids representing a clear moon in a picture, and prefers a clouded one; and for the same reason, he has preferred northern subjects (such as Scandinavian) to Oriental. He once made a water-colour landscape study of a Wild Boar by moonlight¹ for his friend Mr. Carl Haag, whose natural bent, he says, is to prefer things clear and sharp as seen in the East by daylight. He omitted the eyes which, save for a glint or two, as he had proved, could not be seen by moonlight. He had, however, considerable difficulty to convince his friend that he was right. "It is of great importance to know what to leave out in nocturnal subjects."

Light and shade, he thinks, are quite as important as local colour. "In my case I cannot choose the local colour of the creatures. They have their own, and I am tied to that; and in order to make that local colour tell I have to introduce as near as possible the complementary colour in the accessories. I want to be truthful in colour as well as in drawing; and when I do a picture I am tied down by the local colour, and cannot put in the combination as well as I would

¹ "A Midnight Ramble."