

NIGHT WATCHMAN

By T. W. TALLENTS



SLEEP-HELP is a generally accepted principle in our neighbourhood. It takes the form of helping yourself to other people's chickens, wherever and wherever opportunity offers. When half a dozen hens disappear in the night, there is scant sympathy to be had from other poultry keepers, for they have almost certainly suffered similar, or worse losses.

To compete with this state of affairs many and various ruses have been tried—and most found wanting. One old lady even takes her hens to bed with her each night, lodging them in a bomb-damaged room opposite her own. Large fierce dogs are generally advocated as poultry wardens, but the food situation does not easily admit of yet another guest without a ration card. Lately there has been a vogue for guinea fowls, on reports that they give vent to loud cries on the approach of marauders. After investing in the third lot of laying pullets within nine months (the first two lots had gone without leaving so much as a feather) I decided to investigate the possibilities of guinea-fowl as night watchmen.

I rang up the wife of a local farmer. She sang the birds' praises but was unable to supply any. She explained that her own were so wild that on the approach of a human they took to the trees. This, I thought, was promising. A pair of birds, roosting in high trees near the hen-run, and occasionally swooping down to snatch

a morsel from the beak of a startled hen, sounded like the answer to our dilemma. I visualised them flapping from tree to tree above the heads of the thieves—shrieking heralds of their approach. I did not know much about guinea-fowls, then.

The local dealer maintained that, with geese on the ground and guinea-fowl in the air, one's domestic poultry were as safe as in the Bank of England. He took my telephone number and promised to see what he could do when next he went to market. Three weeks later there arrived a cryptic note which said: "Lost Tel. No. Got G. Fowl. Cost £1." I set out in the car to bring the bird home.

"You better let me 'andle it," said the dealer. "Very tricky things. 'Ave to 'ave special wire at the market or some mug lets 'em go." He transferred the bird with elaborate care to a crate. I took it home and transferred it with equal care into a larger crate inside the hen run. With food and water the guinea-fowl settled down to a 36-hour acclimatisation period. After that, the dealer had said, it should be safe to let him go.

I had expected that, when finally released, the bird would rocket up to the nearest tree. That would be the critical moment, I told the family, and the one in which he would decide whether to stay with us or not. When the door of the crate was opened the guinea-fowl spent at least half an hour deciding whether to come out at all. Then he made his way over to the pullets and, it seemed, nervously introduced himself.

True, he made an excursion of some twenty yards outside the pen on that first day, having cleared the wire in good style. But his inability to make his way back again hardly seemed compatible with his role as Lord of the Air. For some two hours he paced up and down outside the pen like an expectant father, apparently baffled by the wire over which he had originally flown. Finally, as the business was clearly getting on the pullets' nerves, as well as my own, I was forced to admit him through the gate.

When I opened the hen house the next morning there was no sign of him. High in the

surrounding chestnuts, I imagined, he was watching every move on the ground below. It was, something of a shock when, after the last pullet had left the house, he filed out quietly after it having spent a comfortable night alongside his charges.

The opinion of the family, hastily re-orientated, was that this might prove a blessing, as he would undoubtedly be on the spot to give warning of an approach by robbers. On the other hand, if the thieves used some sort of gas to silence the chickens, he would presumably keel over with the rest of them. Further, during the limited period of our acquaintance, the guinea-fowl had produced only a noise similar to that of a cricket, and very little louder. If muffled inside the coop, it was held, this small cry might be inaudible to sleepers in the house.

We therefore decided to make a test to settle the second point at least. One evening, well after dark, a companion and I stealthily approached the hen house. We unlocked and quietly opened the door. As soon as the torch was switched on, I told myself, there would be a wild beating of wings, accompanied by strident warning cries. My companion lit the torch.

In its light the guinea-fowl, comfortably ensconced between two pullets, blinked and shifted his feet slightly before settling down again. We held a consultation. As the bird had proved his incompetence inside the house, we felt that he might as well prove his mettle outside, there and then. He proved, however, an elusive customer, and put up a spirited, though still silent, fight before he was finally evacuated. Once outside he took to his wings immediately, and disappeared into the gloom. Inspection of the neighbouring trees yielded no trace of him.

Next morning he was back again, showing no ill humour at his rough handling of the previous night. He is still at work, fulfilling a function known only to himself and, no doubt, closes his eyes at night with the same sense of satisfaction in duty well done as the pullets beside him. Whether upbringing or temperament is responsible for his incompetence, we do not know. His eminent edibility strikes us forcibly when the butcher has not been kind. But there is something appealing in his modest figure like that of an old, bent gentleman in a grey frock-coat, and it seems likely that he will continue to provide the pullets with a courtly, if inarticulate, escort.

THE STORY OF A BOGGED RHINOCEROS

By U. TRAPPE

I AM prompted to write this account of a bogged rhinoceros after reading in *COUNTRY LIFE* for May 25, 1945, the story of the bogged elephant. A friend who was staying with me for the week-end at my farm, Momella on the eastern slopes of Mount Meru in Tanganyika Territory, came home from a walk on the Sunday morning and told me that he had discovered a rhino stuck fast in the mud near one of the lakes, of which there are several on the farm. I called my *mnyampara* (headman) and 25 labourers and, with bush-knives, hoes, and a length of rope, we all set out for the lake, which is surrounded by a broad belt of swamp.

We found a full-grown animal, with fairly good horns, in the position shown in the photographs. The back was level with the surrounding reeds and floating vegetation. The head rested on the reeds and pointed towards the lake. The thirsty animal had probably gone to the water to drink.

We had first of all to turn it round. In the beginning it grunted and tried to use its horns, but it was so trapped that it could move very little. Naturally the natives were afraid, but they soon got used to it. The rhino also calmed down very soon. It even took grass out of my hand. Our rescue work was hampered because the men frequently sank to their knees in the mud and rotting vegetation.

At the last we succeeded in turning the rhino round, cutting the grass and roots with bush-knives and using ropes and poles. The men got hold of the animal's ears and tail. We then worked our way slowly towards firm ground, digging a canal and pulling and pushing the huge animal. It took us three hours in all and we were very careful when the rhino set

foot on terra firma. But nothing happened. To all appearances the beast, though exhausted, was quite healthy, but very hungry. It started feeding greedily on grass and bushes, taking no notice of us. It was a female and in an advanced state of pregnancy. Judging from its bad condition the poor animal had evidently been bogged for days.

I revisited the lake the next morning and, to my great regret and disappointment, found the animal dead where we had left it feeding. I presume that, having had no food for days, it overfed, and that this, in a pregnant animal, was the cause of death. In our rescue work we had been very careful and there was no question of the beast having been injured. I have seen rhino swimming in a lake, but never before had I seen a bogged rhino, alive or dead.



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