

# MISHI THE MAN-EATER

*AND OTHER TALES OF BIG GAME*

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## CHAPTER VI

### SOME RING STORIES

In the North Cachiar Hills rhinoceros were not everyday occurrences and most of those we came across were solitary wanderers from the swamps at the foot of these hills. If they were few in number, they were, however, almost invariably distinguished on account of their extremely bad tempers, so, whenever I heard of their arrival, I generally made a point of trying to bring them to bag as soon as possible. Two rhinos which I came across in two consecutive years in the same place were both quite typical North Cachiar specimens; solitary brutes, bad-tempered and wicked to the core. The two adventures with them were, however, great contrasts in every way.

My first adventure was with a lady rhinoceros, who had taken up her abode in a wide stretch of rolling hill country, some seventy miles from my headquarters. In the early spring the greater part

of this country was very much like an English park, everywhere a carpet of vivid, green grass, only a few inches high, with scattered oak trees growing over the greater part of it. In the valleys between the hills there were generally tangled growths of dense elephant grass and cane brakes, some of these patches almost impassable at any time of the year; whilst, here and there, on the crests of the hills, there were dense thickets of scrubby, clump bamboo, growing so closely that, unless one lay on one's face on the ground, it was impossible to see more than two or three yards ahead.

Villages were few and far between, but one of these had the misfortune to be placed in the centre of the ground selected by this rhioceros for her temporary abode, and word was soon brought to me that she had taken to going for the wretched natives when employed in their little patches of cultivation. She was reported to have already killed two women and one man, whom she had caught in their rice-fields alone; in each case trampling upon her victims until it was almost impossible to distinguish any human remains in the earth she had churned up.

## SOME RHINO STORIES

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At the time word was brought to me of this rhino I was shooting gaur in the vicinity with a friend, a very keen sportsman, but one who had done no big game shooting, and my original intention was therefore to leave the rhino alone until I could tackle her at leisure and by myself. Fate, however, willed otherwise. One morning we started out together, meaning to part company within a mile or so; he, with the intention of trying for some buffalo he had seen the previous day, I to cut off and send back to camp the head of a bull gaur which I had shot just before dark the night before; then continue shooting in the same direction. Shortly after we had parted I heard my pal B. shouting in the distance, so cutting across country I went to see what he wanted. Before, however, I got to him the reason was pretty obvious, for there were the prints of an unusually big rhinoceros showing up conspicuously in the short grass and in the soft soil.

When I got to him I found it was as I had expected. He, too, had seen the tracks and was very keen on going after the rhinoceros at once. I eventually agreed after some persuasion, and we

arranged our plan of action. The habits of this rhino were well known to our trackers, and they told us that she almost invariably spent the early part of the day, after feeding, in some small pools situated in the middle of a fairly large patch of long grass. If disturbed in these, she invariably made for some thorny bamboo cover, where she awaited her enemies. We decided that I should lead and that the best tracker should keep at my heels to see that I did not miss the tracks which were not too conspicuous when we got on to the higher and harder ground and, moreover, it was essential for the man with the gun to keep a watch as far ahead as possible, in case of our game showing itself. For some distance the trail led us up and down over the hills, for the most part in fairly short grass where we could swing along at a good pace but, whenever we got to the hollows at the bottoms of the hills, we found the jungle pretty thick, and we had to move with the greatest caution, on the off chance that Mrs. Rhino had stopped to wallow in the mud and water nearly always to be found in those patches.

We had, however, gone fully two miles before

we saw any signs of her slackening her pace, after which the track showed that, instead of keeping straight ahead, she had wandered from one side to the other, evidently having made up her mind to have a rest as soon as she came to a suitably muddy pool. After about another quarter or perhaps half a mile of this desultory wandering we came to some very thick elephant grass, where her tracks were very numerous, the place apparently being one of her favourite resorts. Here we again called a halt and consulted among ourselves as to the best method of attack. The trackers told us that about a couple of hundred yards farther on, inside the grass, which was from about eight to ten feet high, there were some three or four small pools which always contained water and here they thought we should find the object of our pursuit. The tracks were so easy to follow, the ground being again quite soft, that we told the two trackers to keep well behind us and, should the rhino charge, to make the best of their way up the nearest trees, so that we should not have the double responsibility of looking out both for ourselves and for them. Ram, the head tracker, however, told us

that he did not think there was any chance of her charging in the grass but that, if she was at home and heard us coming, she would make for the thorn bamboo a few hundred yards farther on. He told us that, so far, this had always been the habit of the rhino when disturbed, although, in the quite open country, or in cultivation, she always charged directly she saw anybody.

Proceeding cautiously along a path trodden well down by the rhino we gradually approached the pool and had got within ten or fifteen yards of it when we heard a mighty snort in front of us, followed by the sound of a huge body splashing out of the mud and water and then cantering off in a direction away from us. Following her up, we got through the grass without adventure and, coming into an open space, we saw in front of us a wide stretch of almost impenetrable bamboo. The tracks of the rhino led straight into this and here evidently was her stronghold, in which we had to attack her with every advantage on her side; for it would be absolutely impossible to see her if she charged until she was almost on the top of us, whilst there were no trees to climb and the

bamboos were so dense that it was *not easy* to slip on one side in case of a charge.

We made up our minds, however, to tackle her where she was and agreed that, when she charged, as we knew she would do when she got our wind, we were to reserve our fire until she was almost on us, and then jump, I to the right and B. to the left, so as to try and get her between us. As it turned out our arrangement was the best possible one that could have been made under the circumstances, for, had we been able to jump as agreed upon, we ought to have got good side shots as she passed us, for no rhino can pull up in a really determined charge under several yards. Starting once more upon the tracks we had got some fifty to a hundred yards inside the bamboo jungle before hearing or seeing anything. Then we simultaneously caught a sound as of some animal, at no distance from us, breathing very hard, and, presently, we heard something heavy moving towards us. Not a sign, however, could we see of anything, whilst the sounds made were extraordinarily slight and soft for so huge a beast. Signing to B. to keep alert I lay down on my face to peer through the bases of the bamboo



clumps, and directly I did so I could see the four immense mud-plastered feet of the rhino coming towards us. Waiting until she was within a few yards, I then jumped to my feet and shouted to B. to look out and, the next moment, with angry snorts and grunts, the rhino was on the top of us, crashing through the bamboos as if they were so much tissue paper. Fortunately for me I had a fairly clear space on my left and jumped for all I was worth, the rhino passing straight on. Whirling round to try to get a shot I found I was too late, for the rhino at once disappeared behind a clump of bamboos and, to my dismay, I heard B. running backwards.

Evidently he had been too much shut in by the jungle to jump on one side and the next second I heard the double report of a rifle and then a scream of "My God, he's got me!" Dashing to the right of the clump of bamboos between us I could just see B. lying on his back, the head of the rhino between his legs, evidently trying to slash him with her teeth, or to hurl him on one side preparatory to trampling on him. At once raising my gun I let drive at the rhino's brain, which I could just see clear of the

bamboos. Unfortunately I was a couple of inches too low, for the 12-bore conical bullet, instead of killing the rhino outright, merely smashed the base of her jaw. For a second the smoke hung like a pall in the thick, wet jungle and, before I could fire my second barrel, the rhino had turned like a cat upon me and, catching me fairly in the chest with her nose or horn, had sent me flying through the air. Still grasping my rifle I fell on my face with a tremendous thud some yards away and the rhino, following me up, planted one foot firmly in the small of my back and then passed on. For a few moments I thought my back was broken, for, though I still held my rifle in my hand and could move my one arm and head, my legs seemed to be quite useless. As it happened, however, the rhino had thrown me into a pool of mud which had allowed me to sink, whilst the mass of broken bamboos around me had taken off much of her tremendous weight. In a few minutes I was able to crawl, and as the rhinoceros was standing some thirty yards away from us, roaring continually defiance at us, I warned B. to keep quiet or he would bring her down on us again. This was quite sufficient to

reduce him to silence, although he must have been suffering greatly and, presently, when I managed to drag myself over to him, I found that not only was he suffering from the assault of the rhino but also from the effects of my shot, the base of my bullet having gone clean through his thigh, which had been on the other side of the rhino's head when I fired.

Although in a towering rage the rhino was evidently so deluged with blood about the head that she could neither see us nor get our wind; we were therefore safe from a further attack and, eventually, when the rhino moved off, the two trackers came back. Between us we made a litter with their puggarees and some bamboos and the two men carried B. back to the camp, a distance of some five or six miles, whilst I carried the rifles. Poor B.'s shooting was over for some time to come, whilst I was far too bruised and knocked about to do any more shooting that day; indeed, afterwards we found that in addition to minor injuries I had six ribs broken, my sternum stove in, and a small bone in my shoulder broken. This, together with a journey of seventy-two miles back to headquarters

in prospect, was sufficient to look forward to without more adventures. At last, after a very wearisome march from village to village, where we got fresh relays of carriers for B., we arrived at my headquarters, where B. was duly attended to and got all right in time. The rhinoceros, we heard about ten days after, had been seen in a very weak state, apparently blinded and unable to eat and our next report was that her remains had been found in the very pool from which we had first started her. Undoubtedly the broken jaw had eventually caused her death by starvation, though, in so far as the occurrence itself went, we had to admit that it was a case of "Rhino Victrix."

My next encounter with a rhino happened at about the same date in the following year, but under very different circumstances, whilst the final result, if tragic to the rhino, was very much more satisfactory to ourselves. On this occasion, also, I had a young friend with me who was being initiated into big game shooting but, as I had no intention of tackling any more rhinos on foot in impossible jungle, we took with us two elephants reputed to be staunch to all sorts of big game. Of the two elephants one

was a fine large tusker, well known to have no fear of tiger and, though he had no experience of rhino, we hoped he would be equally satisfactory with them, should we have the luck to come across one. The other elephant was a very small, female, baggage elephant, but what her qualifications or disqualifications were in regard to sport we had no idea. Unfortunately I had never shot off either of these elephants, for I had always eschewed shooting in this manner as a rather inferior form of sport. Moreover, shooting with a heavy rifle and only one arm to hold it with, off the back of an elephant, with no howdah, was not particularly easy and with a bolting elephant might become extremely uncomfortable. However, "Needs must," etc., so we duly started out, hoping for the best.

We had been successful in our shooting during the previous week, having got a couple of good bull gaur and a buffalo, but we had got them on foot, and had not tried the elephants. Our camp was situated in some jungle very close to where we had stayed the previous year and had been so heavily scored off by the female rhino. We knew also that there was another rhino in the vicinity, as he had killed a man

who had met him suddenly while passing from one piece of cultivation to another. This rhino seemed to be a great wanderer and, though every day we had kept a look out for his tracks we had seen no signs of them until the previous evening, when, as we were coming home, we came across them, about twenty-four hours old, leading to some heavy, bamboo jungle.

Accordingly, we decided to have a try for him and, on the morning in question, we mounted our two elephants with the intention of tracking him down, if possible. The only howdah we possessed was on the back of the big elephant and into this my young friend L. climbed, whilst I sat astride the small one. We wandered about for a considerable time without seeing any fresh tracks, so at last made up our minds to examine the pool from which we had first started the rhino of the previous year. We had, however, only gone about half-way to this place when we came on fresh tracks made by the rhino that morning, going in the opposite direction to that of the pool. He was moving slowly, feeding as he went and twice we came on places where he had lain down and rested; curiously enough, both

times in quite short grass. The jungle into which we tracked him and in which we expected he was hiding, was not nearly so heavy as that generally frequented by these animals, so that even when we got well inside it we could, from our raised positions, see some way ahead of us. Moving along through this thin scrub we were able to keep about a hundred yards apart and yet be pretty sure that the rhino, if present, would certainly be seen. We had not gone far thus when I saw L.'s elephant suddenly stop; L.'s rifle go up to his shoulder and in the next second away went his elephant, off went the rifle into the air and down came a rhinoceros in a headlong charge. He had been lying down in the scrub, fifty or sixty yards on the far side of the direction L. was taking but had charged directly he had got our wind. Unfortunately, although I could see the bushes and scrub smashing down as he passed through them, I never got a glimpse of the rhino, though I could see the back of L.'s elephant in the distance, L. tumbling about inside the howdah as though he was playing at being a dice in a dice-box.

After following the elephant for a couple of hundred yards the rhino turned off and came

across the jungle in front of me, but too far off for a shot. My tiny elephant, however, showed no fear and, when the mahout urged her forward, scuttled after the rhinoceros as fast as she could go. We were soon out-distanced and presently we lost, not only all signs of the rhinoceros but even of his tracks, for there had been a long drought and the ground was very hard. Getting inside some fairly thick bamboo jungle, with lofty clumps through which we could see a long way ahead, we halted and awaited the return of the big elephant, who arrived almost immediately after.

As we were standing talking, whilst our trackers were on the ground hunting round for tracks, a barking deer came out of the jungle, passing within a foot or two of L.'s elephant. L. asked me if he might shoot, or whether it would frighten the rhino if he did so. As I knew it would be more likely to bring the rhino back if he heard the shot I told him to fire away, upon which he let drive and dropped the deer. Getting down from his elephant, he was going towards the deer to pick it up when we heard a crashing through the jungle in front of us and back came the rhino, cantering towards us.



L.'s elephant was a big one, and the howdah was higher than the elephant but, before the latter had time to turn and flee once again, I caught a glimpse of L. back in the howdah. How he got there I don't know, but it must have been by an acrobatic feat of which anyone might have been proud. As the rhino charged down on my elephant, who stood as steady as a rock, I let drive and caught the rhino on the point of the shoulder; this swung him round and I gave him a second barrel just behind the point of the elbow but, as we found out afterwards, a little too low down. Off he went again, but on three legs and, as we took up his tracks, we could see that his off foreleg was a swinger, for several times, as he passed over fallen branches and débris, he came a purler. About four hundred yards of this was enough for him and getting into some long scrub he awaited my arrival, charging down viciously as soon as I got within thirty yards of him. Again I got a snapshot but, unfortunately, at the same shoulder and only placed my shot within a few inches of the first bullet without doing him very much harm. My second barrel raked him as he swung round but again failed to stop him and

he plunged through the bamboos for two or three hundred yards and then again awaited us. Coming up to him, this time as he charged, I managed to get a shot better placed, which pulled him up to a walk but the brave beast still continued to advance, and I had to give him another barrel. This stopped him within a few yards of the elephant and, as he stood with legs widespread, evidently just about to fall, L. came up on his tusker, administered a *coup de grâce* from a few yards off and then, once more, went on a tour of inspection of the surrounding country. Presently, however, he came back for the last time, having had a very severe rattling again, at the end of which his elephant had pulled up with such a jerk that his solar topee had fallen off, to be promptly smashed by the frightened beast, whilst he himself had nearly followed suit.

This time we had certainly come out on top and we had shot a really magnificent rhinoceros, standing well over six feet at the shoulder, and with a horn just over eighteen inches long; I think, however, we both felt that there was not the same satisfaction in shooting him off elephants as we should have felt had we been successful on foot.

## MISHI THE MAN-EATER

At the beginning of this chapter I have said that our local rhinoceri were nearly always distinguished for their bad tempers, but of course there were exceptions to these and, occasionally, I came across one that was as cowardly as those were brave about which I have already written. I remember on one occasion when I got information about a rhinoceros I went out at once in the hopes of getting a shot but, on my arrival at the place whence he had been reported, found that he had moved on. His tracks were plentiful all about the country and at one particular pool, where he had been in the habit of coming every morning and evening to drink and wallow, we picked up some about twenty-four hours old. Taking these up we followed them for some six miles and found that the rhino, though feeding here and there at first, seemed to be steadily making his way to some other point, though he was not moving at any great pace. Another six miles brought us to some pools where he had rested and had had a bath before again moving on. At this point his tracks seemed to be about twelve or fourteen hours old but, fortunately for us, he was travelling in a very erratic ring, so that, although we

had spent some five hours after him, we were not more than an hour or so from our camp.

Trudging steadily on we followed him for the whole of that day, having to give up shortly before dusk to get back to camp, then about five miles away. We calculated that the rhino was then not more than two or three hours ahead of us, so made up our minds to have another attempt to track him down the following day. Arrived back at the camp we fed and turned it at once and, before dawn the next morning, were well on our way to where we had left the tracks the previous evening. Taking these up again we were disappointed to find that he had been moving at a fair pace. Once more a wearisome walk of another twelve miles or so had to be tramped before we began to get on terms with him. Twice we had passed places where he had lain down and slept, whilst latterly the cropped grass and shoots on either side of his tracks showed that he was moving very slowly and probably had no intention of travelling much farther. Still on and on we went, and the sun first grew hotter and hotter and then cooler again as it began to sink behind the hills, yet still with no rhino visible.

THE MAN-EATER

We were just thinking of once more returning to camp, for, although we were evidently very close to him, the light would not have held down the side of the hill and showed me the huge bulk of a rhino sauntering through some grass, coming towards us, and certainly not half a mile away.

From his movements it appeared that he had turned round, was coming back on his tracks, and would very probably pass quite close to where we were. He was sauntering backwards and forwards, eating as he came and, as the breeze blew straight from him to us, he had no idea of our presence. The grass we were in was not more than four feet high and, though it was quite sufficiently long for us to lie in and hide, it was much too short to conceal the rhino. Unfortunately, if he continued to follow his old tracks backwards he would come head on to us and in case of a charge it would be difficult to get any but a head shot, whilst there were no bushes or clumps of bamboos which we could dodge behind for momentary shelter. About a hundred yards from us, however, there was a fairly big, wild plum tree which he would pass

within a dozen yards of if he stuck to his former tracks. This seemed quite a possible vantage point from which to get a shot but, when we got up to the tree, I found it was impossible to climb it with one hand, so I sent the tracker up the tree whilst I myself took a position about sixty yards beyond it, giving the tracker instructions to throw stones at the rhino and attract his attention when it passed him. Collecting a number of large stones in his loin-cloth the tracker then went up the tree and perched himself comfortably in a big fork, whilst I retired to hide in the grass, expecting that, when the rhino stopped to see who was hurling missiles at him, I should get a broadside shot.

By this time the rhino had got to within about a quarter of a mile of us, still quite unsuspecting of danger and, of course, we had taken the utmost precaution not to show ourselves, so that his nose alone could have warned him of our presence. It seemed an immense time before the rhino came up to us. Feeding as he came he only made a few yards in as many minutes and once I thought he was going to lie down and that I should have to stalk him as he lay. He, however, changed

his mind, came on steadily up to the tree and was at once greeted with a large stone which caught him a smack on the flank. So far, however, from charging the tree, or turning round to see who was insulting him, he gave a squeal of terror, jumped about and was just going to bolt the way he had come when I got on my feet and gave him a shot behind the shoulder. On receiving this he roared lustily but, instead of charging me, as I fully expected, he commenced backing down the hill. Replacing the spent cartridge with a new one, I let him have another barrel, again getting him behind the shoulder but again a little bit too far back. As he received the last shot the rhino looked up and saw me and at once wheeling off, cantered down to the bottom of the hill and plunged into the long grass which grew at the bottom.

Following him up as quickly as I could I found masses of blood, much of which was frothy and thick, showing that his lungs were badly damaged, so I felt sure he could not go far but would probably wait for me in the long grass. Arriving at this I entered it very quietly and cautiously, on the alert for a charge which I thought would

almost certainly come. Instead of this, as soon as he got my wind, he snorted and lumbered off once more away from me. Hearing that he was retreating instead of charging I, too, broke into a run and was soon climbing out of the long grass on to the shorter grass higher up the hill, when I once more saw the rhino ahead of me. Uphill, however, he could do little more than crawl, and even as he went I could hear a rattle and choke at every breath he took. Still, although I shouted at him to try to make him stop, he had no heart for fighting, so gradually I decreased the distance until I was barely thirty yards from him and was forging ahead to a position enabling me to get a satisfactory broadside shot. In a few more minutes I had got parallel with him and raked him from behind the ribs, slantwise through his chest. This brought him to a standstill and at last he turned to face me, but still his heart failed him and, once more, he tried to stagger up the hill, when, as he turned, I gave him a shot through the neck which finished him off.

From first to last this rhinoceros showed no signs of anything but terror and the squeal of funk



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he uttered when he received the stone on his side, and saw my tracker in the tree, was a curious contrast to the roaring grunt of fury and indignation uttered by our braver enemies under similar circumstances. He was an equally fine beast, standing about six feet three inches at the shoulder, but had a poor horn of about seven inches only.