

THE TUSK-HUNTERS

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CHAPTER XIII

A RHINOCEROS FIGHT

IN order to stalk the elephants without disturbing and stampeding the herd, Mbumbwe, using his owl-feather down, tested the wind, and found that, in order to approach the patch of green vegetation, up wind, it would be necessary to make a detour around one-third of the circumference of the dambo. This brought another side of the clump of trees into view, and gave Spencer a most unexpected sight.

Some thirty or forty yards from the timber a young elephant calf was romping about, gaily but clumsily—his mother, probably, being asleep. Calves between one and two years old are apt to roam by daytime, for they learn to take green food for some months before being weaned. Like children, they are hungry all the time, and need a snack every now and then. Besides, their sense of smell and their experience are not sufficiently developed for them to be able to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome foliage on a dark night. There are many trees in the jungle which a wise

elephant leaves strictly alone, and the ground plants are still more dangerous. Euphorbias, for example, will give any baby elephant a nasty stomach-ache.

This calf elephant, however, was more adventurous than he should have been; he was more than that, he was disobedient, and disobedience, in the jungle, usually brings its own penalty, for the rules have been made on the strict basis of life and death. There was no need for the little fellow to have come a-wandering, food was plentiful inside the clump of trees, where he would have been in safety under the protection of the herd.

"Good calf!" whispered Mbumbwe. "You want?"

"Perhaps," answered The Hunter, in the same low tone, "but I had wanted a smaller one. Still ——"

He was about to put rifle to shoulder when a sudden movement in the reeds beside the river, far to the left of him, bade him look around. A hunter needs eyes on every side of his head.

The reeds parted.

A large "white" square-mouthed rhinoceros, two-horned and menacing, came trotting out with an air of annoyed hurry that was quite unusual.

The rhinoceros does not feed as he goes, like the elephant. He has his special feeding-grounds, well known to his preference—he is very fond of young thorns—and he reserves his appetite until he is quite ready to make a good feed.

In all probability, his dinner-table was that thorny scrub in that well-shaded clump where the elephants were. That meant little to him. For elephants, the rhinoceros had neither love nor dislike; he did not foregather with them, but neither did he go out of his way to avoid them. On the contrary, the elephants would be more likely to move away. They disliked, intensely, the attentions of the tick-birds or Red-beaked Rhinoceros Birds, which invariably are seen perched on the back of a rhinoceros and which feed on the parasites which inhabit the thick skin of the beast, an attention for which the rhinoceros is grateful.

The elephant calf, in all probability, had never seen a square-mouthed rhinoceros before, and he did not understand this formidable beast, not so very much smaller than a half-grown elephant and, in its way, every bit as powerful. If a wart-hog boar is perhaps the most hideous animal in the African jungle, the “white” or square-mouthed rhinoceros certainly bears off the palm for ferocious

appearance. It was little wonder that the elephant calf was scared.

Certainly, he was frightened, for he trumpeted for his mother in a whining little pipe. Even from where the hunters lay, crouching, it could be heard distinctly, and its note told that the little fellow was alarmed.

With a hoarse roar—one of the throat cries—the mother elephant dashed from the clump of trees. She had been asleep—as much so as an elephant ever is—but she had heard the calf's shrill pipe. And, as she emerged from the forest, she saw the huge rhinoceros trotting in a straight line direct for her little one.

Now, a rhino will pay no more attention to an elephant calf than he will to any other beast. He is a rigid vegetarian, very much accustomed to mind his own business and very well able to see to it that no one interferes with it. But the cow elephant, just awakened and troubled by her calf's cry of peril, was standing there, on the edge of the dambo, angrily lifting one forefoot after the other, swaying her head and tossing her trunk crossly. The rhinoceros, despite his small brain, shared with all other beasts of the wild the telepathic power of recognizing hostility.

To add to all this, the rhino, himself, was in ~~an~~ exasperated state. Once in his life he had been shot at and wounded, and, just a few minutes before Spencer and his father saw him coming out of the fringe of reeds, a falling branch had struck ground near him with a sudden crack that resembled the crack of the rifle he had heard, ten years before. He was excited and restless, as was shown by his darting here and there, as he ran, after the fashion of his breed, when alarmed.

The rhino's suspicion, in the same psychological way, communicated itself to the cow elephant, though she had no knowledge of the cause, and this added to her irritation. Though there was no reason for any of this hostility, the situation was tense with mutual distrust and anxiety.

On this grassy ground, what was more, the white rhinoceros was absolutely sure of himself. Standing fully six feet in height and eleven feet in length (this species has never been seen in captivity) weighing a couple of tons and more, with a disproportionately large and powerful head armed with sharp and stocky upcurving horns of which the front one reaches nearly two feet in length, the square-mouthed rhinoceros is a match for any creature living.

This one, a fair specimen of his kind, feared nothing on earth except the smell of the white man. Natives, he ignored. As he was trotting forward, in this state of exasperation, suddenly something struck him with added annoyance, probably a whiff of the hunters, for he stopped, whirled round with an agility that seemed scarcely possible for a creature of his bulk and looked straight at Spencer and his father with his low-set pig-like eyes. A rhino's sight, however, is as poor as his scent and hearing are keen, and even if the hunters had not been hidden it is doubtful if he would have seen them. But his sense of smell could not play him false, and he had no doubt that something very threatening was toward.

At this most inopportune moment, the little calf squealed again. This time, the little fellow had ample cause, for the mother had given him a sharp slap with her trunk as punishment for his disobedience in wandering away; elephant training is strict, and a trunk forms a most effective "slipper."

The rhino wheeled again at the squeal. No, this was too much! Too many annoying things were happening in this dambo. He would get out of there; he would go where there were peace and quietness, at least, and where a rhino might eat his

lunch, undisturbed. He set off again, but the change of direction which had been caused by his momentary wheeling to face the hunters led him straight in the direction of the cow elephant and her calf.

The elephant paid absolutely no attention to the huge beast which was rapidly nearing her, but she gave the calf another slap.

Why should she heed the rhinoceros? He was nothing to her, nor she to him. She had seen hundreds of rhinos in her life, but they had ignored her, as she had disregarded them. There was no reason to suppose that this one would behave any differently from the others.

The rhinoceros, with an occasional angry snort, trotted across the grass at a ponderous run.

What particular streak of ill-temper was it that decided him to be vicious? He did not know, himself. It was a case of nerves.

With a little squeal of ferocity, he charged straight for the towering bulk of the big cow elephant. To his small brain, she seemed to be barring his way. The elephant had scarcely time to turn, in order to escape a slashing rip from the formidable anterior horn of the rhino, for a rhinoceros can deliver a blow little less deadly than that

of the elephant, and the slashing fashion of it deals an ugly wound, worse than that of an elephant's tusk.

"That was the moment," writes A. Herbert, describing a similar combat, "when a wise elephant would have spirited herself away, but this mistaken female considered her prestige at stake, and resolved on battle.

"The rhinoceros pulled up and stood still, trying to get the wind of other possible adversaries—the rest of the elephant herd was out of sight among the closely growing shrub—and peered about him cunningly with his low-set eyes.

"He looked what he was—invulnerable!

"Seen square on, the hinder horn, so much smaller than the front one, was not visible, but the powerful front horn, standing up twenty inches from his armored nose, looked vindictive. The terrific thickness of the skull bones of the rhino, and the smallness of his brain cavity, made him as impervious to frontal attack as the elephant herself."

"Is he going to charge again?" whispered Spencer to his father.

"No, not likely. He'll go on about his business."

In most cases, The Hunter would have been in the right in such a judgment, for the rhinoceros is an animal that is interested only in his own affairs. But the cow elephant, as Herbert has told in one of her many fine pieces of jungle writing,

deemed herself mortally offended by the rhinoceros' attack. Trumpeting, and raising her trunk aloft, to keep it out of danger—always an elephant's chief concern—she rushed at the enemy.

“On the first impact,” writes this eye-witness, “the greater weight of the cow elephant bore the rhinoceros down and carried him forward in a protesting slide. Her tusks, sharp and powerful as they were, could not pierce that armor-plated shoulder, and, as her impetuous charge carried her forward, the angry rhinoceros detached himself, and, recovering his feet with a nimble agility, wheeled and made a sideways feint which gave him an instant advantage.

“His thick sharp horn got her between the ribs, and, in a titanic struggle for supremacy, the warriors went down. Sometimes the elephant had the advantage, but, more often than not, the laurels lay with the smaller and wilier animal.”

The rhinoceros had a terrific advantage over his foe. His own vitals were fully protected by his battleship-armor back, and it was next to impossible for the elephant's tusks to pierce that, while her own vital parts were just within easy reach of her enemy's formidable up-raking horn.

Despite the deep and jagged wound in her ribs, the elephant got to her feet, gave a stride and kicked forward. The powerful blow caught the rhinoceros fair. It would have punched a hole in a

steel plate. The huge grey beast went rolling, and, her tusks gleaming, the cow elephant turned her head sidewise and lunged down.

Had the tusks struck absolutely fair and true, they might have gored, even through the rhinoceros' hide, but, though the rhino had been sent spinning and several of his ribs crushed in, his blood was up and he was not one to care for the blow even of an elephant's foot. Any fight, in the jungle, is a fight to the death.

There is nothing slow about a rhino when he chooses to move, and, in the second which elapsed between the kick and the tusk-thrust, the rhinoceros was already rolling clear. The gleaming tusks slipped on his moving body. Had the nearest tusk been but a foot or two farther forward, it might have found the vulnerable point near the shoulder and the rhinoceros would never have moved again.

Sure, absolutely sure that she had pinned her enemy to the ground, the cow elephant stayed stock-still, her tusks deep in the earth, then she drew them out and stood there, a second, down-stooped, before kneeling on what she supposed to be her prostrate foe, in order to squash him to death.

She had misjudged, miscalculated!

The rhinoceros was not pinned down by those tusks. Though wounded and battered, he was on his feet, so filled with fury that he was unconscious of pain.

Backing up a yard or two, he charged again with all his tremendous force, two tons of muscle behind a battering ram.

The two horns caught the elephant under the shoulder, but the wounds did not reach the vitals.

They proved just as dangerous.

The elephant, already off her balance by her stooping position from the tusk-thrust, was felled to the ground by the rhinoceros' maddened charge, and lay for an instant on her side.

Before she could move, before she had a chance to rise, the furious rhino battered her with continuous blows of his mighty two-horned head, blows as tremendous as the elephant's own.

An elephant cannot leap to the ground with all four feet, but must rise slowly; each time she heaved herself to her knees, the rhino crashed her down again. The short, sharp horn gored in a dozen times at least. There was not an instant's pause in the savage attack; that unwieldy head swept sickle-wise or lunged forward with a frenzied quickness and power that were irresistible.



Courtesy of Hutchinson & Co. Drawn by Winifred Austin.

A RHINOCEROS ATTACKING AN ELEPHANT.



Courtesy of Wm. Heinemann.

SQUARE-MOUTHED RHINOCEROS IN SHALLOW STREAM.

Once, indeed, trying to rise, the elephant heaved herself full to her knees. In a second she would have been up. But, in so doing, she exposed her throat, and the rhinoceros plunged in under the gleaming tusks and ripped all the arteries away. The blood spurted out in tremendous jets.

The cow elephant bellowed frantically, but it was her last effort. Death came instantly after.

For fully two minutes the rhino pounded the body, until, having satisfied himself that his enemy was dead, he set off again, running in the jerky lines and short curves that a rhinoceros foolishly adopts when trying to evade pursuit.

The cow's death bellow had been heard!

A minute later, the leader of the herd dashed out to the rescue.

One look at her dead comrade told her what had happened, and the sight of the disappearing rhinoceros explained the rest. She ran a few strides forward, planning revenge, and then halted. After all, the cow elephant was dead. What was to be gained by further fighting? Yet, conscious of her duties of leadership, she trumpeted defiance.

Though wounded, battered, and sick, the rhinoceros turned. Not that he wanted to fight; he had had more than enough. But there was only this

one stretch of flat grassland in the immediate neighborhood, and the great grey two-horned beast knew well that if the elephant were to pursue him, he would have little chance in the brush. He stood his ground, head lowered, but he did not advance to the charge. Nor did the leader of the elephant herd.

While in this state of mutual indecision, a wandering gust of wind, shifting slightly in direction, blew the hated man-smell to them both.

At that, neither of the animals hesitated an instant. Deeper than either revenge or rage was the fear of Man. The rhinoceros wheeled and trotted on toward the river, while the leader of the elephants, mindful of her first duty to the herd, rushed into the scrub to gather them together and to stampede them away.

In the frenzy of the discovery that Man was near them, she did not think about the calf who had been the origin of all the disturbance, if, indeed, she had noticed it at all.

A few seconds later, both rhinoceros and elephants were gone.

Spencer was panting with excitement. He was only brought to a realization that all was finished by the sound of his father's voice.

"Do you want to shoot the calf, Son?" The Hunter asked, quietly.

"Shoot him, Father? Poor little beggar! What for? He didn't do anything!"

"We undertook to get a specimen of a calf elephant for the Museum, you know."

"But—but, Father, he's an orphan!"

"That's just exactly why I suggest it."

"Why! I don't see!"

"Don't you? The elephant herd has smelt us, that was clear from the way they ran. They won't stop under twenty miles. That little chap could never catch up with the herd."

"You mean he's lost?"

"Oh, he'll probably try to follow until nightfall, and then ——"

"And then?" echoed Spencer.

"Then a lion or a leopard will get him. You can be sure he won't be alive by two hours after sunset. That's the way of the jungle!"

"Well, in that case ——"

Spencer raised his rifle and aimed. But he did not fire.

"I—I can't!" he said. "A poor little chap like that!"

The calf whimpered, put up his little trunk feebly

and turned broadside, as though to go in search of his dead mother.

The Hunter fired, and the elephant baby fell without a sound.

"The brain shot," he said, explainingly; "death was instantaneous, Spencer."

There was a lump in the boy's throat. Somehow, the tiny elephant had seemed so helpless, so much in need of protection.

His father put a hand kindly on his shoulder.

"Don't get wrought up, Son," he said gently. "It may seem cruel, but it's certainly kinder than leaving him to be mauled horribly and eaten by a lion! "