

TRAPPING WILD ANIMALS IN NORTHERN SIAM

Harold T. Wilkins

Film lovers who remember "Chang" will be interested in this absorbing article, describing the ingenious methods by which the jungle folk of Northern Siam trap the fierce wild beasts that roam that primeval wilderness. Elephant, tiger, and rhino—there is a different plan of campaign for each; and the victory does not always rest with the hunter.

A MONTH'S journey from the nearest civilized village, and nearly two months from the railhead in Northern Siam—"land of the fire and the white elephant"—lies a vast region of dense jungle, peopled by fierce tigers, fiercer leopards, wild elephants, and great pythons. On the edge of this virgin wilderness a few scattered tribes of Laos and Shans have hacked clearings from which they obtain a precarious living by tilling and harvesting rice or paddy.

For a time all goes fairly well with these primitive cultivators. The rice is sown, the crops are gathered—and then the jungle hits back at the pigmy invaders of its fastnesses. One night a herd of wild elephants, trumpeting in fury, hurls itself against the village. The piles that support the huts are rammed by mighty heads; flying brown-skinned men and women are caught up by the animals' trunks and catapulted into the air, and the whole flimsy collection of thatched houses collapses. When the elephants have passed on, the job of rebuilding the village and wresting a living from the jungle has to be started all over again.

These remote solitudes of Northern Siam are a veritable Paradise for the wild animal trapper and the big-game hunter. Yet, except for the very occasional visit of a forest warden of the King of Siam, this vast region of bush and jungle remains practically a sealed book. Few British animal trappers have ever reached it, so inaccessible is the country and so averse are the natives to accepting engagements as bearers and trackers.

Spite of the scarcity of white hunters, however, the world's cleverest trappers and snarers are to be found in this remote corner of Asia, where a race of wild hillmen and jungle-farers pit their keen wits against cruel and cunning creatures, and contrive pitfalls, nooses, cages, and springes of remarkable ingenuity. Their ways of tracking down wild animals are unique, and

show the influence of the Buddhist faith, which forbids the shedding of blood.

Three men will start out into the jungle from a stockaded village built on piles in a clearing. They live as the jungle allows, and do as its wild things do. All round is a green wall of trees bound together with masses of creepers and vines. Cutting the bush foot by foot with native knives, the hunters manage to force a way through the maze of ground-vines, grasses, and rattans. Overhead, light breezes are blowing and a blazing sun flames down, but here, in the gloom of the trees, the men move in a damp, stifling heat which speedily drenches one with perspiration.

These natives are experts in jungle-craft, and can correctly interpret all the mysterious sounds of birds, animals, and insects that reach their ears through the tangled vegetation. It is well for them that they can; a mistake might easily cost them their lives.

The object of the expedition is to track down a herd of wild elephants without being seen or heard, and to select their victim. They first cut rattan vines from the trees and make cables. Then the pursuit of the herd begins. Not a sound is made, not a dry stick trodden on; and no fire is lit to boil their rice. It is tiresome, hungry work, conducted both by night and day. At last a chance offers. A fine young tusker-elephant is seen snoozing in the hot noontide heat in a bamboo brake, well away from the rest of the herd, with one foot off the ground.

Silently and quickly the three hunters close in on him, and in an instant a noose is cast deftly over the lifted foot. The elephant stands quiet till the coil of the rattan clatters on the ground; then he begins a mad rush to break away. But wherever he goes the three men follow, and the fathoms of cable drag heavily among the tree-stumps. Each time the young tusker stops, his pursuers take a turn of the rope round the nearest tree. The constant running, towing, and stumbling

wear the elephant out, and by nightfall he is dead-beat.

Every known dodge is now resorted to in order to get another foot into a noose, and as he plunges right and left and the cables are brought up against a tree, a lashing is put on to shorten the slack and give him less play. Before long, the second noose is in place, and the tusker finds himself securely moored to a big tree-trunk. No fire is lit—that would frighten him—and daily five hundredweights of dainty bamboo shoots and other elephant luxuries are put before him, until finally he gets used to the sight of men who speak kindly to him and feed him well.

The trappers' object at this time is to keep their prisoner from moping, and the sores caused by the chafing of the rattan from getting foul. This accomplished, little by little the patient natives break the elephant in to use.

In the Siamese jungles it is the female elephants that lead the wild herds, as they are more alert to scent danger. When the peril comes, however, the males take command, breaking a path through the dense bush, with the females and youngsters following in the rear.

The elephant never travels round obstacles; he either goes straight through or pushes them on one side. He is a wary and sure-footed beast, and will not step on anything that looks doubtful until he has tested it with one foot. Hence it is no easy matter to construct a pitfall which will not "put him wise" beforehand. The wild herds sleep during the day and feed at night—on grasses, bamboo shoots, bark, and coconuts.

The trappers use females to decoy the wild "rogues" into traps, but only the male tuskers are employed for hauling logs in the teak forests of Northern Siam; the females are allowed to run free to breed.

Some of the wild animals caught in the up-country jungles of Siam are traded to Malay dealers, and in court-yards at Singapore one may see these hard-cheating tricksters sitting round with shaven heads, their chins and lips stained crimson with

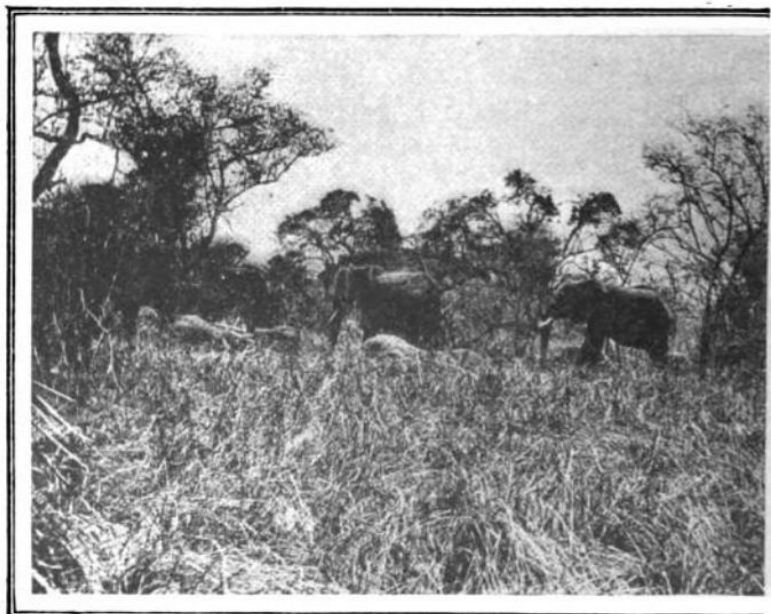
betel-nut, surrounded by wild beasts in cages. Now and again, however, an American or British trapper, acting on behalf of some Zoo, penetrates into the jungles of North Siam.

Word of the white man's arrival soon gets round among the Shans of the jungle villages, and trackers are lured by offers of good pay to lead the British hunter on the spoor of the wild elephant or leopard. Risk of death from cholera or malaria must be cheerfully faced in the dense bush, where horriblesting insects and loathsome leeches lie in wait for the rash intruder. Heavy toll is taken of the natives, and the white man will inevitably pay with his health, if not with his life.

At the order of the headman, fifty tattooed Shans step down from their bamboo houses, thatched with leaves of the *attap* palm and raised on piles to protect the inhabitants from the fierce man-killing animals that prowl around by night.

IN QUEST OF A HERD.

The job of these fifty selected men is to find and surround a herd of wild elephants and keep them moving in a circle while the trapper superintends the building of a *keddah*, or elephant stockade. Trees about twenty-five feet long are cut down and dragged through the bush to the site selected. Here they are planted five feet deep in the earth and braced with smaller trees, so as to withstand the enormous pressure of elephants trying to break out of the *keddah*.



Wild elephants in the jungle. Note the

The stockade is circular in shape, about seventy-five feet across, and has two wings a hundred feet long converging on the entrance. After the posts have been planted and well braced they are bound with tough rattan vines and thatched with thick leaves of palms.

The utmost care is taken not to disturb the jungle through which the elephants are driven, since they can see in the dark and are easily stampeded. The runway leading to the mouth of the trap is not touched and the wings are cleverly camouflaged, so that they cannot be seen against the wall of green.

When the trap is ready a religious ceremony takes place; a Siamese priest invokes the blessing of the jungle-god on the drive. A white cock is found and tied in the centre of the trap. The priest picks out a hundred men, stations them near the entrance with fruit and flowers, and with two companions goes out into the bush.

Presently shouting is heard and priest and men, chanting and waving knives, rush into the trap, seize the hapless cock, and cut off its head. The natives join in a chorus of yells while the priest runs round the trap, sprinkling it with blood, and finally crawls out through a gap in the stockade wall.

Presently word is brought that the herd is near, and thereupon the drive begins. Men are stationed in the tree-tops at every five hundred yards to guide the animals, and then tom-toms are banged and a pandemonium of screams and yells

breaks out. Fighting their way through the dense jungle, beaters follow in the rear of the frightened herd. No light is shown and care is taken to steer clear of the baby elephants, who scurry hither and thither to find out what all the noise is about. If these little "changs" catch sight of a man they give the danger-signal and promptly stampede the herd.

Now the elephants are heard crashing through the great trees. The stalkers follow in rear, moving with the greatest circumspection. If an elephant glimpses the hunter he will charge without hesitation, and trample him to death. The man's one chance of safety, should there be no tree handy to shin up, is to plant an explosive bullet in the frontal cavity at the top of the trunk—by no means an easy business in the deceptive half-light of the forest.

It may take as much as three nights of hard work to drive the elephants to the trap, but at last, if all goes well, the great beasts jam in the runway and, in their struggles to make a way, force those ahead into the enclosure.

There follows a veritable pandemonium of bellowings and trumpeting, and the massive timbers of the *keddah* tremble as the enraged elephants hurl themselves against them. When the last elephant is inside, men cut the ropes holding the gates, which crash down into place. The bars are then run through the sockets, and the herd is in the trap.

Holes are now cut in the rattan webbing of the stockade and the baby "changs" enticed out with tempting morsels of food. These little fellows show themselves very playful. They are usually about three feet high, weigh some two hundred pounds, and add an inch to their stature every month. They are fed by dipping their trunks into pails of warm milk and then inserting the ends of the trunks in their mouths, doubled up.

Now begins the tough job of breaking-in the wild elephants. Stocks have to be built where the animals can be held until used to the sight and smell of man, for one wild elephant can create enormous havoc should the men lose control even for a moment. Then two rows of heavy stakes are driven into the ground about four feet apart, leading from the stocks to the "trap." This is a small enclosure four feet high by fifteen feet long. Finally the piles of the *keddah* are removed from the entrance to the passage-way and bars substituted.

To make the elephants more docile they are given little food till the breaking-in process begins. The young "changs" need no breaking-in once they have been lured from the *keddah* with food; they roam around, playing about and watching



Photo by courtesy from the film "Chang."

sleeping animals to the left.

the fun. Old tuskers are shot for the sake of their ivory, since they would not pay for the trouble of transporting them to the nearest port.

When all is in readiness a bundle of young bamboo shoots is placed in the trap enclosure and the bars let down. The nearest elephant sees the food, sniffs, flaps his ears, and walks in to eat. So eagerly does he feed that he fails to notice the men fastening rattan knee- and foot-hobbles on him and drawing them out through the bars. At the same time his trunk is secured. The bars of the trap are next removed, and the foot-ropes loosened. Out walks the elephant, to be drawn forward, step by step, to the stocks.

If he tries to bolt, he falls over; and it must be remembered in this connection that he is still vicious and full of wickedness.

TAMED!

The stocks are covered stags, and each elephant is confined apart from the rest, being tied up so that he can neither lie down nor move. All he can do is to wave his trunk. For a fortnight or so he is under-

fed, but petted and treated kindly until he gets used to the sight of men.

Then, one day, he is once more hobbled and, with a keeper sitting on his head and men leading him with tough ropes, while eight others with rattan whips follow, the elephant walks out. The men in the rear beat him with the whips until he bellows with pain. Thereupon the whipping at once stops, for the bellow is a sign that the animal is mastered. After this he is fed and made much of; his ordeal is over. If, on the other hand, despite the flogging, the animal stubbornly refuses to bellow, he is shot, for his refusal to submit shows the trapper that time spent on attempts to tame him would be wasted.

Some of the wild tribes have methods of trapping and hunting that are all their own. The dwarf jungle folk known as Semangs, for instance, hide in the fork of a tree and shoot poisoned arrows into the elephant's foot as he passes by all unsuspecting. The wily Karien lurks behind a bush and hamstring the tusker as he sleeps; and the Kamuk risks his life by shooting at wild animals with an Old Tower musket that is likely to burst at any moment.

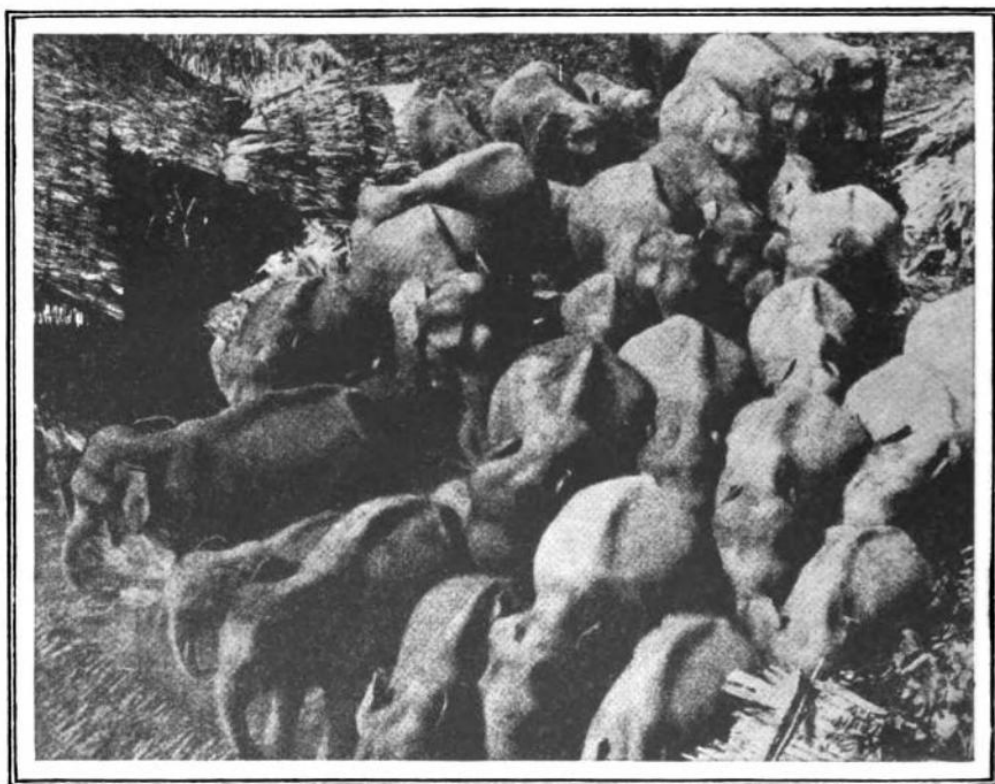


Photo by courtesy from the film "Chang."

This striking picture, taken from the top of the *keddah*, shows a herd of wild elephants crowding down the runway into the trap.

The Kamuks, by the way, have a most ingenious method of snaring the *kratai*, or hare. These animals live in the jungle scrub surrounding the villages. The hunters make low hedges of great length converging by devious ways on a small enclosure. Armed with sticks, the young men of the community beat the jungle from a distance toward the maze, and the hares, having been driven into the runway, course along beside the hedges until the small enclosure is reached. Then, with wild shouts two or three men leap out of ambush, harry the terrified animals from behind, and drive them into the central trap, where they are killed with sticks.

Trappers are always on the look-out for the unexpected. Most dangerous of all the jungle's inhabitants is the black or spotted leopard, which lies quietly along the limb of a tree waiting to spring without warning on anything passing beneath. The lordly tiger will slink away when disturbed in the daytime, but the leopard stands his ground and can do more damage in one minute, in the way of biting and scratching, than a tiger in treble the time.

HOW LEOPARDS ARE CAUGHT.

To trap the leopard—or the tiger, for that matter—the Shan seeks for a particular jungle tree. When he finds it he makes a cut in its trunk and holds a gourd underneath to collect the thick, glutinous sap that exudes.

This gum is spread in the runways of the animals, the trap being carefully hidden with leaves. Along comes the leopard,

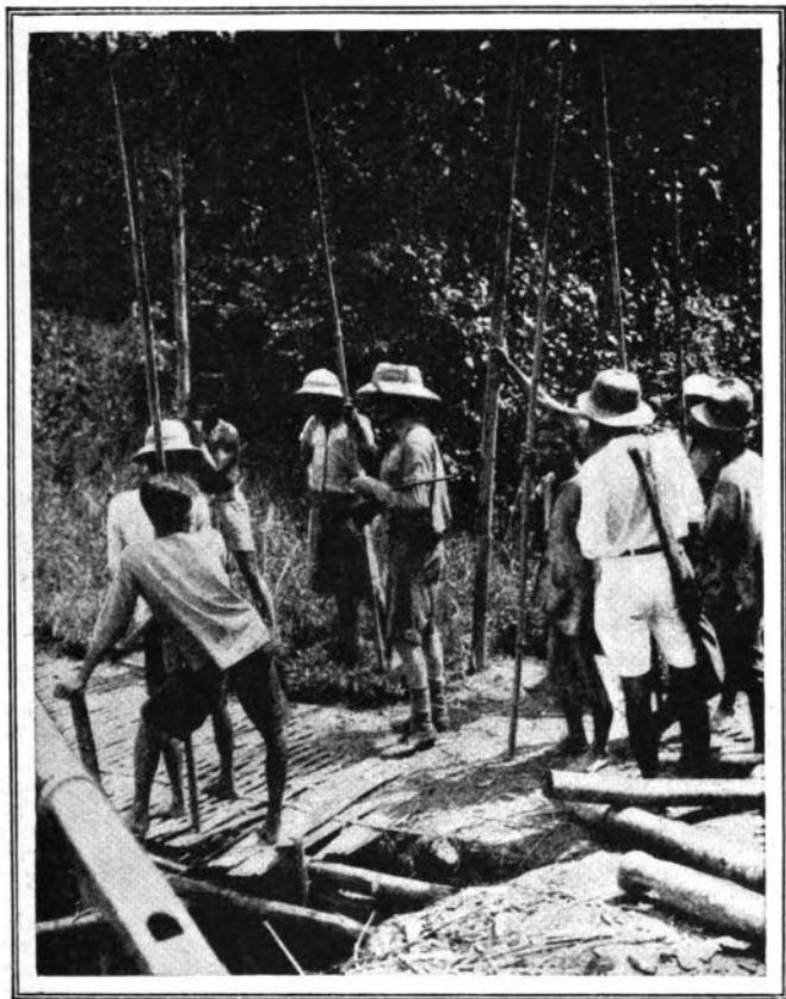


Photo by courtesy from the film "Chang."

The white hunter and his Shan beaters on top of the keddah.

and puts his foot in the sticky stuff. Annoyed, he tries to bite the gum off his paws, and gets some of the stuff on his face. This infuriates him, and he rolls over in a rage, with the result that the gum gets into his eyes. Before long he is so completely covered with a sticky mass of gum and leaves that he cannot see to fight, and with not too much trouble he is captured and caged, spending weeks thereafter trying to lick the gum from his fur.

Birds and monkeys are caught by smearing the same gum on trees, with the result that the unfortunate little victims stay there till the natives come to remove them. A cute way of capturing small monkeys is to place a sweetened piece of cloth in a bottle which is covered with a green rattan and tied to a tree.

Along comes Mr. Monkey and puts

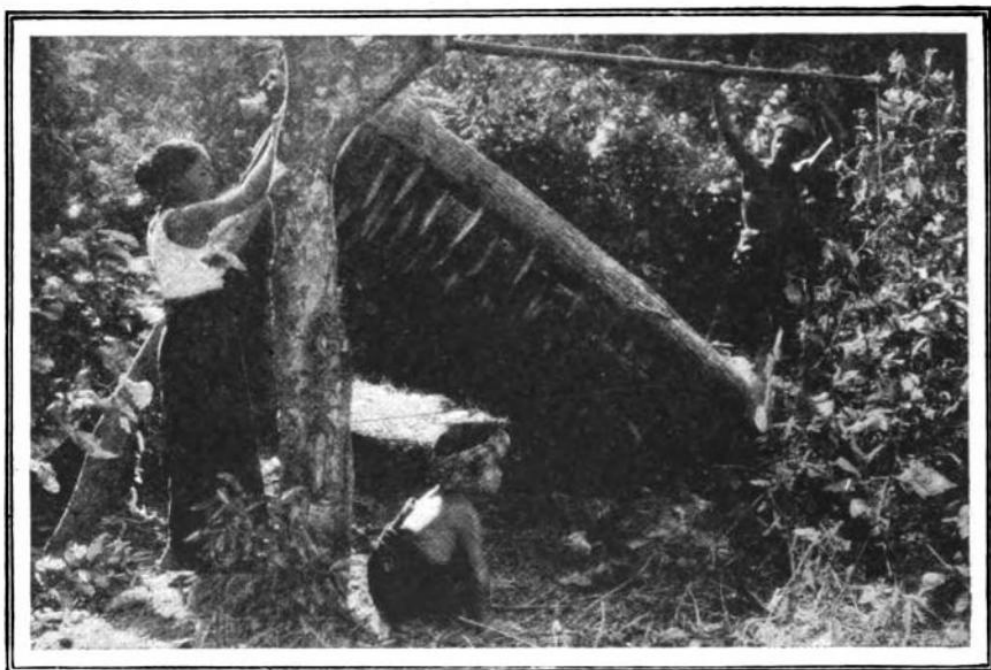


Photo by courtesy from the film "Chang."

A Lao leopard trap. When the animal touches the string across the bottom he releases a counterweight and causes the spiked trap to fall upon him.

his hand into the narrow mouth of the bottle to grab the sweet rag. He cannot get his hand out because it is doubled up, holding the rag, and he hasn't enough sense to open his paw and let the rag go. When the trapper arrives he presses a nerve in the monkey's elbow and thus forces him to release his grip.

Fish are taken by drugging a stream with lime and the sap of a certain tree, villages downstream being warned beforehand not to drink the water. The white liquid spreads in a film over the surface, making the fish drunk. They rise to the top and are gathered in prodigious quantities.

The biggest "tough" in the jungle is undoubtedly the much-dreaded *vaat*, or rhinoceros, of Northern Siam. This two-ton animal is short-sighted, and charges headlong down-wind directly he scents the hunter. In the dense jungle it is very difficult to stalk him, and he cannot be driven or enticed with a pitfall. The trapper, therefore sets out to discover where the rhino is in the habit of taking his bath. Then a crowd of natives make a net of strong rattans, twenty feet long by fifteen wide, with a mesh about a foot square.

This net is placed partly on the ground and partly in the trees, so that the rhino either runs his head into it or else steps on it, in which case he brings it down on him. Native scouts watch in the treetops, and as

soon as they see the animal entangled they bang tom-toms as a signal to the trappers. Thereupon the Shans rush to where they hear a crashing and tearing of vines and trees and the snorting and grunting of the monster animal.

If a young rhino is caught in the net, the mother lumbers round and round it, trying to get the youngster on its feet and break the net. Directly she hears the hunters she cocks up her ears and tail, blinks her pig-like eyes, and charges savagely. The natives wait till the animal is exhausted and then kill it with gun-shots or spears, but the white trapper, trying to secure the beast alive for a Zoo, has a much more difficult problem to solve.

He directs his men to cut down trees to make a heavy cage of timber, round which a webbing of tough rattan vines is woven. Water buffaloes are then hitched to a rope passing through the rear of the cage, the other end being fastened to the net. At a signal the buffaloes draw the enmeshed rhino into the cage, the net being cut away as the beast enters. When the rhino is well inside the door is fastened, and later the cage is drawn on rough sleds into the village.

Another way is to dig a pitfall, which the natives generally make square, so that the animal often injures himself. The white trapper, on the other hand, digs

four pits round the water-hole where the rhino bathes. These pits are wedge-shaped, being six feet wide at the top, tapering to three feet wide at the bottom, the idea being that the animal shall not injure himself when he falls in.

Over the tops of the pits, platforms of bamboo poles are built and carefully camouflaged with mud, leaves, and grasses. Days of hard work are necessary to make one pit, and the trappers have to be always on the alert lest the rhino should come on them unawares.

CAGING A TWO-TON RHINO.

Finally a morning arrives when a Shan scout comes with the news that a rhino is in the trap. Grunting and struggling, a great two-ton beast lies wedged

in the hole. When he sights the trappers he becomes frantic with rage, pounding the bottom of the pit with his feet. The cage of heavy timbers is made ready, and the ground in front of the trapped rhino dug away, so as to leave a slope leading up from the bottom of the pit. Runners are then fixed to the cage, which, when only two feet of earth hem the rhino in, is slid close down to his head.

The wall separating the rhino from the open end of the cage is then dug away, and the animal, prodded from behind, butts away what is left of the obstructing earth and lumbers into the cage. The bars are then slid into their sockets, and a team of buffaloes heaves and strains till the cage is dragged up the incline. Weeks of arduous work follow, cutting a way through the dense bush, until the cage is put on a raft on a river and floated down to port.

Rhinos never become completely tame. Even in the Regent's Park Zoo they will feed out of the keeper's hand at one moment and the next charge the reinforced steel stanchions of their house until the whole place trembles. Rarely indeed does a keeper dare to enter a rhino's stall when the animal is there.

The Shans and Laos of Northern Siam generally give the great constrictor python a wide berth, but now and again they will help a white trapper to catch one. One method of snaring pythons is by means of

a net suspended from a branch. A chicken lures the big snake into the net, and once inside his struggles serve to draw tighter and tighter the rope at the mouth of the trap. The trapper must keep clear of the python's thrashing tail, however, for even the end of it can kill. Some of these snakes are twenty feet long and weigh at least two



Photo by courtesy from the film "Chang."

A remarkable flashlight picture of a tiger drinking at night.

hundred pounds. Their strength is enormous.

Snared pythons are put into a crate made of straight limbs of trees tied with rattan. As soon as they are inside, the top bars are shot into grooves and they are carried back to camp slung on large poles.

Another way of capturing the python is to take him when he is gorged and torpid after a meal. A crate is prepared from stout rattans, and a rope passed through it and tied to a tree, with a running noose at the end to slip over the snake's head. Two more ropes are tied to the python's tail and fastened to trees on either side. As the snake is dragged into the crate, natives tug on the secondary ropes to keep the tail straight and prevent the big reptile from lashing out.

A well-known Far Eastern trapper, the American Charles Mayer, once had a thrilling experience with a captured python in the jungles of Siam. The snake suddenly sprang forward, whipped the rope out of the natives' hands, and knocked several men flat. One unfortunate fellow was not able to get out of the way, and the enraged python coiled round him.

Mr. Mayer yelled to the natives to pull on the tail-rope, but in the confusion they did not hear him. Accordingly he went for the snake's neck, intending to pinch a nerve-centre and partially paralyze the reptile until the men were calm enough to pull on

the rope. Before he could accomplish his purpose, however, the python turned its head and sank its fangs into Mr. Mayer's forearm. Involuntarily he sprang back, and immediately the great snake constricted its coils and crushed the hapless native in his coils to pulp.

The men prodded the snake with sticks in order to get him inside the crate and to make him release the dead body. Mr. Mayer and three natives grabbed the snake's neck,

One tribe of nomad Kariens, on the edge of the jungle, have invented a queer scarecrow to keep the jungle animals from stealing their scanty crops of rice, pumpkins, and bananas. Running from hut to hut are lines of bamboo poles with a hole in the top, through which a native rope is threaded, hung with sections of dry, hollow bamboos. When the jungle men on watch see birds and animals stealing out of the bush toward the crops, they pull the rope and cause the



Photo by courtesy of Major Powell-Cotton.

A mother rhinoceros and her calves emerging from the jungle.

but were repeatedly flung from side to side. The monster lashed out furiously with his terrible tail, knocking natives down right and left, but with men pulling at his head and others at his tail, acting as a brake, he was finally dragged inside, where he coiled up. When the snake was half in the cage Mr. Mayer tied the middle and head-ropes to trees, passed the tail rope through the crate, and thus dragged the tail inside. The python then promptly fell asleep.

bamboos to dance, making an odd booming sound that can be heard for a mile through the jungle.

Cinema patrons will remember Siam as the place where two camera-men spent twenty-two months in the jungle making the wonderful picture "Chang," in which five hundred Laos hunters, four hundred elephants, and many tigers, leopards, apes, and pythons figured. The Americans nearly lost their lives in the making of this film.



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