

THE
WHITE ELEPHANT;

OR,

THE HUNTERS OF AVA

AND

THE KING OF THE GOLDEN FOOT

BY

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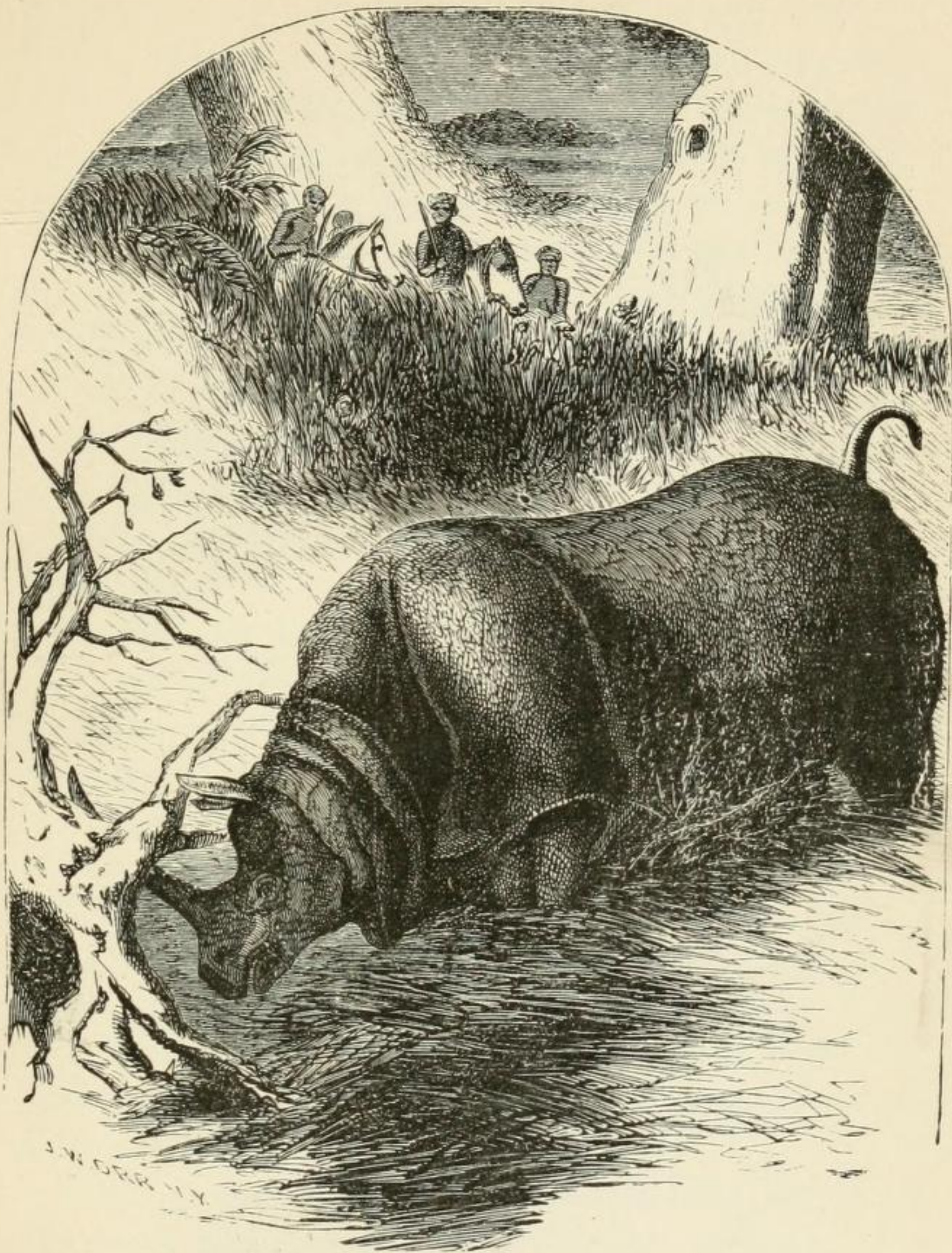
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THE RHINOCEROS.

CHAPTER XVII.

A RHINOCEROS HUNT.

WE had nearly traversed the swamp, and were within five hundred yards of the wood, when, stopping his horse, and with eyes flashing with excitement, Mikee exclaimed—

“The rhinoceros! We must take him.”

Then for a minute or so I watched the great unwieldy brute, who, with his great upper lip, which is capable of being lengthened out so as to increase his power of seizing any object, in the manner the elephant does with its trunk, was pulling down the leafy branch of a tree; which, having quickly devoured, he then placed his snout, or rather the great horn at its end, in the root, till, finding sufficient leverage, he lifted it from the earth, and, to my surprise, speedily ripped it into narrow strips, and prepared to enjoy his repast.

“Take him!” echoed Naon; adding, “the worthy hunter is brave, but he cannot do impossibilities. Why, the brute has the power of fifty oxen; his hide cannot be pierced, and he will tread us all to death with one fall of his foot.”

“Will the noble colar hunt the brute?” said Mikee.

“Hunt!” said I, laughing. “Why, Mikee, the beast has no hunting legs; he can’t waddle.”

“The noble colar shall see, if he will try,” was the reply.

“But suppose we succeed?” said I.

“His hide, his horn will repay us for our trouble,” said Mikee.

“Agreed then,” I said.

“The noble colar’s attendant is afraid, therefore let him get off the horse,” said the hunter; adding, “he can take mine.”

“But what will you do, Mikee?”

“Ride behind the colar,” was the reply.

Hearing which, and no doubt thinking the hunter wished to ride behind me that I might bear the brunt of the attack, Naon expressed unmistakable doubts as to the wisdom of the arrangement. However, having faith in the hunter, I complied: and when Mikee had mounted behind me, sword in hand, I held the loaded rifle; Naon mounted Mikee’s horse, and followed.

Finding we were firm in our seats, Mikee goaded the horse, and we set off at a gentle trot. Mikee, as we neared the animal, gave a strange unearthly scream; whereupon the rhinoceros, after his nature, never turning his head, set off, to my surprise, at a full trot; and thus the chase, if chase it may be termed, began. For some ten minutes we followed.

“See,” I said, holding my rifle in readiness for a close attack, “he is at bay; he cannot pass those trees.”

But Mikee noticed not my words; and he was right; for, although the trees would have formed a

formidable obstacle to a horse, the huge creature dashed by them as if they had been reeds; they bent against his hide, and returned to their natural position when he had passed; and thus, as he no doubt calculated, he gained upon us, for we were obliged to pick our way. The stupid brute, however, not deigning to look backward, had no sooner passed the trees than, believing himself to be safe, he stayed to feed.

“We have him now,” cried Mikee; and goading the horse forward at a faster pace, we got within a few yards of him. That few yards, however, was every thing to the animal, for he was near another thicket of prickly brambles, over which hung the huge arm of a tree. Onward, with a bellow, and, as before, the arms of the trees bent before his strength. Forward again we went, goading our horse to its full speed, excited with the chase, for it was a trial of cunning against swiftness—rhinoceros *versus* horse. We neared the tree; it was too near to stop the horse; my breast came violently in contact with the branch, and over we rolled, both of us, into the thicket.

Fortunately we were but little hurt, so, remounting, we were off again, under the branch, through the thicket, as best we could, and at last made upon the rhinoceros. “Ah!” I exclaimed, seeing another thicket in the distance, to which the cunning animal was making way, “he shall not dodge us this time; here goes,” and I discharged my rifle. Mikee laughed, and well he might, for the bullet, though it struck the animal, rolled off its hide harmlessly; and with a

whisk of the tail, by way, perhaps, of a slight acknowledgement of the favor, he continued to trot as before, through that thicket, and again he had made ground. In a few minutes, however, we were again upon his track, and gaining ground at every instant. It was all plain now, there were no more thickets. "Now we have him," cried Mikee, urging our beast forward.

"Stay; let me load; he will turn at us," said I.

"Not so; they never turn; we must shoot ahead," said Mikee, and in two minutes we had gained upon him some dozen yards. "Now wheel round," said Mikee, taking the rein, and in an instant we stood before the formidable monster. It was an exciting moment; my last, I believed; for seeing us in front, he stood still, at bay, too proud to turn, and evidently lashing himself into a fury.

"Let us turn, he will never overtake us," said I, giving the rein a pull, and fearfully alarmed.

"No; now is our time; give me the rein," said Mikee, coolly, and in another moment the enraged beast put down his head, pointed his horn, and ran at us with the fury and after the fashion of a wild boar. The rein, however, was in Mikee's hand, so, turning the horse short to one side, he slipped off its back behind the wild brute, and with astonishing dexterity ran his sword across the tendon of one of its heels, and the beast fell, incapable of moving, but bellowing with rage at its victor, who, quietly taking my rifle from my hand, discharged its contents into its brain.

Bravo, Mikee ; you are a wonderful hunter !” I exclaimed, rather to hide my tremor (for I can assure you I trembled, more at my escape—and I thought it a narrow one—than I had in positive danger) than at any pleasure I felt at the destruction of an animal which, although so ungainly in shape, except attacked, is harmless to all but the elephant, with whom he seems to have an hereditary feud ; for it is said they never meet without a duel, and seldom without the elephant meeting with its death by a thrust in the chest from its antagonist’s formidable horn.

“Thanks to the lord of heaven for the sahib’s escape,” said Naon, riding up to us now the danger was over.

“Let us praise the courage of the brave Mikee,” said I.

“Truly he is a mighty hunter,” said Naon.

Then, when Mikee had cut his mark upon the hide with his sword, he said, “Now, if it please the noble colar, we will hasten to the village.”

“But what is to be done with this dead beast, O brave and worthy Mikee ? for surely it will be worth a large amount of silver,” said Naon.

“The worthy colar will carry it before him upon his horse,” said Mikee, laughing.

Naon, however, not liking to be laughed at, kept a sullen silence.

“But will the carcass be safe here from robbers ?” I asked.

“Mikee will hasten to the village, where carts may be obtained,” was the reply. Rejoiced to find we

were so near the river, I mounted, and we proceeded on our way in silence till we came to some large fields planted with, what at the time, from the shape, appeared to me to be thistles, and about four feet in height.

“The Lord of heaven be thanked, we are near the river, for this is the indigo plantation,” said Naon.

Then it was not thistles, but indigo, that plant of which we hear so much, and generally know so little. Although in Burma the indigo plant thrives luxuriantly, the natives prepare it with small skill, simply by steeping the weed in old boats sunk in the river, and which answers the purpose of a vat. It is questionable if they know how to purify and reduce it to a hard refined consistence ; or if they do, they are too indolent, and prefer to use it in a liquid state.

In other parts of Asia, however, indigo is prepared as follows:—When the plant has reached a given height, and the leaves are in good condition, they are stripped from the stalks and thrown into large pits half filled with water where they are bruised and stirred till the water becomes muddy. After a few days the water is drawn off, and the slimy sediment taken up in baskets of the shape of children’s tops, or flat cakes, and dried in the sun. The people employed to sift the indigo stop their nostrils, keep a cloth before their faces, with little holes for their eyes, and drink milk every half hour to preserve them from the penetrating quality of the dust, which, notwithstanding all their precaution, gets into their throats, and causes the saliva to become blue.

At length, after traversing these extensive fields, we came to the stockade, or bamboo enclosure of a town, or rather large village, the houses of which, although numerous, were erected of wood, and built upon poles, almost all having great earthen jars filled with water upon the roofs, in readiness for fire, as also a long bamboo pole fitted with an iron hook, for the purpose of pulling down the thatch, as well as another pole, at the end of which was an iron grating some three feet square, for the purpose of suppressing any sudden conflagration by pressure. The greater part of the houses were small, and of unplanned wood, as befitted the rank in life of their inhabitants. One, however, was much larger than the rest, and from the lacquer upon the poles and doors, was evidently the residence of the head man, as no less a person dared presume upon such a luxury.

The town consisted of two well-paved streets, which crossed each other at right angles, and were drained by gutters along the sides. The lines of houses were at intervals interspersed with kioums, or monasteries, whose triple gilded roofs, shaded by the foliage of the trees, which arose from the ground behind, as also those of the many pagodas (the works of religious merit of living and dead Burmans), with their winding paths, gave an imposing appearance to the scene.

Passing through the wicket, near which was an ancient piece of cannon, and a few indolent soldiers lying upon the ground chewing betel and smoking cigars, to our delight, we saw a shed in which were

jars of water, placed there by some charitable person for the benefit of pedestrians of the poorer class, of which we gladly availed ourselves; and as we were desirous of passing through the streets unobserved, it was fortunate that when we entered the town the people were engaged in attending the procession of a young novice, who was about entering upon the priesthood.

This youth—he was not more than ten years of age—was wrapped in a yellow robe, and mounted upon a handsomely caparisoned horse led by two servants. The procession was led by a band of music, then a host of seniors, in the midst of whom rode the hero of the day, followed by a vast number of his male and female relations and friends, accompanied by their whole families, each person carrying in his hand a present for the priests of the monastery of which the youth was about to become a member.

So far had we passed through the town without calling the especial attention of any of the multitude. When, however, the procession took a different direction from that in which Mikee was leading us, I became alarmed, for we came face to face with a recruiting party, who were conducting conscripts down to the war-boats; but such a recruiting party that you do not see in England. There were about a hundred peasants, who, being destitute of the money to purchase substitutes, were being either driven at the point of the spear, or, with their arms and legs tied together, carried upon the shoulders of the soldiers down to the war-boats in the river.

Fortunately I was too well disguised, or the soldiers too much engaged to notice me, for they passed on their way, when Mikee, who had observed my fears, said—

“The noble colar is safe; the good priest will befriend us;” and as he spoke we stopped at the entrance of a kioum, where the hunter was warmly greeted by a yellow-robed, shaven-pated, round-faced Poonghi (priest), who led us into the large space—it could not be called a hall, for there were no sides—wherein it is customary to entertain travelers, and among several of whom we took up our station for the night, greatly to the chagrin of Naon, who, looking around him nervously, said—

“It would have been wiser, sahib, had the worthy hunter conducted us at once to his boat.”

“It is not possible; Mikee must remain here this night, for to-morrow he will be put into law,” said the hunter

“Put into law,” I repeated, with surprise, for so tedious and expensive is that operation in Burma, that “may he be put into law” is the greatest misfortune that a Burman can wish his worst enemy; but for some reason Mikee made no reply. An hour afterward, the iron tongue of the great bell which marks the passing hours in Burmese towns, warned us it was time for sleep.

“By the way, the Burmese method of dividing the time is curious, and peculiar to themselves. Their year, like our own, consists of twelve months, although their months, being alternately of twenty-

nine and thirty-days, this year consists of three hundred and fifty-four days, and is a lunar year. In order, however, to preserve the solar time, the fourth month of every third year is doubled, which brings the year to three hundred and sixty-four days. The additional days and hour are supplied, as occasion demands, by a royal order, under the advice of the court Brahmins, and by custom are added to the third month of the year.

Their great peculiarity, however, is the non-enumeration of the days of the entire month; for instance, instead of enumerating as we do, from the first to the last day of the month, they divide each month into two two parts, which they designate as the days of the increasing and the waning moon. The first day of a month, for example, they term the first of the increasing moon, and the sixteenth they term the first of the waning moon.

The week, like our own, is divided into seven days; instead, however, of hours, they divide the day into sixty parts, called Nari. The most popular division of the day is into eight divisions, or watches, four being allotted to the day and four to the night, each watch being equal to three of our hours. The time-keeper employed is a copper cup, perforated at the bottom, and placed in a vase of water, which sinks to a particular mark at the close of each Nari, when a great bell, suspended from a tall belfry close to the house of the chief magistrate is struck.

In the capital there is a regular establishment for the service of the bell, and a custom that, if the time-

keeper on duty commits any error, his companions are at liberty to carry him off and sell him at once in the public market (you must remember that a value is set upon every man, woman, and child in the kingdom, in order that they may be sold off, if necessary, like their goods and chattels, to pay debts of their own or their relations'). With reference, however, to the time-keeper, it is merely a form; the sale is a mock one, the price being always fixed at a very trifling amount, so that the offender may ransom himself without difficulty.