

ON THE RHINOCEROS TRAIL—III

By W. S. CHADWICK

PROBABLY the elephant alone can deal successfully with the rhino in single combat, and on several occasions the discretion I have seen rhino exercise towards the forest kings seemed to indicate their own appreciation of the fact. To the elephant folk they generally yield right-of-way as to no other forest dwellers. Yet their evil tempers *do* sometimes betray them into unwise challenge, as I once witnessed.

I was after a young rhino at the time, in the interests of a certain zoo, and the experience cost me my prize. I located the youngster by accident late in the afternoon, lying hidden by a pile of bush, with only his nose showing. I lay watching carefully for the advent of the mother, as I knew what would happen if a squeal from the youngster brought her on the scene to catch me red-handed; and hated to think of it. I knew also that she must be somewhere at hand, and decided to await her return before proceeding to kidnap the youngster.

I had waited about half-an-hour when a great grey-black form emerged from the opposite trees, and I found myself staring at the head of a very alert elephant cow. I was wondering at her being unattended when I noticed that a tiny calf ran between her forelegs and applied himself to the milk supply. Then I guessed that she had left the herd for maternity purposes, and was now seeking her kinsfolk again.

I was testing the wind rather anxiously when there came a squeal that said "rhino," and a few yards away a furious cow broke from the bush and charged straight at the elephant mother. This motherhood business is a curious thing. To the abnormality it engendered in both contestants I attribute what followed. I feel reasonably certain that in ordinary circumstances that rhino would have let well alone; or, if not, that the elephant would have treated the charge with contempt or inflicted only slight punishment.

Behold, however, an amazing fury on the part of the grey lady, as pushing her youngster aside she rapidly curled her trunk and rushed to meet the rhino with an equal intent to "do grievous bodily harm." But even her fury did not cloud her judgment—as it did that of her opponent—and her tactics, well conceived and carried out, were eminently suited to the occasion.

As the rhino's lowered head came within a yard of her she dropped on her haunches and pivoted rapidly aside. Then as the big "pig" blundered past she came swiftly to her feet and followed. The rhino slithered to a halt; but, while she was in the act of turning, the grey lady's great head took her in the ribs, and both tusks penetrated the lower part of the stomach.

Despite her weight, the terrific impact hurled her some yards away, and in an instant the enraged elephant stood above her with reddened tusks. In a very transport of fury she drove those tusks into the exposed stomach once, and then knelt on the quivering form which collapsed under her great bulk, until all struggles ceased from the mass of pulp and blood beneath her.

As she rose from the curiously crushed form, I congratulated myself on her having removed the obstacle to my purpose. I was distinctly premature. That rhino cow had apparently bred in her adversary a hatred of the whole family, and she knew the calf

was there as well as I did. She turned her head in its direction.

For a moment she looked at the heap of bush under which it lay, and then with a trumpet note of triumph she started towards it. Twice her huge form flashed through the bushes, and when she returned to her calf and led it from the scene a man might have been puzzled to name the mass of blood and filth which had been a baby rhino.

I felt like punishing that grey lady, but an "illicit" elephant might have caused serious trouble with the Belgians who had granted my rhino permit, so I contented myself with the rhino horn, a thrilling ten minutes, and a sigh of regret!

A knowledge of animal habits means not only added safety but sometimes increased income to the hunter. A young man I once knew, was unaware of the rhino's habit of entering and leaving cover by the same trail. The density of such cover makes it necessary for the hunter to use the same route. But it is unnecessary to do so hastily, carelessly, or noisily, as that young man did.

He knows better now. The awakened rhino which he met coming out, taught him! But the lesson cost him a dislocated shoulder and two broken ribs. But for an experienced friend it might easily have cost him his life. That is one habit the knowledge of which makes for safety. Here is another, which I once turned to profitable account, but which might at the same time have proved an unpleasant situation.

The rhino has the curious custom of evacuating always on certain selected spots while he uses a locality, and near a favourite feeding ground, or sleeping place, many sizeable heaps of fumets may be found. I had tried for a week once to secure a particularly fine specimen, but his attendant "tick birds," and his own wariness had always defeated me—until this habit, and a fortunate chance, betrayed him.

He had broken from cover one afternoon and gone towards water, when I decided to follow his spoor while the light lasted. About a mile from cover his spoor turned off the path, and following it I came to a pile of fumets beneath a large and solitary mimosa tree standing out on the plain. The bull had gone, but fresh fumets seemed to indicate that he had come here especially to relieve himself. My natives were of that opinion, and I at once decided to be hidden in that tree at dawn and sunset in future, until he came again.

For two days the appointment failed. Doubtless he used other selected spots as well. But an hour before sundown on the third day I saw his huge bulk lumbering across the plain towards me, surrounded by his feathered attendants. I sincerely hoped that the latter—some of which were perched on his back—would not investigate the tree and thus betray me. Luckily they did not.

As he came beneath it and commenced to accomplish his purpose, the birds alighted near him. Losing no time, I sent a heavy bullet down between the shoulders. The shot broke his spine and killed him instantly.

I congratulated myself on the lucky chance that had led him to select that solitary tree, and have often felt regret that such selection should be uncommon. More often than not, the "favoured" spot is in open or rocky ground, affording little or no cover. But a knowledge of animal habits does make these lucky chances more common.