

# The Wildest Game

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as told to DANIEL P. MANNIX

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY  
*Philadelphia & New York*

Today, there are only three men, besides myself, who handle large shipments of animals. Of these, two are over seventy. When they retire, I doubt if anyone will take their place. Animal collecting is becoming too difficult. Still, I am glad to have partaken in the great elephant keddahs in the foothills of the Himalayas, the wild pursuits after rhinos across the African veldt, and the capture of rheas with bolos by Argentine cowboys on the pampas. It has been a great period and I am happy to have seen it.

## Chapter I

### One of the world's rarest animals

SHAIK SUBRATI is the only man I've ever known who could identify a rhino simply by drinking a glass of its urine. He would sniff the full glass as though savoring a fine wine, drain it, smack his lips and then announce with confidence, "Ah, that was Joymothi. She's in very good shape today."

Subrati was the best animal man and jungle craftsman to work for me in my years of collecting wild game. Without him, I'd never have gotten the almost legendary Indian rhinoceros . . . possibly the inspiration for the mythical unicorn. And I shudder to think what would have happened had we failed in that lunatic venture. For suddenly and without warning I'd found myself stuck down one of those blind alleys that seem to booby-trap the animal business. My career seemed finished, my prospects nil, my immediate future grim indeed.

It was in 1950. I was collecting animals in Siam (now Thailand, but I still like to call it Siam) with Mercia, the exquisitely lovely Eurasian girl I'd married a few months before. We had a nice lot of specimens, including six black leopards, four tigers, several dozen gibbons, hundreds of small birds and twenty good-sized king cobras. It was Mercia's first experience at animal trap-

ping and she had brought thirty-four trunks full of fashionable clothes. At first she even insisted on wearing high-heeled shoes which are hardly practical for jungle work, but she was learning and after the first couple of weeks changed to a sarong and sandals. Mercia was particularly good with baby animals and I had great hopes for her.

Our headquarters was a small village named Suratthani in southern Siam which we had selected because it was only twenty miles from a telegraph office. Late one afternoon, a telegram arrived from my old friend Theo Meier. He was in Bangkok, passing through on his way from Europe to Bali, and he wanted me to have a drink with him.

Theo had once taken me in and nursed me back to health when I was dead broke and discouraged. This was the first time in thirteen years that he had left Bali and as I doubted I would be returning to the island I might not see him again for an elephant's age. I left Mercia in charge of the animals and rented a sampan to take me across the river to the railroad station.

I was worried about Mercia. She was very good with leopards and tigers, but I didn't altogether trust her to take proper care of the cobras. Mercia was nervous with snakes. Unfortunately, Subrati was off on a trapping expedition but as I planned on being away only a couple of days, I was sure Mercia could handle matters until I returned.

There were no seats on the train, so I sat on some boxes between two carriages. I arrived in Bangkok somewhat dirty and tired at noon the next day. I was still wearing my jungle clothes, sandals and a stained pair of old khaki drills, having had no time to change. I went at once to the swimming club where Theo had said he'd meet me. Sure enough, there he was, a short, dark man looking almost Oriental after his many years in the Far East. He too was wearing sandals and a brilliant Balinese blouse of his own design.

"Peter, my old friend!" he shouted in a voice that could be heard halfway to the Floating Market. "Come and have a glass

of this mekong! It's nearly as good as the tuak we used to drink in Bali."

We embraced and had the mekong. It tasted a little like gin laced with sulfuric acid and the effects were almost immediate. Afterwards, Theo took me to a European bar where you could get real Danish beer and then we went to a native restaurant for *namprik*—a paste of shrimp and rice, seasoned with limes. We ended back at the swimming club drinking gimlets and eating coriander leaves mixed with fried, hair-fine spaghetti, shrimp and limes.

We had much to talk over; my animal trapping adventures, an exhibition of modernistic art Theo had seen in Paris (he is a skilled painter himself, somewhat in the Gauguin manner), the communist situation in Malaya, a collection of West-Coast-African ivory carvings I had made and was hoping to sell in New York, whether the scrap left over from the war on some of the Pacific islands was reclaimable, and a new religious sect that was springing up in the Celebes started by an old witch doctor who could apparently call butterflies to him by an act of will. At two o'clock in the morning, we still hadn't talked ourselves out but the bar was closing and I remembered that I had no hotel accommodations.

"Think nothing of it," said Theo when I wondered aloud about where I would sleep. "Spend the night with me. I'm at the Palace."

I thought I knew every hotel in Bangkok but this one had escaped me. Theo roared with laughter when I said so.

"It's not a hotel, you ninny. I mean the royal palace. I'm staying with Prince Rangsit."

"I have no decent clothes," I protested.

"Neither have I. The Prince won't mind. You'll like him. Let's have another drink before the bar closes and we'll go. What about some champagne this time? I'm tired of gimlets. Waiter, *Veuve Cliquot*, '47, and two fresh glasses."

We had to finish the champagne in a taxi en route to the palace as the bar closed before we'd emptied the second bottle.

The palace was a huge, rambling white building, partly European and partly Oriental in architecture. When we got out under a gigantic porte-cochère servants in brilliant blue and white livery prostrated themselves. I like to see well-trained servants. Theo led the way inside.

We went through room after room, walking on Persian carpets so thick we seemed to be ankle deep on clouds. Theo went so fast I didn't have time to see much, but I noticed on the tables some brass Buddha heads that must have been 2,000 years old and are the most valuable of Siamese antiques. They come from remote temples and by Siamese law cannot be exported, although some are smuggled out of the country. Theo took me to our quarters where the servants helped us undress. No amount of liquor ever has any effect on Theo but I needed help. There was a magnificent tiled bathroom, imported from the United States, with yards of shiny chrome faucets but instead of a shower there was a china vase full of water in the bathtub with a dipper beside it so I was able to dip the water over myself Siamese fashion. After the servants had withdrawn, Theo and I lay on our beds naked as neither of us had pajamas and talked until dawn before falling asleep.

When I awakened, it was late afternoon. A slender, dark man, completely naked, was standing by the bed regarding me somewhat curiously. He had obviously come in to use the bath and found me there.

"Savadee—greetings," I said.

From the next bed, Theo roared, "Get up, you fool. That's Prince Rangsit. Don't lie in bed when you're talking to a prince."

I sprang up and the Prince and I shook hands. As we were both nude, I felt somewhat embarrassed but the Prince didn't care. He asked if I'd enjoyed my sleep, invited both of us to dinner to meet his father, the regent, and then disappeared into the bathroom.

Theo told me that the Prince was a great sportsman and an excellent businessman. Instead of lounging in his palace as do

many Oriental rulers, he had worked hard building a large trading company and made a fortune. He was a keen shikari (hunter) but the demands of his business limited his hunting trips.

We had dinner that evening in the great dining hall. Each of us had three of the liveried servants standing behind his chair and a little lamp by his plate as the lights in the room were purposely kept dim. The Prince's father was a very old man, dressed in Western clothes. He was also the King's uncle and regent. The King was a young man finishing his education in Europe and was the grandson of King Mongkut, the sovereign of *Anna and the King of Siam*.

The old regent's mind was obviously still clear and sharp, and he could drink and smoke as much as we younger men. I am sorry to say that two weeks after our meal, the old gentleman died. He was certainly gracious to put up with two wandering Europeans in sandals and ragged clothes at his table.

Dinner was finished and we sat back to enjoy our cognac and Havana cigars. The cigars were the best I'd ever smoked, with a rich, potent flavor, but mild. Prince Rangsit explained that he had them made up especially for him in Cuba. The regent was chatting with Theo about the care and breeding of fighting crickets and I felt perfectly happy and relaxed.

The regent reached for his cognac glass and said casually to me, "Oh, by the way, I just signed a bill that will affect you. All shipments of wild animals from Siam are forbidden." Then he continued his talk with Theo as though he had asked me if I was enjoying my cigar.

I sat stunned. Six months' work and all my savings had gone into my animal trapping. I'd spent my last ticals (the Siamese currency) in having the shipping cages made; the animals were to go out in two weeks. The Antwerp Zoo was cabling me \$3,000 against the cargo so I could pay the loading charges at the docks. Mercia and I didn't have more than a few Swiss francs between us. We couldn't even pay our passage out of the country.

Prince Rangsit said gently to the old regent, "But, my father, surely this law doesn't apply to Peter as he came here in good faith and has spent much time and money making his collection."

"I know, I know," said the old regent somewhat irritably. "It will be hard on him. But the people will have it so. They know that animals are worth a great deal of money and they resent having them taken out of the country." Then he went back to his conversation with Theo who was looking at me aghast.

As for me, I could neither speak nor move. I had to force myself to think. The extent of the disaster grew worse as I considered it. Now I could not even pay my bills in Suratthani. I had two partners in the venture who would be ruined. And Mercia . . . After months of hard work, enduring jungle fever and insects, handling leopards and the terrible cobras she dreaded so, she would have to be told that it was all for nothing. What would she think of me? Although I was not conscious of making a noise, Theo later told me that I groaned aloud.

Theo managed to interrupt the regent to ask, "Your Excellency, can nothing be done to help my friend?"

The old man blinked at him with watery eyes. "Something done? Do you know how this country stands? In the north are the Chinese reds. In our hills are bandits hired by them. In the cities, fear and suspicion of all Europeans. We balance on a razor's edge over the pit of hell. We must have the people's confidence and support. Do you think I would risk their resentment for the sake of a few leopards and monkeys?"

What he said was true and looking at the sad faces of Prince Rangsit and Theo, I knew it was hopeless.

Theo took me to the train. He said nothing and there was nothing he could say. As the train pulled out, he shouted after me, "Remember, you and Mercia can always come to Bali and live with me."

It was kind of him but there are few wild animals on Bali and I could not make a living there. The next morning, I stumbled off the train at Suratthani in the grip of a depression

so terrible it was like madness. I could not face Mercia or my partners with the news. As I crossed the river on the sampan ferry, I wished that it would sink or that a bandit would shoot me from the bank or that anything would happen to spare me the ordeal ahead. Yet while I had these thoughts, I knew that they were childish and I was ashamed of them.

Instead of hiring a car I walked to our compound for now every coin was precious. Mercia met me at the gate. In the graceful sarong that showed her figure to advantage, she looked as though she had just stepped off a South Sea set in a Hollywood studio. But for the first time, my heart did not jump at the sight of her. Instead, I tried to think what I would have naturally said. I called, "How are the animals? Oh yes, and how are you?"

I was never able to fool Mercia for an instant. She said at once, "What has happened? Tell me the worst."

I told her. If there is too much seasoning in a dish or a train is five minutes late, Mercia goes into fits of hysterical temper that are terrifying to watch but in a crisis she is always calm. She stood there with her hands folded in front of her like a child, her delicately carved face expressionless. She was looking towards the jungle trail that led to the west where we had expected to ship the animals, but her eyes did not focus. She said slowly, "Then there is no help for it. We must get the rhinos."

I gave an angry laugh and went by her. Without turning around she said, "The gin is in the box under the bed. We only have one bottle left."

"I don't need gin," I retorted. But later I changed my mind and emptied the bottle. Sometimes liquor helps you to think.

Mercia knew nothing about the animal business. All she possessed was a savage determination that would listen to no reason and admit of no obstacles. Her remark about the rhinos was typical of her fierce single-mindedness.

Three months before, I had received a cable from Dr. Hediger, director of the Basel Zoo in Switzerland, which read simply, "Ship rhinos at once." Puzzled, I had cabled back that I was

not in Africa. I got a longer cable in reply. Lothar Behrend, a bizarre old German collector in Argentina with whom I'd once been in partnership, had known I was in the Far East and cabled Dr. Hediger asking if he wanted Indian rhinos. Of course Dr. Hediger did—so did every other zoo director in the world. Behrend had simply taken for granted that I could get them. He might as well have taken for granted that I could get a pair of Abominable Snowmen.

There are only about 350 Indian rhinos left, which makes them one of the world's rarest animals. Approximately 300 of this number live on a reserve in Assam, a province of India north of Bengal and bordering on Tibet. Another fifty or so are in Nepal. No foreigner can get a permit to shoot or capture one and no one but an idiot would even try.

However, after getting Dr. Hediger's second cable, I began to think a bit. A couple of years before, I'd been having drinks with an English tea planter in the bar of the old Spence Hotel in Calcutta. I'd told the man that I was in the animal business and he at once assumed a knowing look.

"I'll wager you'd like to get your hands on an Indian rhino," he said grinning.

I grinned too. "I certainly would."

The tea planter hiccuped and placed his finger alongside his nose. "Tell you what, write Pat Stracey. Got the name? Pat Stracey. That bloke can get you anything. Senior conservation officer of forests at Assam. Just mention my name."

"What is your name?" I asked.

The tea planter winked at me. "That's a secret. 'No names, no pack drill, eh?' Just tell old Pat you know me. Wonderful chap, old Pat." And putting his head on the table, the planter went sound asleep.

I took down Stracey's name and address on a slip of paper torn from an envelope I had in my pocket. Then I forgot about the incident. I didn't think about it again till I got Dr. Hediger's cable. By a miracle, I still had the scrap of paper. I wrote to Pat Stracey.

Naturally, I got no answer. I hadn't expected one. But I'd made the mistake of mentioning the incident to Mercia, together with the information that an Indian rhino was easily worth \$10,000. After that, Mercia was determined to get a rhino—several rhinos. She had haunted the post office waiting for Pat Stracey's letter which never came. Personally, I doubted if there even was such a man. The planter was slurring his words and might have said "Tracy" or "Macy" for all I knew.

After drinking the bottle of gin, I fell into a restful sleep and didn't wake up until the next morning. Meanwhile, Mercia had been organizing things, and had done very well. She had been able to sell most of the animals to local merchants who were willing to speculate on getting export permits later. A number were bought by an old Chinaman who, I learned later, sold them to the Peking Zoo, sending them by a cargo ship that had been smuggling arms to the guerillas in the hills.

Apart from the financial loss, it was heartbreaking to lose the ones that had become pets. I remember especially two baby gibbons Mercia had raised on a bottle. They clung to her, moaning and sobbing, and Mercia was in tears too. It was pitiful to see them in the shipping crate, clutching each other like little orphans and crying to Mercia for help. Mercia made the old Chinaman who'd bought them promise to sell them together and he said he would, although whether he was able to keep his word or not we never knew. That's the worst of the animal business, having to sell the ones that love and trust you.

In spite of the money that Mercia had received for the animals, we were in desperate straits. The cash, and it was almost nothing, had to be split three ways between my two partners and us. One of them was an ex-mining engineer who'd given up a good job to go into the animal business. He took the few ticals coming to him and vanished down the river in a sampan. The other man, a Swiss, who'd put his life's savings into this venture, went to Bangkok by train. Years later, I met him in Algiers where he was working as foreman of a brickyard.

Mercia and I added up our share. We had enough to pay our



debts in Suratthani and a little bit over but not enough to start animal trapping anywhere else. Finally Mercia said quietly, "I'll have to sell my clothes."

For most women, this wouldn't seem too great a sacrifice but it meant everything to Mercia. Mercia always took great pride in always being smartly dressed, especially as a Eurasian in the presence of the rather dowdy British *mem-sabibs*. To lose her fine clothes would be the greatest of deprivations to her.

However, there was nothing else to do. Before going to the merchants to see what they'd offer, we stopped at the post office to get our mail. To our astonishment, there was a whole sack of it. The clerk explained indifferently, "There have been serious floods which held up all the mail for a month."

We sat down on the porch of the post office and tore open the letters. They were the usual thing. A crazy American millionaire wanted to buy a white elephant for the Pope. An English lord wanted to get a dozen zebras to train for polo, having heard somewhere that zebras were very quick on turns. There were a number of cancellations and some new orders, none of which made any difference to us now.

Then I found a letter from the Indian Forestry Department. It was postmarked Assam. Over the return address was typed "Patrick Stracey."

I sat staring at the letter. Far from feeling relief, I hated Pat Stracey at that moment. I knew what the letter would be: a polite brush-off. It could be nothing else. Why had he bothered to write me? Why hadn't he merely ignored my letter?

Mercia snatched the letter out of my hand and ripped it open. She glanced through it eagerly, her lips parted and her bosom heaving. Then she screamed, "He's giving you two permits—to get a pair! That's about 80,000 francs! We're saved!" and she began to cry quietly.

I read the letter in a daze. Stracey was indeed giving us the permits—why, he didn't say. There was a hitch to it. The permits cost 20,000 rupees each, roughly about \$5,000. Then I'd have to go to Assam and catch the rhinos myself. But Stracey

promised me the help of the forestry department and the free use of elephants for the job.

Thank heaven we had enough money from the sale of the animals to cable Dr. Hediger. Dr. Hediger was willing to pay 80,000 francs (about \$20,000) for the two rhinos but that was C.I.F. (cost, insurance and freight) Basel and no money in advance. Of course, Mercia and I could no more raise the 40,000 rupees for the permits, plus our plane fares to Assam and the expense of getting the rhinos to Basel, than we could rob the vault at Fort Knox. After desperate cables, Dr. Hediger finally sent us 30,000 francs—about \$7,000. For that, we could fly to Assam and get at least one rhino.

We left for Bangkok to get the plane. We had disposed of all our animals except one, a huge red-faced monkey the size of a small child and far more powerful than a man. He had been a pet and was tame, in so far as he'd lost his fear of humans. He was the roughest, meanest monkey I've ever seen. He hated Mercia and used to throw his dung at her with an extraordinarily good aim. He saved all his dung and kept it in little piles in case she got within range. He loved durian which is a horribly messy fruit and Mercia used to gather it for him, knowing that durian is one of the greatest delicacies for either man or beast. But it never changed his dislike of her. Mercia hated him, too.

No one would accept this monkey even as a gift so we had to turn him loose. He was always breaking out of his cage anyway and we took for granted he'd run off into the jungle. Instead, out of sheer contrariness, he refused to leave us. Finally Mercia left a pile of durian on the bank of the river and while he was eating it, we and Subrati jumped into a sampan and the boatman shoved off.

When old red-face saw we were leaving him, he went into a perfect spasm of fury, turning somersaults with rage and danc-ing up and down on the bank. Mercia screamed at him, "Now you can go and gather your own durian! And I hope a python gets you!" We crossed the river with Mercia screaming at the monkey and the monkey screaming back at her.

## Chapter 2

# Capturing the "living fossil"

TO REACH Assam, the northeasternmost state of India, we had to fly over the foothills of the Himalayas, one of the bumpiest rides I've ever endured. Subrati and I were old travelers and therefore virtually immune to both airsickness and seasickness, but poor Mercia nearly died. By the time we landed at Jorhat, she was so weak that Subrati and I had to carry her off the plane.

We hired an ancient car to drive us to the Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary where the rhinos lived. It was a sixty-mile drive over terrible roads and did nothing to improve Mercia's condition. I really became afraid for her but there was nothing we could do except to push on. The country was weirdly beautiful, reminding me somewhat of a lunar landscape. There were great ranges of mountains over which our car panted, knocking and boiling, and then we plunged down into vast plains covered with the high, yellow ekkra grass. A few minutes later, the car would be crawling on a narrow track through a jungle, the road so completely overshadowed with creepers and interlocking branches that we seemed to be in a tunnel. Then would come a magnificent scenic bit along the side of a ridge among the miles of tea gardens, worked by imported coolie laborers with colorful pieces of cloth wrapped around their heads.

We reached Kaziranga and put up in a dak bungalow left over from the British days. These dak bungalows are a godsend to travelers. They are scattered all over the country, never more than a day's journey apart, and were built by the British administrators for their use during inspection tours. Although many are now falling apart we were lucky to find a good one. Poor Mercia collapsed on the rickety old bed and I left Subrati in charge of her while I went to find Pat Stracey.

Instead, Pat found me. He drove in with some of his rangers in a beaten-up English landrover while I was still asking the natives where I could find him. Pat was a Eurasian and looked like a slender, dark-complexioned Englishman. He was a cheerful, lively fellow with a great sense of humor and turned out to be one of the most capable men I've ever encountered. We managed to get a bottle of whisky from a tiny, thatch-roofed store and returned to my bungalow to discuss the rhino situation.

On the veranda we sat down in two dilapidated bamboo chairs while Subrati made our drinks. I was particularly curious to know why the forestry department had granted my request for a permit so easily and I asked him frankly.

He replied, "Your request just happened to come in at a good time. Fifty years ago, there were only about ten rhinos left and it seemed almost certain they'd become extinct, and they had to be rigorously protected. The locals hunted them mercilessly for their horns. As you probably know, the horn is supposed to be a powerful aphrodisiac and sells for 100 rupees an ounce. That's a fortune to people here. However, since we started protecting the rhinos, the herd has built up until now we have between 340 and 360 of them."

"That still doesn't seem like a large herd," I remarked.

"It's about all the sanctuary can stand. It's 164 square miles but we have to fight for every inch of it. The people want the land for rice paddies and crowd in from every side. They drive their cattle in to graze and the cattle carry diseases which infect the rhinos. As they increase in numbers, they're apt to wander



off the sanctuary and then there's trouble between them and local farmers. We had a case of it just the other day."

Pat told me that an old male rhino had been driven out of the sanctuary by younger males and the old fellow's mate had followed him, an unusual example of devotion among the big beasts. Outside the sanctuary, the pair discovered plenty of paddy fields filled with succulent rice and proceeded to have a feast. The villagers tried desperately to drive away the two monsters that were ruining their only crop but the rhinos promptly charged and scattered them.

The village hunter was called in, armed with an ancient shotgun loaded with buckshot. He fired at the old bull and wounded him. Until now, the bull's attacks had not been serious; he wanted merely to scare the people off, not to kill. Now he charged in earnest. The hunter tried to run but a rhino can do a good 35 mph and the man hadn't a chance. The bull tossed the man and then trampled him to death.

"When I found the corpse, it was completely skinned," Pat told me over his drink. "The rhino's mate had licked off every inch of skin with her tongue. Why, I don't know unless she was trying to get the salt."

I remembered that 800 years ago Marco Polo had written that the Indian rhino will skin his victims in this curious manner.

"The old bull chased some boys who'd been with the hunter up a tree and held them there for eight hours while his mate was 'skinning' the dead man," Pat went on. "The boys had to sit in the tree and watch it. Must have been a sticky sight for them. Then the bull went to the village and cleared everyone off the streets. A man drove in from another village in a 1914 car and the rhino charged and overturned it. The man hid under the car and the rhino couldn't get at him, although the old chap spent a long time snuffing around and trying to dig the man out with his horn. By this time, the villagers had gotten word to me what was up. I came and shot the bull. Nothing else to do. The female went back to the sanctuary as soon as she saw her mate was dead.

She's taken up with another bull since then and has a nice little calf."

It was because of this incident and several like it that Pat had decided to give me a permit. Besides, as he cheerfully admitted, "For what you're paying, we can run the whole department here for a couple of years."

Pat told me what I found hard to believe, that the Indian rhino seldom uses its horn as a weapon. The horn is softer than that of his African cousin. The Indian rhino's real weapons are his teeth. "They slash with the big incisors and can disembowel an elephant with one blow. But you'll go out on old Akbar, our best *kunki* (pad elephant). Akbar is a bull with big tusks and he's used to handling rhinos."

Later that afternoon, Mr. E. P. Gee drove up to the bungalow. Mr. Gee is a tea planter; a thin, schoolteacherish man who wears glasses and doesn't drink or smoke. He is a bachelor and has devoted his life to the preservation of the Indian rhino. I believe that he was largely responsible for the creating of the Kaziranga Sanctuary. I'd heard of Mr. Gee and was afraid he'd oppose my taking a pair of young rhinos, but he was enthusiastic over the idea. "Possibly they may be induced to breed in captivity," he said in his precise, English voice after refusing a drink and settling in a chair which Subrati hurriedly produced. "If anything should happen to the herd here, it would be a comfort to know that the race was being perpetuated elsewhere."

The great question was how the young rhinos were to be captured. "In the old days, the mothers were always shot in order to obtain the young," Mr. Gee explained. "I am confident that this expedient will prove completely unnecessary."

"It had better," interrupted Pat decidedly.

"Quite. My suggestion is this. Dig pits. Cover them over with light reeds and earth. The rhinos always follow the same paths through the grass. Or one can find a pile of their dung and dig the pit there. Rhinos always go to the same pile when it becomes necessary for them to evacuate and they back up to the pile, which should render the problem even more simple."

"That's true," agreed Pat. "The poachers used to hide behind the dung heaps and shoot the poor brutes in the arse. Filthy bastards, those poachers. We've got 'em fairly well cleared out now, thank heaven."

"The unfortunate rhinos really have had a miserable time of it," said Gee with a tenderness in his voice men usually only employ when speaking of a beloved child. "The unhappy creatures actually have no business being alive in this age, you know. They're one of the oldest types of mammals in the world today, really living fossils. I hope when the Assamese discover how highly Europeans prize them and what excellent publicity they will bring the country, the people may be induced to be more tolerant towards these remarkable creatures."

Although Pat Stracey and Mr. Gee seemed very cordial, I thought it might be a good idea for them to see Mercia. One look at Mercia clinches any deal, as far as men are concerned. I went to get her and found my pretty wife tossing on the lumpy, dirty bed with a headache and in a very bad mood. "I thought in Assam we'd be living with a rajah instead of in this smelly hovel," she snapped at me. "You're always running off to meet some prince or rajah. Well, I wish you'd find one now. How could you bring a decent woman to such a filthy old dak bungalow?"

I told her that Pat Stracey and Mr. Gee were on the veranda and the success of our trip depended on them. Mercia grumpily got off the bed and peered through the window.

"My God, a chi-chi and a thin old bespectacled planter in sweaty clothes," she muttered contemptuously. "I should get dressed for trash like that!" and she flung herself back on the bed.

I went back to the veranda and explained that my wife was still feeling the effects of our plane ride. We resumed our rhino talks. Fifteen minutes later, Mercia joined us in a ravishing Japanese silk gown that clung to her figure like wet paper. She was overjoyed to meet dear Mr. Stracey to whom we owed everything, fascinated by Mr. Gee's accounts of tea planting,

and deliriously happy over our adorable little bungalow. When the two entranced men left, we could have sailed the *Queen Mary* up the Brahmaputra River to Assam and loaded every rhino in the place on board with their wholehearted assistance. And, most important of all, it was arranged that we need pay only part of the permit fees at that time, so we could afford to trap two rhinos.

The next morning, Mercia and I went out to the elephant lines to inspect the animals we would use and especially Akbar, who was to be our pad (riding) elephant. We found him easily, for Akbar was the biggest elephant there, one of the biggest Indian elephants I've ever seen. He stood 9 feet 3½ inches at the shoulder and had magnificent 5½-foot tusks. His mahout, a slender, brown little man in a loincloth, proudly showed off the big bull.

"Akbar is seventy years old, sahib, and comes from the Garo Hills, where the biggest elephants grow." The Garo Hills are the area celebrated by Kipling in *Toomai of the Elephants*. "Once a wounded tiger attacked him during a big *shikar*. Akbar charged the tiger and knelt on him until the tiger died. He got that scar on his shoulder from the tiger's claws. This scar on his flank comes from a fight with a wild rogue elephant that attacked him when Akbar had four men on his back. Akbar fought the rogue for five minutes and finally drove him off, although he was hampered by the weight of the men. They were afraid to dismount. The scars on his trunk are rhinoceros bites. He has killed three that attacked him."

"Is he perfectly safe with people?" asked Mercia anxiously, for Akbar was watching us suspiciously out of his little eyes and running his trunk towards us in a manner suggestive of a great python moving towards its prey.

The mahout swelled with indignation. "*Mem-sahib*, there is a story told in the bazaars that Akbar has killed twelve men. It is a foul lie. He has only killed two. One was many years ago, a low-caste farmer who tried to keep Akbar from eating his plantains when the elephant was hungry after a long day's

fast. The second man he killed only a few days ago. This man was a thieving grass cutter who had stolen some of Akbar's ration of salt. All the mahouts knew of it but the stupid courts desire proof so this man jeered at us and we were helpless. Akbar did nothing, biding his time. Then one afternoon while I was taking him for his daily swim, Akbar saw the grass cutter. He broke away from me and pursued the thief who ran into a hut. Akbar followed him inside and there impaled him on his tusks. When justice had been completed, I called to Akbar and he came like a pet lamb. I mounted on his neck and together we went down to the river to cleanse the blood from his noble tusks."

"Didn't the authorities say anything?" I asked. A man-killing elephant is almost invariably shot.

"They demanded his death, so Stracey Sahib said to them, 'Good. If you kill Akbar, you must first kill me.' But they have decreed that the tips of his beautiful tusks must be cut off. Stracey Sahib is fighting it and with Allah's help, he will prevail. Ah, my beloved, would these cruel men who know nothing of us elephant people mutilate thy beauty? May they roast in hell together with the pariah dogs who were their mothers if such a thing is done." The man threw his arms around the great bull's trunk and Akbar fondled him with the tip, making little crooning noises.

Mercia promptly announced that if necessary she would go to Nehru himself to prevent this crime, thereby completely winning over the mahout. She doubtless meant it too, at least at the moment. We arranged to start out on Akbar at dawn the next day, accompanied by another elephant, named Mohan. Pat Stracey would ride with us and another ranger would be on Mohan. Travelers in the sanctuary always go in pairs in case of accidents. An elephant may be attacked by a rhino and disabled, leaving his riders helpless in the vast, swampy preserve.

We were delayed the next morning because Mercia, in spite of all the luggage she had insisted on bringing to Assam, found that she had forgotten her topi. "If I go without a topi, I'll get

sunburned and people will think I'm a native!" she cried. I told her to stay in the bungalow but she refused to do that either. "I want to see anything that's worth 40,000 francs," she snapped. Finally, she compromised by wrapping her head in a shawl.

Pat was waiting for us impatiently. The rhinos are only out during the early morning and late afternoon; during the heat of the day they lie up in the thick ekkra grass. Akbar knelt so we could climb to the pad on his back. These pads are big, straw-filled mattresses with ropes along the sides to serve as handholds. As an elephant moves with a curious lurching sway, balancing yourself on the pad is quite an art. The mahout sits on the elephant's neck and directs him with his knees.

The sanctuary is a semi-swampy area lying along the south bank of the great Brahmaputra River. To the north, the foothills of the Himalayas rise toward the dead-blue sky, and on a clear day you can see Mount Everest. The Brahmaputra is a very erratic river, changing its course so frequently that often the ghats (wharfs) have to be moved eighteen miles or more as the river floods and creates a new channel. Most of the sanctuary is covered by the great ekkra grass, higher than a man's head even when he is on the back of an elephant. Only on elephants is it possible to penetrate this great area, for a man on foot would not only become lost in the dense grass, but he would be unable to cross the cat's cradle of waterways that cover the sanctuary. Even for an elephant the going is not easy, and Akbar would frequently stop and test the soggy ground with one of his great feet before moving carefully forward.

The area was interlaced with a network of rhino trails leading through the ekkra and we saw plenty of tiger pad marks in the soft earth of the paths. Once we even saw one of the great striped cats. He was gliding along a rhino trail and stopped when he saw us. Akbar stopped also, lifting his trunk and waving the tip slowly back and forth to pick up the scent. The tiger watched us for a few seconds before pouring himself noiselessly into the ekkra.

"Tigers are another nuisance in the sanctuary," said Pat who was sitting on the pad behind Mercia and me. "Last year they killed four young rhinos. Didn't get a chance to eat them, though. The mother rhino always drives them away even though she can't always save the baby."

Then we saw our first rhino.

He was a big bull, weighing well over 4,000 pounds and lying in a *bheel*, a rhino wallow. It is because rhinos spend a great deal of their time in these bheels that they are nearly always heavily coated with mud. We moved towards him slowly, Akbar carefully parting the *ekkra* with his trunk as he went to make sure we wouldn't come unexpectedly on another rhino in the thick stuff. We came closer and closer until it seemed to me that we were looking directly down on the big fellow. Then Pat reached out and touched the mahout on the arm and he stopped Akbar.

Rhinos have poor sight and as we were upwind of him, this bull was unconscious of our presence. He lay like a great pig, luxuriating in the wallow. All around him were white herons who generally accompany a rhino, feeding on the insects that he disturbs while plowing through the *ekkra*. Suddenly the whole flock rose in the air like a cloud of white confetti blown by a sudden breeze. At once, the bull reared up and looked around him, his huge ears (the Indian rhino has much bigger ears than his African relative) twitching about independently of each other, like two sonar listening devices ready to catch the faintest sound.

I was fascinated by the great beast. The Indian rhinos are the largest of the rhinoceros clan and this old bull must have stood some six feet at the shoulder and weighed over two tons. His skin hung in great folds, giving him the effect of wearing armor plate, and he had only one horn, while the African rhino has two. His nose was upraised and he was sniffing loudly, trying to catch our scent.

Mercia was inching around me to get a better look and the bull caught the motion. Without the slightest warning he ex-

ploded out of the *bheel* and stood on the soft ground, the water pouring off him and both ears cocked forward. He had changed suddenly from a peaceful, wallowing pig to a dangerous wild beast . . . an armored tank directed by a tiny, uncertain brain.

Akbar quietly curled his trunk out of harm's way and lowered his head to meet the charge with his tusks. The rhino stood considering us for a few seconds, much as the tiger had done, then gave a grunt and, swinging around with surprising nimbleness, trotted off down a path through the *ekkra*. In spite of his size he seemed to float over the marshy ground and moved much faster than an elephant could have done.

"They seldom charge now," said Pat with paternal pride. "They know that we won't hurt them. It's these damn poachers that cause all the trouble. If one of them wounds a rhino, of course that makes him vicious and after that he'll charge the first strange object he sees."

I spent the next three weeks going out morning and evening to watch the rhinos, for I needed to know a great deal about the animals to make sure of keeping them alive during the long trip to Europe.

Because of the melodramatic books and motion pictures made of the animal collecting business, most people think that capturing a wild animal is a difficult, dangerous affair, but once captured the animal is simply shoved into a crate and shipped off like a box of oranges. Actually, capturing a wild animal is usually a fairly simple business; the trick lies in keeping him alive after capture. This is a complicated, highly technical affair, and the collector must be as familiar with the animal's mental characteristics as with his physical habits.

For example, virtually all wild animals have what my friend Dr. Hediger calls a "flight distance." That is, a definite distance they will allow an enemy to approach before running or fighting. In theory, a cage for an animal should have a diameter of double the animal's flight distance so when he retreats to the center he always feels safe from a man standing on the outside. If the cage is smaller, the animal becomes so emotionally upset

that he will not eat or sleep. Of course, in practice it is rarely possible to construct a cage of this size, certainly not a shipping cage. Therefore, the animal's flight distance must be artificially reduced, generally by taming. When Pat Stracey took over the sanctuary, the flight distance (or in this case, attack distance) of a rhino was as far as he could see or smell a man. I discovered that, due to Pat's care, the attack distance of the rhinos had been reduced to about thirty yards (about the distance we'd been from the old bull). This was of crucial importance to me in planning an enclosure for the young rhinos before I dared to try shipping them.

I made several other interesting observations. The Indian rhino calves always walked in front of their mothers where she could keep an eye on them. In Africa, the white rhino calves behave in the same way, but the black rhino calves go behind the mothers, a curious fact for which I can see no explanation. From my point of view, this was an important point as it made trapping a calf far easier. If the calves had followed the mothers, the adult would have been caught in a pit rather than the calf. Until now, I had been uncertain whether to dig the pits in the trails or by the dung piles but now I determined to use the trail method. I also studied the rhinos' feeding and bathing habits. They bathed constantly—in fact, seemed almost semiaquatic (completely unlike the African rhinos which live in the arid bush country), and their favorite food was young bamboo shoots.

As I knew that Dr. Hediger hoped to get the captured pair to breed, I watched carefully for any signs of rhinos mating so I could give him some tips. At last, I was lucky enough to witness a courtship. It was astonishingly rough, the bull coming up behind the cow, lifting her hind legs clear of the ground with his horn and then pushing her along like a man with a wheelbarrow. This sexual play was apparently necessary, for the cow refused to allow him to mount her until he had repeated this performance several times.

Although Pat Stracey was always helpful and interested, the

mahouts became increasingly restless over these long trips into the swamp. There was always the chance of meeting a tiger or being charged by an irritable mother rhino worried about her calf. The mahouts didn't bother about their own safety but they were concerned for their precious elephants. I would have given up my researches at the end of the first few days, but Mercia urged me on.

"For heaven's sake, Peter, stand up for your convictions," she told me when I was discouraged after a day's work with the sullen mahouts. "Don't let the natives walk all over you. If these beasts die on our hands, we won't get a franc for them. Find out all you need to know."

But after three weeks, even Mercia was beginning to get restless. "The next time I go on a trip with you, I'll bring along some books to read," she grumbled. "I'm sick of riding elephants or sitting in that dak bungalow with no one to talk to. Besides, I think you simply enjoy watching those bloody rhinos. You must know all there is to know about the brutes by now."

There was something to what Mercia said. I did get a great satisfaction from watching the big, lumbering animals and there were plenty of other animals in the reserve too: wild buffalo, swamp deer, hog deer, black-necked storks, and adjutant storks. Every time I went out I saw something new. Still, Dr. Hediger was beginning to send me irritable cables from Basel, and I knew Mercia was right.

First, I directed the building of a corral near the bungalow. The corral covered slightly more than an acre of ground, ample for the flight (or attack) distance of the young calves. It also included a good grove of bamboo where they could feed and a stream that they could use for a bheel. The corral was made of heavy teak stakes firmly planted in the ground, covered with bamboo stems lashed together to serve as a "bumper" in case the rhinos charged the corral wall. I didn't want the calves to hurt themselves against the heavy stakes.

At the entrance to the corral, I had constructed a narrow "bottleneck" like the chutes used for examining cattle. Before



putting the rhinos in the corral, I wanted to be able to check them for possible wounds or other injuries as a result of the trapping. Also, I wanted them to quiet down for a few hours before turning them loose in the corral. A newly caught, frightened animal will often rush around a large corral so madly that he hurts himself.

When the corral was finished, we set about digging the pits. I had carefully checked the paths used by the mothers with suitable calves and knew exactly where the traps should be placed. I wanted calves about two years old, fully weaned but still running with the mothers. Ten pits were dug, each 6 feet deep and 10 feet long by 5 feet wide. I kept them narrow so the calves could not turn around. A pachyderm caught in a pit large enough so he can thrash about in it will often injure himself in his struggles to escape.

The Assamese covered each pit with a layer of rushes and sprinkled earth on top. They did an expert job, for when they had finished, no one could tell the trap covers from the surrounding ground, including the men themselves. Later, when men had to go out to examine the traps to see if anything had been caught, several fell in by mistake. I had to send out mahouts on elephants to rescue them.

I fully expected to have my two calves in a few days, but nothing happened. Finally I found out what the trouble was. The mahouts were checking the traps, riding close to them on their elephants and then looking down from the advantage of their heights. Rhinos have a keen sense of smell and the odor of an elephant lingers a long time. The rhinos had simply abandoned the polluted paths.

I had fresh pits dug and insisted that the Assamese go on foot to check them. They didn't like this idea at all as they had to follow the rhino paths through the ekkra, and there was always a possibility of meeting a rhino or a tiger. At last, I had to go with them. I admit after a few days I sympathized with the Assamese. You could generally hear a rhino coming; they made quite a lot of noise, for the paths were virtually tunnels

through the dense grass and their great bulk scraped against the dry stalks. Then you could dive into the grass and hide until the rhino had gone past. But the tigers moved absolutely noiselessly. We met several of them but luckily always at a distance. We simply stood still until the tiger moved away.

Then one memorable morning as my men and I were plodding along a path towards one of our pits, we heard great snortings and splashings ahead of us. "A rhino, sahib, a rhino!" the men screamed and we all broke into a run.

Instead of a rhino, we found a mother water buffalo and her calf in the pit. The pit was half full of water from seepage, and the two animals were thrashing about, the mother's great horns and staring eyes barely above the surface and the poor little calf nearly drowned. A rhino would have been perfectly all right but the two long-legged cattle were at a disadvantage in the narrow pit. I instantly sent one of the men back to camp with instructions to bring Akbar and plenty of picks and shovels so we could liberate the unfortunates.

One of the natives and I took turns holding the calf's head above water until Akbar arrived. Instantly we set to work digging a ramp down one end of the pit so the captives could climb out while Akbar and his mahout stood watching. The work finished, we leaned panting on our tools, certain the thankful mother would trot away followed by her baby.

The thrashing cow finally got her forefeet on the slope and with a mighty heave freed herself from the mud. The baby followed more slowly. We waited to see them bolt down the narrow path but instead the mother stood looking balefully around. She was only a few yards away and I suddenly realized that I had miscalculated her sense of gratitude.

"Run, sahib, she's going to charge!" yelled the mahout. Even as he spoke, the cow lowered her head and came for me at startling speed in spite of the marshy ground that took her in over her knees at every step.

I flung myself backwards into the grass. All around me were screams and yells as the cow went through the terrified natives,



spraying them in all directions. Two of them dove into the pit, several plunged into the ekkra, one man raced towards Akbar with the raging cow after him.

I expected to see Akbar run because even for an elephant a charging buffalo is a terrible sight. Instead, Akbar curled up his trunk out of harm's way and braced himself to meet the charge. As the cow rushed in with lowered head, Akbar took the attack on his tusks. There was a crash that shook the ground under me and both animals recoiled from the shock. The cow backed away, shaking her head, and I thought that she'd had enough but she came in again, this time deliberately going under the bull's tusks to disembowel him.

I saw her disappear under the elephant's body and red blood squirt into the air like a jet from a hose as her horns found their mark. Akbar screamed with pain and fury. He tried to kneel on her but the buffalo was under him, working with first one horn and then the other to reach his vitals. The mahout was screaming insanely and kicking Akbar, apparently trying to force him forward so he could bring his full weight to bear on the buffalo beneath him. The cow drew back again, her black, dripping hide streaked with blood—Akbar's blood. The bull was trumpeting furiously, the natives yelling, and the buffalo bellowing. Then the cow charged for the third time.

Akbar dropped on his knees so she couldn't get under him again and received the charge with both his tusks. Thank heaven the tips hadn't been cut as the government had ordered. I thought the cow would impale herself but buffaloes are tough animals. In spite of the fearful punishment she was taking, she kept trying to force home the charge. Akbar half rose and with a tremendous heave flung the cow over backwards. She lay panting for a moment and then staggered to her feet. Slowly, she turned and limped away, the bleating calf trotting behind her.

After this, it was harder than ever to get the men to go to the pits unless they were on elephant back. I was growing desperate. The rains were only a few days away and once they

began, trapping would be over for the season, for during those torrential downpours, the pits would be flooded within an hour and become useless. Pat and Mr. Gee were sympathetic but unable to help. Mercia alternated between hysterical fits of fury and hardheaded practicality. She would curse me for delaying the trapping, excoriate the rhinos, and swear at the natives; and then, once her rage had passed, she would go out alone to check the pits. Mercia was absolutely fearless, both with humans and animals.

The rhinos had turned out to be much cleverer than I'd thought. The cows in some way or other sensed the presence of the pits and avoided them. Mercia raged at me, "All this time you've wasted watching these creatures and you don't even know enough to catch a baby!"

I went over and over my notes on the rhinos. Then I had an idea. The rhinos must be mad about salt. That was the only logical reason they would "skin" a dead human with their tongues and there were only a few salt licks in the reserve. I decided to scatter salt over the pit coverings and along the paths leading to the pits. Perhaps the rhinos, in their eagerness to get the salt, would forget caution and be caught.

Subrati and I spent an afternoon spreading the salt. We were out at dawn the next day.

The cover of the first pit was gone; there was nothing but a gaping hole in the ground. We approached it without daring to hope. Inside was a baby rhino.

Subrati and I raced back to camp, yelling with delight.

Mercia burst into tears of relief. Everyone in the camp went mad with excitement. Akbar was still recuperating from his fight with the buffalo, so we started out on another pad elephant, named Jess Pagli which means "the Crazy One." Jess Pagli wasn't fully broken to rhinos but we had no time to think of that. Mohan was hitched to a big transport cage and followed us more slowly. There were five people on Jess Pagli, including Mercia and me. I was carrying a very fine German camera to

photograph the transferring of the baby from the pit to the transport cage.

The mahout took us right up to the edge of the pit as there was no longer any need for caution. The baby was a splendid little fellow weighing about a ton. He was splashing around in four feet of water and seemed completely unhurt. While we were admiring him, there was a sudden snort from the ekkra. The mother rhino burst out and came straight for us, her mouth open, her tail straight in the air, scattering mud in all directions as she charged.

Jess Pagli gave a scream of terror and bolted. I was hanging to one of the rope grips of the pad for dear life. The mahout was yelling, Jess Pagli was trumpeting, and through it all came the fierce snorts of the furious rhino. Five people are too much for a single pad even when an elephant is walking slowly and I knew someone would fall. A great, black shape appeared below me and I saw the rhino slash at Jess Pagli's flank with her terrible incisors. The elephant screamed again and now she really began to run but the rhino kept alongside and slashed again. I was still clinging to the camera and was half off the pad. The rhino was just under me.

Jess Pagli reached a broad waterway. Without hesitating, she plunged into it. As she fell away from beneath me, I was left sitting on air. I turned over and dove, with the camera in my hand. My only idea was to swim far enough underwater so the rhino couldn't get me.

I swam until my lungs were bursting and then surfaced. Jess Pagli had finally halted in midstream. There was no sign of the rhino. Mercia was screaming at me, "Don't get that camera wet! It's worth 20,000 francs!"

No one was hurt except poor Jess Pagli who had two bad gashes in her flank. When the mahout had succeeded in quieting her, we returned to camp and got two bulls with tusks. But even the two big bulls refused to face the raging mother rhino and at last we had to fire the grass to drive her away. Then we

all worked desperately to put out the fire before it could spread to other parts of the sanctuary.

Mohan had arrived with the transport cage and I told the natives to dig an incline down towards the head of the pit, but to leave a solid wall of earth about a foot thick between the pit and the incline. The cage was pushed down this incline, the doors opened, and the dirt wall dug away. Ropes were thrown around the young rhino and he was hauled into the cage and the door secured behind him. Then Mohan dragged him to the corral.

I was very glad that I'd had the forethought to construct the "bottleneck," for the baby's eyes were full of mud and a mild infection had set in. I washed the eyes with boric acid and treated two small cuts in his legs before turning him loose.

The baby was a male with a little bud of a horn just showing. Everything depended on getting him tame, for an animal as large and powerful as a rhino is extremely hard to handle unless he knows that you don't mean to hurt him. We decoyed him into the bottleneck several times a day, giving him *jagri* (palm sugar) and salt as a reward. Once in the bottleneck, we could scratch his ears and pat him so he soon grew used to us. We had also taken the precaution of smearing the inside of the bottleneck with his dung so the chute would smell homey. Animals are almost completely controlled by odor, and strange surroundings don't disturb them nearly as much as strange scents.

Within a week, the little fellow was so tame that he'd run to us like a big dog to be petted and fondled. Mercia could even ride on his back. He actually got to be a nuisance, following us about and poking us with his stump of a horn to get attention. Mercia named him Gadadahar, after an ancient Assamese king, and when she called "Gadadahar! Gadadahar!" from outside the corral, he would squeak back in reply and butt his head against the stakes trying to reach her. We never heard Gadadahar grunt or snort like the big rhinos. His only noise was the funny little squeak that he had used to call his mother.

We caught three other males before we got a female. "Nat-

urally, because all males are damned stupid," Mercia remarked. We finally got a female two days before the rains broke. She tamed even more quickly than Gadadahar had. We named her Joymothi after an Assamese queen. The two rhinos got along very well together and took their baths lying side by side in the bheel I'd made for them at one end of the corral.

Dr. Hediger had by now sent me enough to pay for capturing permits for both babies and we were ready to start the long trip to Europe. I had hoped to fly them by chartered plane to Calcutta but no plane was available. My next choice was rail but that would mean sending them through East Pakistan, and at that time the railroad lines were closed between India and Pakistan due to the riots. There was only one way left: to float them by flatboat down the Brahmaputra River. This meant a three weeks' trip and exposing our babies to all the dangers of rapids, sudden floods and uncertain native boats, but there was no help for it.

To add to our troubles, the shipping had to be accurately timed. Not every ship that puts into Calcutta is going to Europe or will accept animal freight. Those that do have their regular cargoes and there's often no room for animal cages. I spent several days cabling shipping lines until I found that the Dutch merchant *Alcione* was arriving in Calcutta and would take us and the rhinos. Even then, I did not dare to leave until the last minute. If I arrived at Calcutta ahead of time, the rhinos would be put in the zoo, as wild animals cannot be kept at the docks or even in private compounds because, the authorities argue, if they escaped they would constitute a public menace. There was no telling what infections my babies might pick up if put in a cage that had housed hundreds of other animals, many of them diseased. The *Alcione* would only be in the harbor for eight hours so I had to float the rhinos down the river, arrive during that eight-hour period and load them directly on the ship without delay.

Another unforeseen complication arose. My money was in traveler's checks and no one in Assam would accept them. I

went around borrowing five rupees from one man and ten from another until I had enough to fly to Calcutta. There I cashed my checks and returned to Assam with 50,000 rupees in cash. I hated to do it as men have often been murdered for ten rupees in the Orient, but it was unavoidable.

I found Mercia exhausted. The whole responsibility of caring for the rhinos and making preparations for our departure had been left to her. However, she'd done well as she always did. She had gotten a paddle-wheel steamer to tow our flatboat down the river, gotten a lorry to transport the rhino cages to the flatboat, gotten coolies to help with the loading and unloading, and laid in a supply of food for the rhinos. If everything went right, we had just time to load the rhinos and reach Calcutta before the *Alcione* sailed.

There was no trouble getting the rhinos into the shipping boxes. We had coated the floors with their dung and been feeding the rhinos inside the cages for weeks, so they regarded the cages with affection and were quite content to ride in them. With the rhinos inside, chewing happily on bamboo shoots, we prepared to have cages lifted onto the lorry. I was constantly glancing at my watch for time was of the essence. A delay of even a few hours could mean that we'd miss the *Alcione*.

I had just given the order to have the cages pushed up the tailgate into the lorry when a young forestry official came up to me, looking very natty in his immaculate uniform.

"Your permits have just been revoked," he told me importantly. "The forestry department has decided that no female rhinos are to be allowed to leave the sanctuary. These animals are an important national asset and the female cannot be allowed to leave India."

## Chapter 3

# Rhinos on a raft

HERE IT was again, the same disaster that had struck us in Siam. Perhaps after a long series of protests to the Indian government, I could get the order rescinded but that would do me little good. The *Alcione* would be gone, the Brahmaputra so flooded by the rains that passage on flats would be impossible, and the rhinos probably dead. A foreigner dealing with an Asian official is the most helpless being in the world. There was nothing I could do and the smug ranger knew it. For generations his people had been kicked around by "sahibs" and now was his chance to retaliate.

If I was beaten, Mercia was not. She went into one of her terrifying rages. Even the ranger dropped his haughty air and became nervous. He protested almost apologetically. "I have nothing to do with the order. It has just come through. No females are to be exported. We must keep them here to build up the herds."

"Does the forestry department realize that I've spent five months and 40,000 rupees to get this pair?" I asked.

"That is not my concern. I am only obeying orders." He stamped out to the cages and started to open the door of the female's box.

Mercia threw herself across the door. "You'll have to kill me first!" she screamed.

"Get away from that door," the ranger shouted, struggling with Mercia to release the catch.

He was stronger than she was and managed to tear her hands loose. "Very well, open it! That's a wild rhino and she'll kill me." Mercia did not mention that she had been riding the rhino around the corral the day before. "You'll be held responsible for my death. It'll go on your record that you killed a helpless woman!"

The ranger hesitated. "I'll have the police remove you."

"They can't!" Mercia had both arms and legs locked around the bars in the door. Then she shouted to me. "Don't just stand there, you fool! Call Pat Stracey!"

Luckily, there was a telephone at Gauhati and I was able to find a car to drive me there. Pat might be at any of a dozen places or off somewhere in the sanctuary. I had some qualms about leaving Mercia but from experience I knew that she was quite capable of looking after herself.

I called the sanctuary and a clerk answered. No, Stracey Sahib was not there. No, he was not expected back. No, no one knew where he was. I tried station after station. At last, Pat answered. He had just come in from a tour of inspection and sounded dog-tired.

"All right, all right," he said wearily. "They've mucked things up again. The department is right about having to be extra careful about females, they're our breeding stock. But one more or less won't make any difference and we promised you a pair. Tell that ranger that I want to speak to him."

When I got back to the corral, Mercia was still clinging to the bars like an octopus, surrounded by a ring of cursing policemen and the furious ranger. I gave him Pat's message and he departed sullenly. He returned and gave angry permission for us to remove the rhino.

By now, a large crowd had collected. It was market day and people had drifted into the area from all the outlying towns. When they found that there were two rhinos in the lorry, a whisper of excitement went through the mob.

"He has rhinos!" "Do they have horns?" "Of course, you fool; otherwise, why should he bother with them?" "A piece of those horns would make me a rich man for life!" "Why is this white man stealing our rhinos? We are now a free nation!" "Cut off the horns! The rhinos belong to us! We are no longer slaves to white men."

Mercia said to me quietly, "Get the lorry going at once. This means trouble."

A man pushed his way through the crowd with a long knife in his hand. His eyes were fastened on the rhino cages with a fixed, unblinking stare and saliva ran from his partly opened mouth. I grabbed his wrist. The man ignored me, still pushing on towards the cages. The crowd began to shout and push forward.

I wrestled with the man and the police came to my help, swinging their clubs. The mob was screaming, "Colonialist oppressor! Capitalist exploiter! Cut off the horns! The animals belong to Assam!"

One of the policeman panted, "Let them have the horns! We can't hold them any longer."

The horns were only tiny stumps and if they were gouged out, the baby rhinos might die. One of the policemen went down and was trampled by the screaming crowd. A stone hit another man beside me. He dropped his club and fell back against the lorry, half senseless. The man with the knife was still fighting with insane desperation to reach the cages. He was an old man and probably impotent. Those horns represented his only chance to renew his youthful virility.

The lorry began to move. Mercia had jumped into the driver's seat and started the engine. I pulled myself up on the side as it lurched forward. The car bumped away over the rough road, steadily gathering speed while the mob pursued us, throwing stones and screaming insults until we were out of range.

We went directly to the ghat at Gauhati. The river had altered its course almost half a mile during the last rainy season and a long, rickety causeway on stilts had been built over the

mud to the loading ghat. Along this causeway the rhino cages had to be hauled by gangs of sweating coolies. We had no rollers and the heavy cages, weighing well over a ton each, were tugged along an inch at a time to the waiting flat. Mercia walked beside the cages, feeding the babies bamboo shoots to quiet them. I was in constant fear that the mob would follow us to Gauhati but they must have given it up as a bad job. At last the two cages were loaded on the flat and the paddle-wheel steamer began to move down the river, towing the flat astern. We were on our way down a thousand miles of treacherous river to Calcutta.

Mercia said bitterly, "And those were the people who've been after Pat Stracey for the last ten years to have all the rhinos in the sanctuary killed. Now they won't even let us take out two calves!"

We tied up that evening along the bank; the river is too full of sandbanks, shoals and unexpected currents to navigate at night. There were a number of farmers saying their evening prayers on the bank and they called out to ask what we had in the cages. Before we could stop them, the crew proudly shouted back that we had rhinos and instantly there was wild excitement on the shore, some of the farmers hurrying down to the water's edge to view the rare beasts and other racing back to the village to spread the news.

"Now we're in for it," said our captain gloomily. "We'll have every native in the district here before midnight."

He was right. Men and women began pouring in from all directions, some of them, we afterwards learned, from villages fifty miles away. They were a well-mannered, polite lot and the captain rigged a gangplank and let them come aboard the flat to see the rhino. Subrati did a land-office business selling rhino urine which is considered a panacea for all illnesses. Subrati drank a glass of the urine himself every day and had worked out his own method of collecting it. He had a long bamboo, split longitudinally so it formed a trough. When he saw that one of our rhinos was beginning to answer a call of nature, he



would hastily hold the bamboo under the animal and drain the urine into a bucket. He sold the urine for two rupees a pint and the demand was far greater than the supply. We opened the front of the cages so the people could at least touch the animals which in itself is thought to bring great good luck.

Then Mercia had an idea. "Look at all that fine, rich grass along the bank," she pointed out. "Wouldn't our rhinos just love that! Let's say that everyone who wants to touch the rhinos has to bring an armful of grass."

It seemed like a good idea and we had the captain announce that an armful of grass was the admission price. There were no objections and soon the bank was covered with stooping figures gathering the grass. Subrati stood by the cages collecting the grass while Mercia and I went to bed. We'd both had a long day and were dead tired.

I was awakened by the sound of running feet, chains rattling, shouts, and the shrill squeaks of the rhinos. Then I heard Subrati yelling for help. I grabbed a half-empty whisky bottle from the table by my bed and ran out. The ship was a madhouse. It was alive with people climbing over the cabin, over the cages, hanging from the anchor cable and crowding the gangplank. I stumbled over the body of one of the crew—dead or stunned I could not tell.

I ran for the flat. As I went I heard the crash of broken glass as the rioters smashed the cabin windows. The rhinos were terrified, screaming like pigs. My first thought was for them. I jumped on the flat and managed to drop the cage doors. The doors slid up and down on grooves and even in the dark I could find the release catches. As the doors thumped into position, I heard Subrati yell again. He was only a few feet from me, on his back and covered with fighting natives.

I drove into the press, laying around me the whisky bottle which broke on the first blow. A broken bottle, held by the neck, is a very deadly weapon at close quarters. The grunts and curses of the natives changed to screams as the jagged glass ripped their faces and hands.

Suddenly the whole flat was brilliantly illuminated. The captain had turned the boat's headlight on it. The light seemed to frighten the natives, for they flung themselves overboard and began swimming ashore. Subrati staggered to his feet, his face streaming blood. He gasped, "Sahib, don't worry. The rhinos are all right."

"What happened?" I panted.

"So many people were coming that the captain tried to raise the gangplank. He was afraid the ship would be swamped. These people had collected their grass and were furious so they attacked the ship. But they meant no harm to the babies."

I heard the dull blows of an axe. The captain was cutting the cable. At once the ship began to move downstream, for the current was strong here. The natives still on the ship hurled themselves over the side in a blind panic. In a moment the water was full of their long, white dhotis and the crowd on the bank waded into the river to help their friends. I could hear the captain bellowing to get up steam in the engines.

I was afraid to leave the rhinos. The crowd began to stone us, quietly and systematically, and again I heard the crash of breaking glass. Subrati and I covered the rhino cages with mats we'd brought to protect the animals from the sun. The stones were jagged pieces of flint and both Subrati and I were hit several times before we'd completely finished the job. Then the full force of the current caught us and we swept downstream and out of range.

I climbed back on the ship. Mercia met me, very pale and shaken. "The rhinos are all right," I assured her.

She looked at me curiously. "How do you feel?"

"I'm not hurt," I said surprised. Then I realized that blood was dripping from a stone cut across my forehead, one eye was beginning to swell closed, and I ached all over.

The captain came aft, swearing. "This is the last time I take rhinos. I knew I never should have agreed to such a crazy idea. Every window on the ship is broken, we've lost the anchor and



I don't know what other damage's been done. None of the crew are dead but that's about all you can say for them."

"It's lucky the people all dove overboard as soon as the ship began to move," I said. "If the crowd had stayed on board they could have easily overpowered us."

The captain grinned. "They thought we were carrying them off to slavery and the rhinos were a lure to get them on board. I heard them shouting to each other that the whole business was a trick. It is said that not so long ago there were slavers on the river and the people still remember them."

Fortunately the ship had a spare anchor and after that we anchored in midstream at night. There was one advantage to the whole business; the rhinos had plenty of fresh grass for the next few days.

For the next three weeks we drifted down the mighty Brahmaputra, one of the greatest rivers in the world. The rhinos stood the trip well and I would have been perfectly happy if it hadn't been for the nagging worry about making connections with the *Alcione*. There was no way of telling how many miles we made each day, and when I questioned the captain, he merely replied, "If it is Allah's will that you reach the ship, you will make it. If it is not, nothing mortal man can do will help you."

Then we came to the great delta at the mouth of the Brahmaputra where the river joins with the even mightier Ganges. This delta covers forty-four square miles of waterways, canals, swamps and streams and reminded me very much of the delta at the mouth of the Amazon. A man was kept constantly in the bow of the paddle wheeler to take soundings with a long pole, and although we grounded several times, the crew was always able to shove us off. The captain told me we were only a day's trip from Calcutta "if Allah wills." It was high time, too. According to my calculations, the *Alcione* would arrive the next morning. We had cut it very fine indeed.

After much pleading and a slight additional payment, the captain agreed to go on at night. It was dull, monotonous work. The crew were tired, the chant of the man taking soundings

with the long bamboo poles was like the ticking of a metronome, and the marshy shores stretching away on all sides in the moonlight offered no landmarks, so we did not seem to be moving. I was dozing on the stern when I felt a slight bump. We had gone aground again. I swore and stretched myself. As I did so, I heard the captain shout, "The flat! The cable's broken!"

I bounded to my feet. Caught by the current, the flat with my two precious rhinos was slowly floating past us. On her were Subrati and two members of the crew, all fast asleep. I shouted at them and so did the captain but nothing made any impression. Helpless, we watched them drift away downstream.

The captain snapped, "There're rapids ahead. If the flat hits them, she'll go over."

I jumped into the water with the crew to help shove the boat off but she was firmly stuck on a mud flat. The captain had shaved a bend a little too closely. Even Mercia threw her weight on one of the poles. After two hours of sweating and struggling, the suction under the boat's bottom was finally broken and we were afloat again. We started in pursuit of the flat.

The next half hour was one of the worst of my life. I expected every moment to come upon the flat turned upside down. Finally the boat's headlight picked it up. The flat had run aground on one of the bends, and the three men were frantically waving to us and shouting. We took her in tow again and reached Calcutta shortly after dawn. There was the *Alcione* riding at anchor. We went alongside and the rhino cages were swayed aboard.

The voyage to Europe was uneventful. The news of the rhinos' arrival had been radioed ahead and when the ship docked at Genoa, the pier was black with crowds. Reporters, photographers, newsreel cameramen, radio men, representatives from the zoo, and sight-seers swarmed aboard. Mercia was paralyzed with astonishment. She kept saying over and over, "Have they all come just to see our rhinos? Why, rhinos are only animals. What do these people want?"

Mercia with her stunning exotic beauty made even a greater hit than the rhinos. She was photographed with the babies, photographed with me, photographed sitting on the ship's rail, photographed looking at Europe for the first time, and photographed in virtually every change of clothes she possessed. She was dumfounded by all the attention. Used to being ignored or snubbed by the English, she could not understand why no one cared that she was a Eurasian. She was still in a trance when we loaded the rhinos on a railway luggage car and left for Basel.

An hour or so later, a sharp reaction set in. Mercia seemed to go mad. If anyone looked at her—and because of her striking beauty everyone did—Mercia would go into a wild rage. "They're staring at me because I'm brown!" she wept. Then she feverishly began to unpack the apothecary's supply of lotions, creams and unguents she always carried. "Get out of here!" she screamed at me when I asked what she was doing. I left the compartment and stood unhappily in the passageway smoking a cigar. When Mercia finally appeared, she'd covered her face with a light pancake make-up. When I protested, she yelled, "I won't be taken for an Indian! I won't! They won't let me into a hotel or a restaurant if they know what I am. They may even send me back to Singapore."

New crowds greeted us at Basel. Mercia, after her savage outburst, had suddenly become panicky and helpless. She clung to my arm like a little girl, weeping, "Oh, Peter, what shall I do? How shall I dress? I'll take off the make-up. I know it was foolish. Peter, you must help me. You're all I have."

I sent her to wash her face and went out to greet Dr. Hediger who had arrived at the head of a new battalion of newspaper and cameramen. Flashbulbs were exploding on all sides and I was confronted by a battery of microphones. I couldn't think of a word to say, although Basel is my home and the crowd was full of familiar, smiling faces. I stood stammering and sick with embarrassment.

Someone pushed me aside. It was Mercia, radiantly lovely and smiling. She had changed into an Indian sari and she looked

marvelous. She greeted Dr. Hediger and then, being asked to say a few words, spoke for ten minutes, making jokes, describing our adventures, and saying how she'd looked forward to seeing Switzerland which was even more beautiful than she'd imagined. The crowd loved her. Meanwhile, I stood in the background, scraping the side of the platform with my shoe and wondering how the rhinos were.

Dr. Hediger had insisted that the zoo be cleared during the unloading of the rhinos as he was afraid a crowd might bother them. The crates were carefully slid down the tailgate of the truck and the cage doors lifted. The rhinos refused to come out. The elaborately designed pen was foreign to them and they clung to the familiar safety of their old cages.

"I'll get them out," I said. I went into the house that connected with the pen and gave a special whistle that the rhinos had learned to know. All during the long trip, Mercia and I had checked the babies, day and night, at regular three-hour intervals and we always gave that whistle as we came towards the cages. At once there were excited squeaks and my two animals rushed into the pen and began looking for me.

Except that they weren't my babies any longer. I'd sold them. I turned and ran out of the house by another entrance so they wouldn't see me. If they saw me again, they'd expect me to continue feeding and playing with them in this new home. And that couldn't be; I had to make a clean break.

I went to our hotel and found Mercia in our room, prancing with excitement. "We're asked to a big dinner to meet a lot of prominent people," she exclaimed. "Everyone is delighted with me. They don't seem to care what I am. And look at this!" She flourished a sheaf of letters, telegrams and cablegrams over her head.

We tore them open. There were orders from Rome, from Paris, from New York, from Buenos Aires, from Sydney, from Tokyo. Everyone wanted to commission me to get them animals. We were asked to dinners, receptions, conferences, and heaven knows what. Mercia snatched up the letters, ripped

them open, dropped them half read, and grabbed for another like a child opening birthday presents.

Finally she said while still poring over the wonderful mail, "Hurry and get dressed. We haven't much time."

"I'm not going," I said heavily.

She stared at me. "Why not?"

"Mercia, I called the babies to get them into the pen. They ran out looking for me and I had to leave them there. We'll never see Gadadahar and Joymothi again," and I began to cry.

Mercia sat staring at me. Then she said slowly, "I think you must be mad. After all, they're only animals."

She couldn't have said anything more cruel. "And you're nothing but a native!" I yelled at her.

Mercia went as white as when she was wearing the pancake make-up. I called room service and told them to send up a bottle of schnapps. Then I sat down on the bed again.

The schnapps arrived and I started drinking. Mercia watched me for a while. Then she got up and started dressing, still not speaking. She put on her evening gown and a stole of snow lynx I'd gotten for her in Calcutta. Then she walked over and stood looking down at me.

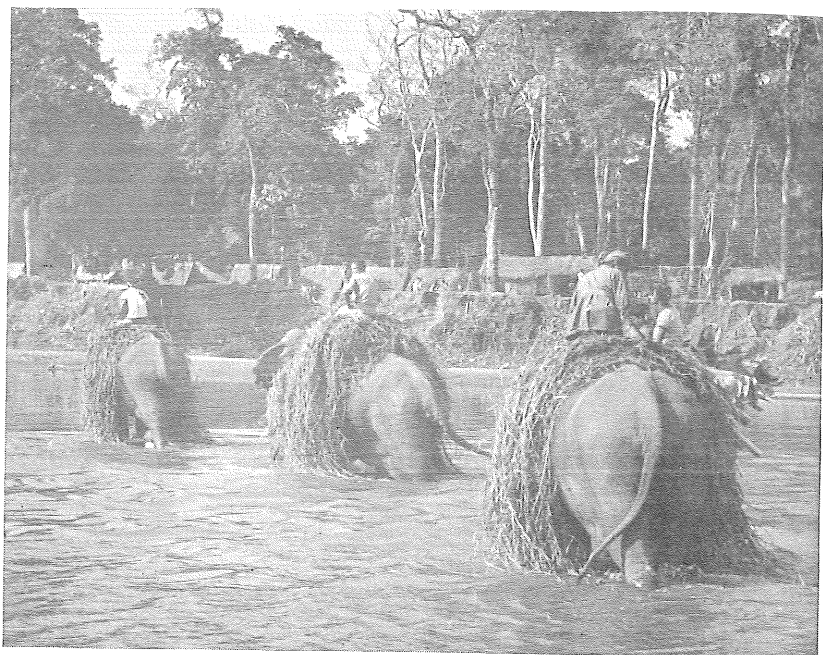
"I've waited all my life to go to a big party and be received by Europeans," she said levelly. "This is my chance. I'm not going to give it up for you and those stinking rhinos. Are you coming?"

I couldn't. I couldn't talk to people tonight with the babies locked up in the Basel Zoo, all alone and frightened. I shook my head.

"Then I'm going alone," said Mercia and walked out. I heard her high-heeled shoes tapping off down the corridor. I was glad she was gone. Now I could start drinking seriously.

I drank myself into a stupor and passed out within an hour. But no matter how drunk I became, all night long I got up at the prescribed periods to look for the rhinos and give them their palm sugar and salt. I wandered around the corridors of the hotel whistling for them and it was only when I didn't hear their

funny little squeaks that I knew they were gone. Then I'd go back home to my room and drink more schnapps until I could sleep again. I swore over and over that I'd never again make a pet out of an animal but of course I broke my word. I'm still breaking it.



An elephant camp in India. The animals in the foreground are carrying grass for their suppers.

Mercia and I with mahout on Akbar, trailing rhinos through the ekkra grass in the Assam sanctuary. Note Akbar's "caste mark."

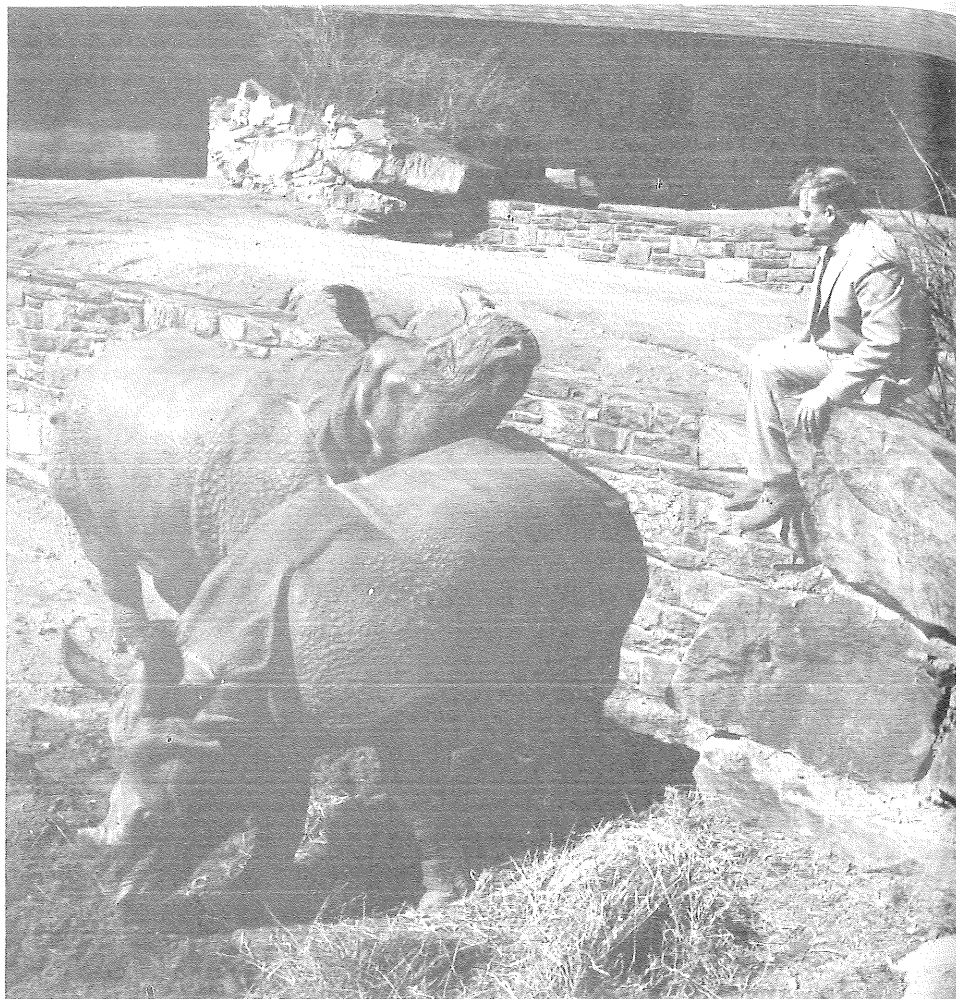


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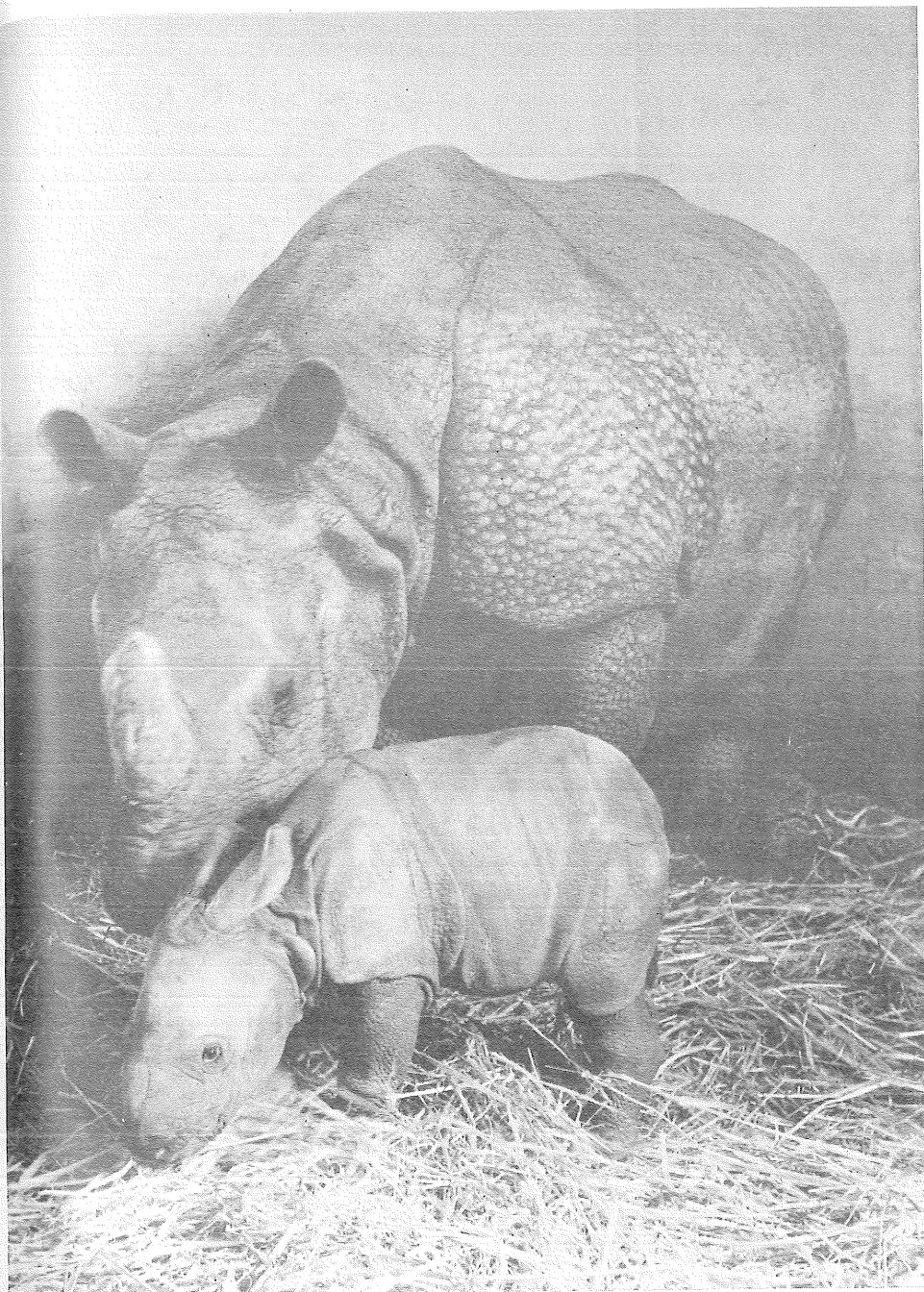
Rhino trapping in Assam. *Above left:* Natives disguise the pit trap with rushes. *Above right:* Our first catch, dangerous and unwanted—a water buffalo! *Below left:* A few moments after this picture of our first captive rhino was taken, the baby's mother burst from the ekkra to scatter the proud captors in terrified flight. *Below right:* The mother rhino vanquished, natives prepare to haul the baby from pit to truck.





*Gus Pasquarella*

At the Philadelphia Zoo renewing acquaintance with two rhinos I'd captured in Assam.



*H. Bertolf*

Here, at the Basel Zoo, is the offspring of that first pair of Indian rhinos I brought back from Assam.