AHEAD LIES THE JUNGLE

by

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ILLUSTRATED

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clash, and there was no guarantee the tether rope would hold.

So there was nothing to it but for us to sit on a machan.

On hearing the goat the lion came out all right, but one look at the huge buffalo and he stood still in his tracks. He sat down on the edge of the glen and viewed the scene from there, got up, viewed it from a second opening, then a third, but not once did he put his foot forward.

The buffalo's reactions were entirely to the contrary. On seeing the lion it lowered its head and began pawing the ground furiously, ready to take the offensive. The animal even became gallant, every time the lion appeared it would step in front of the bleating goat, as if to console the little creature with the words, 'Don't worry, the brute can get at you only over my dead body.' And strangely enough the goat would stop bleating.

The buffalo won the fight on points, for the simple reason the lion did not join it, he vanished into the forest and did not show up again. 'Had it been night, the outcome would have been different,' Dostubhai told us, 'then the female and the male would have joined hands, the female to draw the buffalo's attention, while the male attacked from behind.'

We should have stayed in the Gir longer, for from the photographic point of view the achievement had been poor, and that was because the animals would not come out before sundown. The only good pictures Ylla secured were of 'Ganda', the 'Mad One', when he took the bait at three o'clock and they were hardly six or seven. However, Ylla had an appointment to keep in Cooch Bihar to photograph a tiger shoot, and we had no alternative but to leave.

Frankly, I left the Gir with a feeling of nostalgia. I had come to love this forest of pleasing scenic beauty where brooks murmured all day, and birds sang in the trees. In Rajkot, while taking farewell, we felt quite

embarrassed to tell Mr. Shungloo that we felt our job was only half done. His reply was touching, 'Come again, you are always welcome.' Like the lions, the men of Saurashtra are large-hearted.

CHAPTER X

87.

The One-Horned Rhinoceros of Kaziranga

ON HER return from Cooch Bihar I met Ylla in Calcutta, as had been previously arranged, and we flew to Jorhat in Central Assam in quest of **Rhinoceros unicornis**, alias the Great Indian one-horned rhino in the wild life sanctuary at Kaziranga. From the plane we had a preview of this State, the easternmost in the Indian Republic, a land of hills and rivers, thick forested hills, and wide long rivers, including the mighty Brahmaputra, one of the longest in the world.

Jorhat is in the plains of Assam, a long trough of land enclosed by hill ranges where the climate is damp and humid throughout the year—as soon as I alighted at the airport I felt too warm to keep my jacket on even though in the rest of India it was still the winter season. The dampness and humidity are eminently suited to the growth of the tea plant, however, and a good portion of Assam's arable land is under tea cultivation.

E. P. Gee, manager of the Doyang Tea Estate, had sent his Land Rover to fetch us from the airport. Gee had met Ylla in London the year before and had invited her to stay with him when she came to Assam. The Land Rover was a godsend, for the alternative would

have been a thirty-four miles journey over a so-so ro by one of the overcrowded buses of the State Transpo Department.

My earlier notion of Gee had been of a red-eyed, le thery faced planter who could swear like a trooper a was never parted from his peg of whisky, and what came across was a mild-mannered, cultured Englishm who seemed better fitted to preside over the functions a public school. And that is what nearly came to pa in his life; after taking his degree at Cambridge, Gee w on the point of taking up the teaching profession wh an advertisement in a planter's journal inviting applic tions for a tea estate manager's post in Assam change his mind, and his career. 'I was always attracted to th study of nature,' he told me, 'and Assam seemed to be better place to do it in than a British provincial town The thirty-odd years that he has spent in the countr have made him highly knowledgeable on the subject o India's wild life, and his study of the **Rhinoceros unicorni** is very thorough. One of the first to be selected as member of the Indian Board for Wild Life, Gee has ceaselessly campaigned for more sanctuaries and national parks for India, and the tightening up of measures fo the protection of wild animals.

We had barely had our first sip of tea on the spacious veranda of his bungalow than the tea planter decided to give us a unique taste of the State's 'wild life'. 'I've kept some Konyak Nagas waiting for you,' he said, sig nalling to someone on the lawn, and before we could say Jack Robinson a whole troupe of them filed into the garden, primitive men dressed in banana-leaf cummer bunds and forage caps (the apparel held together by thorns) and wearing hideous-looking strings of animal teeth around their necks. The tribesmen could not have had a bath for weeks, but that did not in the least make them feel self-conscious about their personal appearance. When Gee explained to them that Ylla proposed to take

ir photographs they packed themselves into a line and od woodenly. This Victorian family portrait style se did not please Ylla, and when Gee, at her behest, horted them to sit down they rapidly pulled out chairs om the veranda and sat on them, with their legs pulled . When the photographing was over and they were ked to disperse, the semi-nude fellows beseeched my mpanion to open her camera and show them the re- lts. Since they could not understand why such a thing uld not be done, and felt piqued, they had to be molli- d by being given a peek at each other through the olli's viewfinder. How they giggled!

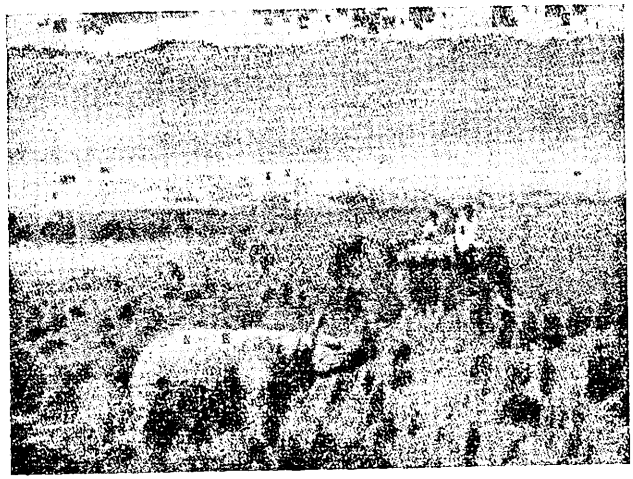
That night Gee showed us a film of rhinoceros he had ken in the Kaziranga Sanctuary. Its highlight was the ecies' courtship methods. Apparently lovelorn rhinos btain a great deal of satisfaction by alternately touch- g their horned noses and ample hind quarters.

After lunch the following day we set out for Kaziranga hich is fifty miles from Doyang. For three-quarters of e distance the road ran through the tea garden area, ws and rows of table-shaped plants filling up the land- ape. Then came trees, tall, leafy, spreading, and be- ind them, on the left, the long, undulating line of the likir hills. On the right the tree clusters faded into ushes, which in turn, gave place to a grassy plain, big nd green like a lake. A little farther on a conspicuous ooden board on the roadside announced to us that this as the Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary. Two miles after he grassy plain began a road branched out on the left. We took it, and went up a sharp gradient, there to arrive t a modern-looking two-storey house of wood and plaster construction, the Kaziranga Forest Rest House. Beside it stood smaller structures, the Ranger's and Foresters' quarters and offices.

Gee introduced us to R. C. Dass, the Range Officer, a large and mild-mannered individual with a smiling face who allotted us our rooms. It was not four o'clock yet,

so we decided to have a quick look at the sanctuary before it grew dark. We drove down to the main road, turned left and carried on for another mile, there to branch off into a country track that leads into the sanctuary. For half a mile the track ran through paddy fields and open ground which acts as a buffer zone to divide the dominion of man from that of the beast. On the edge of the cleared land, and on the stream which constitutes the actual sanctuary boundary, stood the tower-like Mihimukh Observation Post. It is a large wooden room mounted on twenty-feet high poles, in some respects resembling a machan except that it is not camouflaged and all around its four sides runs a wide veranda from where you can observe the sourrounding scene.

This is an excellent spot from which to watch rhinos provided you can spend a good part of the day and all the night there. Rhinos, like elephants, are mainly nocturnal beasts and the ideal time to see them is on moonlight nights when the animals come out into the open. Their daily routine begins before sunset. That is the time when they leave their lairs and arrive at the stream near the Observation Post for a good long fill. After that they waddle on to the nearward bank and browse among the grass. They stay in the neighbourhood most of the night, now cropping, now regurgitating, now standing still to rest, for no one disturbs them here, and they are unafraid. When morning comes the animals wander back into the sanctuary, first to the stream for a drink, thence to a muddy pool to wallow, thereafter to their lairs in the tall Ikra grass. The Kaziranga animals have enjoyed immunity for so long, since 1916 to be precise, that they rarely show hostility towards man, and two of them, Burrah Goonda and Kankata actually would come out when they heard visitors coming, they had become that tame. Until the animals died a few years ago, Burrah Goonda of ripe old age, and Kankata



A general view of Kaziranga with the Mitir hills in the background taken during a rhino drive

Logging elephants in Assam

The Dassarah procession at the palace. Seated in the gold and silverplated howdah on Ranga's back is the Maharajah of Mysore in his ceremonial dress

The Dassarah procession emerging from the palace

an unfortunate accident, these were Kaziranga's chief showpieces.

We saw no rhino that afternoon, and went back to the Rest House before sunset where Gee took leave of us to return to Doyang. We had company though, Ellis Dungan, the Hollywood cameraman who had come to take shots of rhino-capturing operations. Since the end of the last war Assam State has permitted the trapping of one or two rhinos a year, and on this occasion the demand was from the Philadelphia zoo. Some three years previously they had bought a female calf from Kaziranga. Now the calf had grown into an adult and was pining for a mate. It was to supply that need that the order had been placed.

Spending several hours in the Mihimukh Observation Post is one way of seeing rhinos. Another is to scour the adjoining grass jungle on elephant-back. The Forest Department maintains six elephants for the purpose, and visitors can hire them for ten rupees a trip of three hours' duration, either in the morning or in the afternoon. The grass being high you don't always see the animal, but when you detect his presence by the movement of the grass—and how it trembles when the animal lumbers through it—you pick up his trail and follow him until he emerges into the open. However, to be sure of seeing the animal you should have several elephants on the go so the creature can be surrounded and driven out. The Forest Department therefore recommends that visitors go in so as to have more elephants at their disposal. For photographic purposes that was the only course to follow.

We arrived at the Mihimukh Observation Post early the following morning. Mist still clung to the ground, and the line of Mikir hills to the south was hidden behind a pale grey cloud. The elephants were on their way to pick us up—all trips into the sanctuary begin from the Observation Post—we could not see them, but the bells around their necks could be distinctly heard, the tinkling

growing louder as they approached. There were three Foresters and a half a dozen Forest Guards under the charge of Ranger Dass to accompany us, and Dungan too had joined the party.

The Forest Officers and I climbed upon the smaller pad elephants, while Akbar, the huge tusker, was allotted to the photographers. The howdah on his back had ample room to take their equipment and there were fixed benches in it for Ylla and Dungan to sit upon. The plan was that Akbar should be left standing concealed in the grass on the rim of a small glen, while we were to scour the sourrounding grass and drive a rhino before them.

Preparations for rhino-capturing operations were afoot in Kaziranga at the time, and camouflaged pits nine feet long, five feet wide, and six feet deep had been dug in the area to the north-west of the Observation Post. In order that our elephants may not tumble into them by mistake we chose the grass to the south-east to scour, the glen where Akbar was stationed marking the limit of the pit zone. The south-east area had an added advantage; grass there had been recently burnt, and we were sure to find rhinos in it for the animals love the new shoots that sprout up after such fires.

Coursing through Ikra grass which grows thick and high, as high as sixteen feet sometimes, is troublesome even on elephant-back, for its sharp blades rub against one's body and can cut the skin. Another source of discomfort was dew. Assam experiences heavy dewfall in winter, and the grass is thoroughly sprinkled with it—after every morning trip I used to find my trouser ends and jacket cuffs soaking wet.

The rhinoceros is a big powerful beast, weighing anything up to two tons, and its skin is tough, nevertheless it avoids going through the Ikra grass unless compelled to. For its normal movements the animal follows the paths that it has trodden out by constant use, narrow lanes which wander in curves and circles like a maze,

often enough the same path crossing itself at several points, for the creatures have a low IQ, and practically no sense of direction. Abutting on the paths are their lairs, deep caves under over-hanging grass clusters, which the animals flatten out by rolling about on the ground.

After being in the grass for about ten minutes we came to an opening the size of a tent pitch on the floor of which lay a pile of fresh rhino dung, fresh because it was steaming. That was a clear indication that an animal had passed there recently, and if we stuck to the path that shot out from the opposite side, there was a good chance of catching up with the beast, for these animals are inveterate dawdlers.

Left to myself I would never have been able to find my way in this grass jungle, it was so vast seeming like a sea, but Ranger Dass, whose elephant walked beside mine, had a good bump for direction and knew the topography of the area well. We had advanced some fifty yards when abruptly he stopped his elephant, and kneeling on the pad, let out a few staccato whistles that brought the other elephants to a standstill. We clustered close together and Ranger Dass held a hurried consultation with the mahouts after which he ordered my elephant to advance a few steps beckoning me to peer through the grass. And sure enough in a tolerably large opening a rhino was peacefully grazing, his armour-like skin ashen grey, his massive neck stretched down at a forty-five degrees angle, the ugly mouth, crowned with a dagger-shaped horn, sibilantly sucking in grass shoots. When the shoots were cropped the mouth moved forward without changing the angle of the neck, like a vacuum-cleaner going over a carpet.

Without making any noise we moved to the other side of the opening, and formed a semicircle behind the beast. Suddenly the huge head went up and the nose stuck out as if to smell what was amiss—the pose was that of a corpulent schoolmarm suspiciously viewing the class

under her spectacles. He saw us. Dipping his head and bending at the knees the brute dashed into the grass like a boulder hurled downhill. On and on he went without any thought as to where he was going, but going, in his reckoning, away from us. That for a rhino is impossible, for an elephant's larger size and weight carries him through the grass with comparatively less effort, and as to the direction he had taken we could easily make that out by the tremorous line of grass crests.

For the pursuit the elephant line was broadened into a crescent shape, and the mahouts beat and cursed their animals to hasten their pace. As far as I was concerned we were merely following the rhino, but that was not exactly correct. Actually by the clever manipulation of our flanks we were systematically canalising the beast towards the glen where the photographers were stationed.

Rhinos are panicky runners, and soon get exhausted. After madly rushing through the grass for 200 yards the animal's speed slackened, and he began to trot. Every time he reached an opening he would pause and look back, to see if we were still on his track. In time he became so blasé he would halt long enough as though to give us a chance to change our direction, so he could do likewise. Or may be, and his manner suggested that, the beast was just as curious about us, as we were of him.

And so we went for a mile or more, now halting, now speeding, with the rhino forming the centrifugal point of our movement. Apparently the animal was feeling at ease, for when he entered the photographers' glen his gait was that of an unhurried stroller. What a wonderful chance for Ylla, what a superb action picture the scene could make! Alas! that was not to be. The rhino had hardly reached the centre of the glen than the mountainous Akbar broke cover and stepped out into the open. The tusker's entry came as such a shock to the beast; he whirled to the right and shot into the grass literally like a cannonball.

Ranger Dass was livid with rage, his plan had been upset. He had hoped to extend our flanks and by a quick encircling movement hem the rhino into the glen. However, he was more incensed because of Akbar's untimely entry. It is unwise, dangerous, to surprise a rhino, for the animal panics, and may even attack, thus jeopardising the lives of the riders. Why had Akbar been moved when Dass had strictly ordered his mahout not to? The mahout pointed his finger at Dungan saheb. Dungan's explanation was typical of a cameraman's, 'We couldn't focus properly from where we were,' he said. 'In future please do not stir from where I place you,' and the way Dass spoke left no doubt that from hereon his orders would have to be implicitly obeyed.

A smoke did much towards calming frayed tempers, and Dass was smiling when he set out again.

It was nearing nine o'clock, and we had only an hour or so in which to drive a fresh beast before the photographers. After that we would have to stop for then it would be time for the elephants to return to the **pilkhana,** as their stables near the Forest Office are called, to feed and rest. Except in cool places elephants are not worked during the hot part of the day, for heat affects them, and by ten o'clock it gets quite warm in Assam.

Nine o'clock was a little too late to be looking for rhinos, that is when the animals are on the wallows en route to their lairs. We entered the grass on our right and went plodding through to the buffer zone. Many rhinos had fed here the previous night as was apparent from the trampled grass and the dung piles on the ground, but now there was no rhino to be seen. We scoured the area to the east, then to the south, in vain. As the search was about to be given up, the mahout on our right signalled to us to stop. We gathered around him and looked where he pointed; a rhino pair was dawdling on the edge of a wallow, making up their minds about when to go through with the mud-bath ritual.

Manœuvring on this occasion had to be cautiously done, for the cover was thin, and the grass not so tall. Before taking up our positions we posted an elephant on either side of the opening to guard the flanks. When our three elephants advanced from the rear the startled rhinos tried to break out from the sides, exactly as Dass had anticipated, and were checked by the already posted flanks.

The bewildered beasts had no alternative but to go straight ahead and they did so by breaking into a headlong gallop, splashing clumsily through the wallow mud, thence into the grass beyond. On and on they went, shattering the grass like a hurricane, and we could keep track of them with the greatest difficulty. At last when we emerged into an opening we found that one of the rhinos had given us the slip.

In order that the remaining one might not do the same Dass got him shepherded on to a well-beaten path. The animal stuck to it which was heartening since the path led to the photographers' glen. Excitement reached fever-heat when the rhino entered the glen. Dass ordered the elephants to fan out and surround the beast. Before that manœuvre could be completed, to our great astonishment, the beast disappeared, was literally swallowed up by the earth. He had gone a little too far on the other extremity of the glen and fallen into a pit. 'Oh, God,' the Forester riding behind me exclaimed, his voice strained.

It took some time before we could shake off our stupor, for this was an unforeseen development, and we were at a loss to know what to do. The only solution seemed to be to get the rhino out. The question was, how?

But we need not have worried, the rhino himself was doing the needful. After he tumbled into the pit all we could see was a small hole gaping in the camouflage. Now a snout bobbed up and practically breathed the camouflaged away. Then the animal's body heaved back and forth, and the daggerlike horn scattered showers

of mud as it furiously dug into the pit sides. The creature even made a step into the front wall of the pit, and levered himself up a few inches. Thank the Lord the soil of Kaziranga, annually inundated by the floodwaters of the Brahmaputra which flows by its side, is moist. The step gave way and the beast collapsed.

That relieved our minds to a certain extent, but the atmosphere continued to be tense. To worsen matters the elephants had become obstinate and would not obey their mahouts. They would neither move nor turn, but stood facing the beast. This is typical of elephants; when confronted by infuriated rhinos they never show him their rump which is the most unprotected part of their bodies, since neither the trunk nor the tusks, their only weapons of defence, can reach it.

The beast was struggling ceaselessly to get out. In his next attempt he came up to his shoulders, and only a little more effort was needed to see him out. What did surfaced rhinos do to bystanders? We wondered. Would we return home in one piece? At that moment that seemed too much to hope for.

Again the good, marshy earth of the Brahmaputra came to our rescue. The soggy soil was helping the beast to dig steps, but his enormous weight was also causing the mud to slip. Once again his foothold gave way and the animal collapsed. How the ground shook with the impact! 'What shall we do?' Dass kept on muttering nervously.

There was nothing to do except stand and watch. Even if an alternative existed, we knew perfectly well the elephants could not be relied upon to carry out our orders. We were thankful they were not stampeding—one or some of us were bound to tumble off in that case—although now and again they would trumpet shrilly to give vent to their pent-up feelings.

Rhino stupidity is proverbial. There was only one monotonous pattern by which the beast was struggling

to get free, by digging up the pit side in front of him, his brain would not conceive of any other plan. It is said that Lord Krishna once decided to discard the elephant as an animal of war in favour of the rhino, since the former's height made the warrior astride his back an easy target for enemy archers. A rhino was caught and dressed in a mailed armour, and the master of the royal stables was ordered to train him. A few months later when the animal was produced for inspection Lord Krishna was astonished to find the master of the stables shuffling far in the rear of the beast. 'Where is his driver and where is the howdah on his back?' the Lord demanded. Replied the despondent trainer, 'My Lord, an animal like this will never win, but will always lose a battle for its master. It is so stupid it cannot memorise commands; it is so surly it does not obey orders.' Disgusted Lord Krishna had the beast driven back into the Jungle. In the jungle the rhino forgot that he had armour on, and wore it all his life. He bequeathed his characteristics to his offsprings including the armour which was transferred to them in the shape of a tough hide. The story is a legend, but the grain of truth sticks in the fact that to this day Indian shields are made of rhino hide.

But on this occasion the rhino's brute power did help him. He kept on rising, slipping, rising, trying all the time. Once by a violent jerk the boiler-shaped body was lifted two feet above the ground, and a heave brought it clean out of the pit. For a while the brute stood still looking wild and hideous in his coating of mud. His head lowered, he turned sideways and glared at the elephants one by one. Then he gave a prolonged snort, bounced up like a kicked football, and dashed into the grass and was gone.

We breathed normally again, the sensation was akin to what one feels on surfacing after a struggle with weeds on the bottom of a lake. The relief was so great, and sudden, it was exhausting, and for a long time none of

us spoke. Afterwards when I asked Ylla how she felt, she threw up her head, gazed at the sky, and sighed, 'Just like resurrection'.

The following day we decided to avoid the pitfalls by avoiding the pit area altogether. Instead we had our drive in the grass well to the south of the Observation Post. The photographers, too, decided to come with us, they did not like being cooped up in one place as it made them idle most of the time. They also discarded the howdah on Akbar's back, their equipment got mixed up on the howdah floor, they said, and the howdah sides were a great handicap to free movement.

The grass in the south was thicker and taller, and often we lost sight of each other. However the mahouts knew their whereabouts and the elephant line was maintained intact. After a long search we came upon a rhino pair cropping grass. The elephants formed a semicircle and took up the chase. It was not successful because one of the animals was lost in the grass, and the other broke through our line.

Another scour through the grass, east, west, south. Unexpectedly we came upon three animals in a clearing. The surprise was mutual, and for a long minute we gazed at each other mutely. Recovering, we fanned out and embarked on the chase.

This trio was peculiar. Unlike the other rhinos we had encountered so far, these did not panic but ran at an easy trot, and if by any chance we got close, the bulkiest among them would turn around and stay still as though to hold us until his companions had had time to escape. This was not exactly good Samaritan behaviour, we noticed, as the fellow was a strict disciplinarian who insisted on maintaining the flight formation, for if his companions lagged behind his horn would dig savagely into their rumps which made them kick and bleat. By and by the brute grew so bold he would call upon his companions to halt with him, and the three would make

a show of ferocity and try to break through our line. To a certain extent his tactics succeeded, for when we emerged on to fairly open ground we found that one of the animals had slipped out of the dragnet.

The animals were too wilful to permit us to herd them, they chose their own course, and we just followed them. Encirclement was not worth hazarding, for six elephants are not enough to surround two rhinos. The animals had taken a well-trodden path, and were moving leisurely on it, when past the Observation Post it suddenly dawned on Dass there was a pit on that path. 'I hope they don't fall into it,' he exclaimed as if in prayer. He pointed out to me where the pit was, among silk cotton saplings whose leafless branches were ablaze with red flowers.

Dass could hardly welcome such a thing happening, for orders were explicit on the point that in capturing rhino the fall should occur at night so the caging and carting operations can be completed in the course of the following morning before the sun got too hot, since these rare animals—there are only 450 **Rhinoceros unicornis** alive in the world today—are liable to sunstroke. But what could anyone do with this pair which pressed on and on, and could not be stopped?

Luckily the first animal got clear of the pit. So would the second have done had it not taken into its head to pause and look back. In doing so the brute slightly changed his direction, and on resuming his trot stepped into the pit. The animal saved itself from a precipitate fall by unique presence of mind; the second his forefeet slipped in he transferred all his weight to the hind legs, with the result he stood half in and half out. It was an awkward position for him and must have caused intense pain, but the beast bore it with exemplary fortitude.

The kindest thing to happen in the circumstances was for the beast to fall in completely. However it was beyond our power to bring that about since the elephants

were behaving nervously again and could not be relied upon to carry out our orders.

The rhino that had gone ahead had realised that he was alone. What had happened to his mate who was with him only a minute ago? He turned back and sauntered over to the pit to inquire, there to be greeted by that curious sight, his companion standing neither in nor out. It was apparent he had never seen him in that funny position before, and circled round the pit to investigate. In doing so the two animals collided and the first rhino collapsed into the pit with a loud thud. That so startled the second beast he gave a big jump and broke into a headlong gallop. For half a mile he ran, looking neither left nor right, until the grass in the north-west swallowed him up.

After a few minutes the fallen animal recovered its wits and began scrambling to get out; but he was handicapped by the fact that the earth in this pit was dry and so could not be flattened out into steps. He struggled constantly, fanning out earth clods with his horn, but try as he might, he could not raise himself. 'We will have to capture him,' Dass said, sounding more desperate than confident, for we were most unprepared to undertake such a task, having neither ropes nor adequate personnel with us.

Two elephants were dispatched to the Observation Post to fetch the trapping gear, ropes, pegs and mallets. The place was a mile away, and it would take the animals three-quarters of an hour to return. For a long time we stood watching the rhino's struggles, our hearts palpitating, and I could not but envy the jungle mynahs' nonchalance, the way they were feasting merrily on the red flowers of the silk cotton branches only a few feet above the infuriated beast.

Then Dass did a thing that made our hearts miss a beat. He slid down from the back of his elephant and undid the heavy pad ropes; looping one he fastened its

end to a sapling and cautiously advanced towards the pit. Stancing backward like a javeline-thrower he waited for the rhino to lunge at him, and quickly threw the lasso. It was a miss but with great presence of mind he pulled it back and tried again. This time the loop hooked on. 'Come on someone, come on down and help me,' he called to the Foresters, as he gathered up the slack and tightened it around the sapling's base. Only one man answered his call, and he wavered half-way to the pit. Uttering a mouthful of curses Dass picked up the other rope, tied it to a sapling on the other side of the path and advanced, a step at a time. This time the lasso caught on at the first try. The ropes around its neck made the beast hopping mad and he began to pull hard at them and at one point nearly dragged Dass in with him. 'Do you want me to be killed, come on and help,' Dass fumed, his words bitter, pleading. Another Forester slid down and tried to help, but now there was no more rope left. Fortunately at that moment the two elephants bringing the trapping gear arrived.

Elephant ropes are thick, but the beast was straining at them so powerfully we expected them to give way any minute. We could not imagine the fate of these men if by some chance the rhino were to climb out of the pit. Now more men were down, and with the freshly brought ropes more lassos were being aimed. In the next half-hour eight had clasped around the animal, and although the beast went on struggling harder than ever, he seemed securely bound.

The courage of the men was beginning to have its effect on the elephants too. They were now amenable to orders, and squatted down for us to descend. Ylla was behaving like a woman possessed, snapping away ceaselessly. 'Keep off, keep off, Miss Koffler,' Dass shouted, worried, but she took no notice of his warning and picked her way through the labyrinth of ropes to the pit side. She was no more than six feet from the pit when the

rhino gave a vicious snort and bucked. She sprang back like a cat that burns its mouth in a saucerful of hot milk.

It was amazing how quickly fear had left us, we who not long ago trembled at the sight of the rhino's struggles. The animal was still struggling, and just as desperately, and yet we moved about in a carefree manner as if it was an enjoyable event. The atmosphere, too, was conducive to such a feeling, a dash of chill still hung in the air but the mist had lifted and a beautiful red sun floated in the east like a carnival balloon. The sky was lovely to look at, blue from end to end, unblemished except for a pair of circling vultures.

Dass sent an elephant to the Forest Office to fetch the cage to carry the rhino in, while the Foresters and Forest Guards shinned up the thin sapling trunks and cooeed to villagers two miles away to send men to dig a ramp. Nothing much was expected to happen until the ramp was dug—a matter of another hour at least—so I went back to the **dak** bungalow to eat a belated breakfast.

At half-past twelve when I returned everything was ready, the ramp had been dug, and the cage, too, had arrived. For most part the rhino was quiescent, but when diggers got too close to him he would rear up and butt at them.

There was no shade in this open place for us to sit under, except what the thin branches of the silk cotton saplings cast, but that was so nominal as to be useless. 'I hope everything goes well,' Dass kept on praying, fanning himself with his narrow-brimmed hat. Until the animal was inside the stockade below the Forest Office he could expect no peace of mind, for the responsibility for the animal's safety was his, and his alone.

The diggers stopped two feet short of the pit. Held back with ropes the cage was slowly slid over the ramp's incline until it came to rest against the buffer wall, with the two wings of its door thrown wide open. Then some selected men began thinning out the buffer. It was a

dangerous task, for the rhino bucked fretfully, and the men had to parry his lunges with sharp backward leaps. When the wall was sufficiently whittled down, the lasso ends holding the animal were released from the saplings and pegs, and carefully passed through the cage bars for men to hold at the back. Then a Forest Guard bobbed up in the rear of the cage and waved a white cloth to incite the rhino and he charged forward with great force boring a big hole through the wall. Another heave and his left foot was inside the cage. But there the animal stopped, abruptly and conclusively, and would not move. Dass took hold of a stick and belaboured him savagely, but that made no effect on the beast. Then to our amazement he sank slowly, ponderously, as if sucked in by quicksand. When for a long time he remained quiescent, Dass lay down on the pit side and felt the animal's tongue with his hand. It was hanging out like a splash of red paint, and the eyes had a fixed glassy stare about them. Dass sat up, his feet still dangling inside the pit, and slapped his forehead. 'He's dead,' he groaned.

We stood transfixed, stunned. What an anticlimax to reach in a wild life drama! But was the news really true? Couldn't Dass be making a mistake? It was now the veterinarian's turn to take the field, he had arrived with me from the Forest Office when I returned from breakfast to examine the animal's condition as is customary after capture. He prostrated himself on the ground and felt the rhino's neck, tongue, eyes. Quietly he rose, dusted his clothes, and said matter-of-factly, 'Death due to heart failure induced by sunstroke. These animals', and how quickly his voice resumed its human quality, 'are big, yet so absurdly delicate. We've been in the same sun, but none of us have even a headache.'

A pall of gloom gathered over the place like a fog spreading. Not long ago this patch of grassland was the hub of activity, was alive with human voices. Now it looked sepulchral. Pickaxes idled on the ground,

ropes lay scattered, and the cage door pressed against the ramp wall like the jaws of a monster's skeleton. Men, sitting in knots, said nothing, but just looked, inanely, inertly. Ylla and Dungan were the only ones busy, they were packing away their equipment, and heatedly arguing between themselves if pouring water over the animal would not have saved his life. The question was, where was the water, except what we had brought in our thermos flasks?

I gazed at the sky and noticed that it was the same unaltered canopy of azure that I had seen in the morning. In only one respect it had changed, and the change was portentous. Instead of two, many vultures were circling overhead, coming lower and lower towards us. How did these creatures know death had occured when it was barely a few minutes old?

Early the following morning the Divisional Forest Officer arrived from Jorhat to make a report. He accepted the veterinarian's opinion that the rhino's death was due to natural causes, and Range Officer Dass was absolved of all blame. A great burden was lifted off his mind, but Dass was far from happy. 'My job is to see these animals live not die,' he told me afterwards, 'but what can you do when fate is against you?' There was a ring of remorse in his voice as he said that.

We made several trips into the sanctuary after that incident, and came across more rhinos. They are markedly primitive beasts who lack the herd instinct. Seeing more than two animals together was a rare occurrence, and the five rhinos we once encountered on the edge of a shallow lake in the Daflong Bheel four miles to the north, appeared to have come together more by chance than habit, for when they left they entered the grass separately, and each in his own direction.

Our most unforgettable impression was that of the rhino mother whom we often saw walking behind her baby, a creature no bigger than an Alsatian. This was

strange as generally the calves of animals trail behind their mothers. Her object in taking up the rear position could be either that she wanted to see if the young one could be trusted to find its own way in the jungle, or being extra zealous thought she could guard it better by keeping it in view all the time. The responsibility of motherhood had made the animal unusually ferocious, and she would come charging every time she saw us. Once we managed to stop her only a few feet away by yelling madly. Our elephant's conduct on that occasion was highly creditable. Although only a fifteen-year-old tusker recently pressed into the visitor-carrying service, he stood his ground with exemplary calm which deterred the incensed beast from pressing home the charge. Or perhaps the bulk of the credit should go to the mahout whose sharp and crisp commands encouraged the tusker to remain firm. That was the one occasion in Kaziranga, for that matter any time during our trip, when we felt that death was near at hand.

We had rhino charging us before, but none had pressed the attack with such determination as the mother did. Apparently there is an explanation why she behaved in so bellicose a manner. Rhinos beget only one offspring every four years, so guard their babies jealously. At one time, it is said, rhino babies used to walk behind their mothers, but the wily tiger lying concealed in the adjoining shrubbery would carry them off behind the mother's back. It is in order to avoid such surprises that nowadays rhino mothers walk behind their young ones. They also seem to have had their revenge on the misbehaving felines by practically booting them out of the sanctuary. During the twelve days we were there we did not come across a single tiger, although old entries in the Visitors' Book at the Rest House mention meeting as many as eleven in the course of one single trip.

At Kaziranga I had my first view of the wild buffalo. These animals were prevalent in the northern, and north-

western part of the sanctuary. I had heard so much of their thoughtless ferocity that I expected them to charge at sight. On the contrary the herds would take to their heels everytime we appeared.

Once Dass decided to get round the animals by walking our elephants in the thick grass until we were near them. Before we could get there they saw us and dashed away. They did not live up to their reputation for ferocity, but for thoughtlessness they outshone themselves. Following closely behind their leader, a spiny brute with curved horns, they zigzagged from one corner of the plain to the other like a frightened king cobra. Then by pure fluke they spotted one of our elephants who had gone round to herd them from the opposite side. Back they dashed at great speed and crashed into the grass close beside us, just like the charge of the Light Brigade in the good old 'ours not to reason why' style. The leader was everything to them, they followed him literally, blindly, and since he believed in going round in circles we had the unique experience of standing in the middle of their mad, circular gallop. With every circle they came closer to us, until at one point we could have touched them with a stick. It was pathetic to see them thus stuck, so we went to their rescue by putting our elephants in their path and scared them into taking another direction.

Ylla was put off these beasts. Their poor physiques were repulsive, ribbed chests, hollow, pinched stomachs, a murky grey skin, they looked like living cadavers. Compared to the domesticated buffalo they are ugly hideous creatures. The solitary bull has an instinctive hatred for the domesticated stud male whom he attacks to kill. Many domesticated herds graze in the buffer zone where grass is plentiful, and interbreeding with the wild stock is common. The resulting progeny, however, are an inferior variety, they are bad milkers and far too unruly to control.

One day Pat Stracey, until recently Senior Conservator of Forests, Assam, blew into the Rest House. 'Blew in' is the correct expression to describe the ingress, for Stracey hardly ever walks, he rushes, or as Ylla once picturesquely put it, 'when the man enters he makes a draught in the room'. Before leaving Assam to take up his new appointment as the Director of Forest Education at the Forest Research Institute at Dehra Dun, Stracey was racing all over the State saying goodbye to friends. Kaziranga fell in the route of one such trip. 'Hallo Miss Koffler,' he began, pulling a chair towards him and sitting down on it before we could take in the situation. 'I hear things have not been as good as you had expected. Pity. Never mind. But you have got some pictures, haven't you? Now let me tell you a funny story, you must listen to this....'

Damn it! his enthusiasm was so infectious we began pulling chairs ourselves—and making more draught in that small room!

We had met Stracey once before, at Gee's, where he had stayed the night while we were there. However, it was through his letters to Ylla in Mysore that we had made our first contact with him. The letters had advised us which was the suitable time to visit Assam, which places to go to, including the temperatures and visibility we were likely to encounter in each place. The information had helped us considerably in drawing up our itinerary. He had also held up the rhino-capturing operations, scheduled to take place in early January, so we could witness it. What was most appealing about the letters was their human quality, so rarely to be found in communications with officials. They forged some intimate contact between us that made the man a friend before we met him.

He listened to us patiently while we recounted our experiences in the sanctuary. He counselled, 'Don't stay in this Rest House all the time. Go into the forest and live out there for a few days. You will get a better idea of animals. Take elephants from here. There is camping equipment at the Range Office which you can use.'

We didn't go into the forest and pitch camp for a few days as Stracey had advised, but it did reveal to us the shortcoming in our approach to wild life—namely that we were looking at it through the eyes of an outsider, and had made no attempt to imbibe the jungle spirit. No wonder, on its side the jungle too, was behaving formally and had withheld from us many of its secrets.

Stracey had also arranged another thing for our benefit, to see the six tuskers belonging to the Assam Railway and Trading Company at Margherita, in north-eastern Assam, who are credited to be the best loading elephants in the world. Graham Eyre Higgins, Timber Superintendent of the company, wrote in reply to Stracey's letter welcoming us to his place. And so one afternoon we bade farewell to Kaziranga and its bevy of one-horned rhinos.

CHAPTER XI

World's Best Elephants

FOR Margherita the route lay via Jorhat, and so on the way we stopped for the night at Gee's in Doyang. 'Certainly take my Land Rover, the place is more than a hundred miles away; you will need it,' Gee insisted when we told him of our plan. I do not know what we could have done without that car, it served us from the time we landed in Assam till the moment we left, for buses and railways are very bad in the State, and there are no good taxis one can hire.