

ON THE RHINOCEROS TRAIL—II

By W. S. CHADWICK

ON the second occasion of an encounter between lion and rhino, I had been unlucky in my daylight shooting. The rhino seemed to stick so closely to dense thorn country that to approach undetected was very difficult, and so far they had eluded us. So when I came upon a well-trampled glade one morning, in which grew a number of young euphorbia trees and saplings—a favourite food—I decided upon a moonlight vigil.

Preparing a more or less comfortable perch in a tree overlooking the glade, I took up my quarters at sunset, and waited for several hours without anything happening. I was almost beginning to regret my undertaking when two clumsy black shapes emerged from the bush, and sounds of noisy feeding behind them indicated more to follow. Eventually, five rhino emerged and began busily uprooting the young saplings. But, alas for my hopes! None were over two years old, and such youngsters carried little of hide or horn. So I waited, in the hope that more sizeable specimens would follow.

An hour passed, and then one young bull came alone to a dark bush not far from my perch, and commenced to seek further sustenance there. I had observed no sign of life in the vicinity except the five rhino, yet the young bull had been busy barely five minutes when a great shape flashed through the air, and a huge yellow-maned lion landed on his shoulders. Simultaneously two other lithe forms shot from cover and fastened on throat and flank.

The young bull squealed once only, reeled to the shock of the combined attack, and went down with the killers' teeth and claws rending at his body. Mingled with the sounds of crashing bushes, as his comrades fled, came one or two strangled groans from the feebly-kicking victim. Then silence—broken only by the savage growls of the lions, and the tearing sound of rending hide and flesh.

But that feast, too, I disturbed. At the shot which killed the big lion, his companions bounded away, and though they twice returned before dawn I drove them away each time. They kept me in discomfort all night it is true, and I got but little of hide or horn. Yet I do not regard that vigil as wasted.

"All's fair in love and war" is a motto I once saw exemplified in a fight between rhino. Incidentally, its application yielded me a better "bag" than I might otherwise have secured. Queensbury or other rules seem to be totally discounted by the pachyderm, if the fight I saw be any criterion!

I had taken position after sundown on the leeward side of the rhino water trail, and about two miles from the "pan" to which it led. I had waited about an hour when grunts and squeals from the direction of the water led me to expect my quarry. Presently there came up the path a young cow, followed by an apparently mature but rather small bull. The couple seemed on most amicable terms and stopped frequently to demonstrate affection. I was undecided whether to shoot, or to wait on the off-chance of bigger game, when squeals, by no means amicable, sounded from the other direction.

Looking up the path I saw two huge bulls coming down to water, and with their usual ill-mannered stupidity the one in rear kept chivvying the leader to more haste. Really, it was a case of "more haste less speed," as at each dig from the horn of the one in the rear the assaulted leader whirled round, and several minutes were lost in a clashing assault of horns before progress could be resumed. As they saw the lovers approaching, the pair stood and looked

for a moment, and then came on at a purposeful trot. I held my fire and awaited events.

The young bull and cow had also halted, but as the big leader reached them the young bull lumbered determinedly in front of the cow, and, with lowered head and squeals of rage, offered battle. The challenge was promptly accepted, and in a few moments only the rapid movements of the great bodies, the thud of impact, and the occasional clash of horns told of the battle within a rapidly rising dust cloud.

Meanwhile the cow stepped aside to watch the fray, and the other bull proceeded to "make good" by sniffing delicately at the lady, rubbing his ugly nose against her, and making other demonstrations of affection. She, however, seemed indifferent to his advances, and devoted her attention to what might be seen of the fight going on some twenty yards from my hiding-place.

This had been going on for about ten minutes, and the squeals had been replaced by laboured, gasping breathing, when there shot through the cloud of dust a black streak. A thud followed, and the young challenger fell full length across the path and did not rise again. As the dust settled, his antagonist could be seen standing motionless with head held low and flanks heaving convulsively. His victory had evidently been achieved at some cost, and I afterwards found that where a long furrow ploughed his side the jagged ends of two broken ribs protruded. This and other minor injuries had been worked by the long horn of his smaller adversary.

No sooner did the other Lothario perceive his condition than in place of offering "first aid"—as an elephant would have done—he gave a tremendous snort and dashed in with lowered head to complete his erst-while comrade's discomfiture. I was about to punish such a cowardly assault when it struck me that either of the wounded ones might retain sufficient energy to resent my intervention in drastic fashion, or to escape. So I decided to withhold the punishment until later.

The result of the battle was a foregone conclusion. The sorely spent bull had none of his former agility, and could not evade the rushes of his new adversary; while his returns lacked speed and force. Within five minutes he lay helpless, with entrails protruding from a terrible wound in the stomach, and breathing but faintly through blood-flecked nostrils.

As the opportunist victor emerged from the dust cloud, and minced clumsily towards the cause of the trouble, I gave him a .450 behind the shoulder, and he fell in his tracks. At the shot the lady fled up the trail, and the young bull which had first fallen staggered to his feet. As he did so I "put paid" to his account also, and a few seconds later gave the coup-de-grace to his conqueror, already breathing his last.

So by exercising patience I gained an interesting insight into the cost of rhino courtship, the savagery of such combats, and three remarkably fine specimens to replenish a dwindling exchequer.

Nevertheless, I was obliged to build fires and guard my prizes until dawn, lest feline teeth and claws should render the hides worthless.

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