

Lewis 1893

MY FIRST AND ONLY RHINOCEROS HUNT.

By LIEUT.-COL. LEWIS.

It was my fate some years ago to be located in that most dismal of all stations, the subdivision of North Lakhimpore in Assam. A considerable part of the subdivision consists of a great network of streams. I dare say the march of civilisation has by this time opened up and cleared a good portion of the land, but at the time I write of the greater part of the subdivision was dense jungle intersected by the said streams.

In the beginning of the rains, when the monsoon first broke and the Brahmapootra came down in full flood, these streams, full to overflowing on their own account, were dammed back by the volume of water in the main river, with the result that miles and miles of land were flooded.

It was on one such occasion that my police inspector came and told me that some of the people wanted to get up a deer hunt, and asked if I would accompany them. I suggested that the flooded state of the country would rather interfere with a shooting expedition, and he then explained to me that the hunt was carried on in boats; that the deer being driven out of the heavy jungle by the water were to be found in the open grass-lands where the water was shallow, and where when started they could be pursued by the boats. I thought it would be a new experience, so I agreed to go, and sent word to M., a tea-planter, my only neighbour, to ask him if he would like to join.

M. turned up next morning, and after breakfast we started. It was a comical turn-out for a hunting party, consisting of some twenty or twenty-five canoes, common dug-outs, each with three oarsmen, and most of them had an extra hand or two to assist with the deer.

M. and I each had a separate canoe, and my friend the police inspector was in another. I also had in my boat my faithful henchman Dukhi, to load my guns, for it was before the days of breechloaders. My battery consisted of a 12-bore smooth-bore, which was a capital ball gun, and which I thought would do well for the deer at moderate range, with a single-bore rifle and a large heavy double rifle, which I fortunately as it turned out, took, in case we came across anything larger than deer.

Though I had travelled a good deal about the subdivision before, I never till that day thoroughly realised what an extremely watery domain it was. We went for some three hours without seeing much in the shape of dry land; sometimes our course was evidently down a stream, though there were no banks visible, sometimes right over rice-fields, and sometimes through tree-jungle. There was no need to follow the bendings of any streams, for we went straight across country.

At last we arrived at an extensive grass plain where the water was quite shallow, and where it was supposed that the deer had taken refuge. The line of boats opened out, and it was not long before a deer was afloat. My attention was, however, distracted from the deer by a loud splashing ahead of me, and on looking for the cause I saw a

magnificent rhinoceros crossing about 150 yards off. To exchange the smooth-bore for the heavy rifle was the work of a moment, and I was delighted to hear the bullet take effect. The brute tossed his head and swerved off in the direction of M.'s boat, where it was equally warmly received, and it then passed between us and plunged into the heavy wood jungle that skirted the grass plain.

I was afraid we had lost our chance, for the natives have a horror of the rhinoceros, and are more afraid of it than of a tiger even, and I thought it was doubtful if the boatmen would venture after the brute. I found however that two of my men were game, as also the faithful Dukhi, and amongst them they serewed up the courage of the third boatman, and away we dashed into the jungle, leaving poor M. objurgating his boatmen, who all sternly refused to follow.

We pushed on after Master Rhino, guided by his splashing, and whenever the jungle cleared a bit and I could get a glimpse of the animal, I let drive a big bullet at him. Instead of going directly in rear the boat was kept a little to the right, and one of my snap-shots lodged a bullet somewhere about the lungs, for he began to wheeze and snort, and at last came to a dead stop. I had a clear view of him, apparently squatting on his hind legs, and I waited for some time in hopes that he would move and give me a better shot, but at last, as he did not seem inclined to move, I let drive my right barrel at him.

There was no doubt about his moving then, and he was not long in covering the five-and-twenty yards or so that separated us. He came along open-mouthed, and I emptied the left barrel right into his mouth. I was standing at the prow of the canoe behind a tree, and I could feel the canoe jar as the brute came against the tree as he dropped to the shot. I looked back for the other rifle, and found myself the sole occupant of the canoe, my four valiant followers having each climbed the tree nearest to him. I crept along the canoe to get the rifle, which was lying aft, and just as I got hold of it I looked back and saw a great pair of jaws catch the side of the canoe and tear a large piece out. Of course the canoe was upset, and all its contents, myself included, humped into the water, which came up to my breast.

The thought of the wounded monster so close to me was culverting, and I lost no time in first slipping behind and then climbing the nearest tree, which, by the way, proved to be a very thorny one! I need not have been in such a hurry, for the destruction of the canoe was a last effort, and the rhinoceros sank down, unable to go any further.

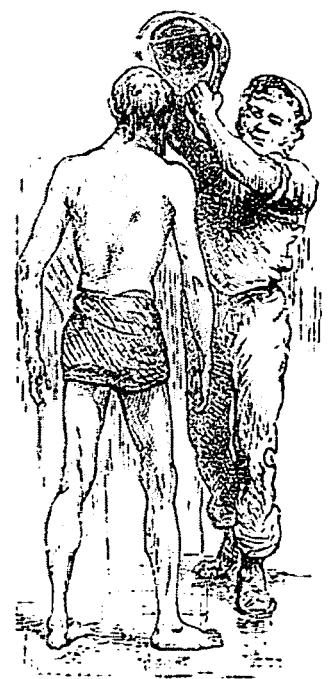
By this time M. had overcome the fears of his men, and I could hear him shouting to me. At last he found his way to the spot, and put a finishing shot into the poor beast. I presented a most dilapidated picture as I emerged from the jungle, dripping wet, and my clothes torn to pieces by the cane creepers

with which the jungle abounded. I was minus one of my guns too, which we could not discover in the deep water, and I had to leave it till the waters abated.

On emerging I inquired for my friend the police-inspector, and found that he was safely ensconced at the top of a high tree. The rest of the boats, however, had made good use of their time and had rowed down some fourteen or fifteen deer. Another deer was started just in front of my canoe, but my guns were all useless after the ducking they had had, so M. got it. I was sorry I could not take measurements of the rhinoceros, for it was an exceptionally large one, but, lying as the body was in deep water, I could not manage it. I had the head cut off and brought to the station, and kept the horn; whilst M. took the tasks, which were as sharp as razors almost.

I found that my last shot into the mouth had taken effect in the upper jaw, and I was astonished that he should have used his teeth in his last attack on the canoe instead of his horn, which, I conclude, cannot be generally used as a weapon of offence. The horn measures ten inches in height and thirteen inches round the curve from front base to tip.

It raised feelings of envy in the breasts of the staff of the Maharajah of Cooh Behar when the latter was in England for the Jubilee. Amongst the dozens of rhinoceroses they had shot they had never got one that came anywhere near mine for size. I often look at the horn and think with gratitude of the Providence which has shielded me in many dangers, of which the one whose story I have now related was not by any means the least, though at the time perhaps I scarcely realised it.



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