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HUNTER'S TRACKS

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patience till the dawn, hoping only that in the meanwhile no homing lion would seek the den.

When at last dawn came we realized that the whirrings and murmurs that had accompanied our terrible waking hours were caused by scores of hairy bats that clung to the roof and had, in their pestilential way, been urinating upon us in showers. Unpleasant, very.

We returned in the morning none the worse—except by frayed nerves—and I had to chalk up a victory to the elephants.

It wasn't the only one by any means. I remember another occasion when I was humiliated and vanquished by a lone beast I met face to face on a track when searching for an apocryphal monster tusker who had been causing trouble among the Makueni women by frightening them while they carried their gourds of water from the stream.

The beast I met was the trouble-maker all right, but his tusks were mere 60- or 70-pounders—exaggerated by the native women into 150-pounders—and once again I wasn't prepared to waste a licence on him.

He, however, was not quite so willing to lose interest in me. He stood directly in my path, fully braced, monumental, his ears forward and his tiny amber eyes with their long lashes watching me and weighing me up as steadily as a cat watches a mouse. There was no more than a fifteen-yard space between us. I was well aware that my safety depended on remaining absolutely still, and I found it extremely difficult; for at such moments one feels an almost irresistible urge to blink or twitch the lips or shift the weight from one foot to the other. That would have been fatal: he would have charged and I should have been forced to raise my rifle and fire.

So there we stood staring each other out. The only movement the elephant made was to waggle his lower jaw from side to side—a movement I took as expressing

his contempt. For perhaps four minutes we stood like that; then, as if tired and contemptuous of the whole thing, he allowed his trunk to dangle loosely on the ground, feeling along the surface as if searching for a lost sixpence.

Still I made no move, puzzling out in my mind just what he was up to with that grovelling movement of his trunk. I tumbled to it too late: he was sucking up a multitude of gritty stones. I realized it just as he curled his trunk inward towards his mouth and then with an enormously powerful backhander uncurled it and blew the entire charge of grit and dust over me with great force. I felt the sting on my forehead and face like a charge of buckshot.

Satisfied now with his revenge he gave a last derisive snort, sauntered off the track and continued on his way.

I think the lesson to be drawn from that incident is to remember that when meeting any dangerous beast (except the rhino) *vis-à-vis* and not wishing to kill it the safest plan is to stand still and remain absolutely silent. You may suffer humiliation, but it is doubtful if any worse harm will befall you.

Rhinos are a special problem. Not much sense in trying to stand and stare them out, for if they know you're there they're usually charging you madly. And you want to make sure you shoot them—and shoot to kill—before they get closer than five yards—otherwise the impetus of the charging body (even though the rhino is technically dead) will topple you over and crush you. I have heard people talk of stepping aside from the oncoming bodies of rhinos they have just shot, but have never seen it done.

It is not at all easy to stalk rhinos to their resting places, even if the wind is in the right direction and one is absolutely silent in approaching. They are peculiarly sensitive to the presence of man and appear restless even

though they may not be directly aware that you are watching them. Flies, buzzing ahead of the hunter in outrider clouds, are partly responsible for raising the alarm, and there are also the rhino-birds—feathered spies whose mission in life is to utter loud *chir-chir* warning cries as they fly across the bushland and observe dangerous interlopers.

I remember once stalking a trio of rhinos which had been doing considerable harm in a eucalyptus plantation at the foot of the Aberdare mountains, uprooting the trees with their horns and eating the topmost succulent shoots. I'd followed them from their night raid on the plantation to their daytime 'lie-up' in the nearby forest—a basin-shaped hollow surrounded by difficult tall greenery which made vision impossible. I could only follow their trail, foot by foot.

This I did for about an hour, having sent my native bearer home because his footsteps had been far from noiseless and I was very anxious to avoid giving the rhinos ahead of me any warning. Coping with a charging rhino in this thick bush wouldn't be all that easy; I wanted to shoot to kill without them being aware of my presence if possible.

Such wind as there was was in my favour and my approach was absolutely noiseless—that I can swear to. But when I came to the hollow and peered through the tall grass and brush to see the three rhinos lying there in a huddle, rather as pigs do in a sty, I could see that they already knew of my presence. They were beginning to become restless, turning their heads uneasily towards me and preparing to attack. A cloud of flies hovered angrily buzzing above the trio and I remembered hearing the buzzing of flies quite near to me a few minutes earlier. So it may be that flies transmit either a secret warning or bear on themselves the smell of approaching man.

In that particular incident, by the way, the rhinos lost

no time in translating their uneasiness into terms of action. They came charging through the undergrowth straight at me, each trying to get ahead of the others. I fired my .500 D/B Express at the face of the middle attacker. The shot hit her between eye and ear and she dropped dead instantly, her body raising a great cloud of dust as it hit the ground. The other two leapt from the side of their dead companion with the agility of cats—unbelievable in view of their great weight and ponderous bodies—turned and were gone almost before I had time to realize that I was out of danger.

Even though I once carried out the greatest rhino drive of all time—in the Makueni district, to make way for a post-war settlement of Wakamba—I have never ceased to be especially cautious in tracking rhino because of their extra-sensory perception. On only one occasion in my life have I ever got really close to a rhino without his knowledge and that time I was so close that I actually hung my stetson hat on his horn. But he was an oldish bull and he was fast asleep. It was quite an occasion, though; for in a moment or two he detected something wrong, rose fuffing and snorting from his rest and went charging off with the stetson still poised on his horn.

Exit rhino to the sound of gales of laughter—mine and my native bearers', who stood holding their sides and rocking with mirth at the droll sight, even though a moment before they had been warning me—with justifiable horror—not to attempt to do such a mad thing.