

## CHAPTER XVI

### CECILY SHOOTS A RHINOCEROS

The day shall not be up so soon as I,  
To try the fair adventure of the morn  
*King John*

We are blessed in this man, as I may say, even blessed  
*Winter's Tale*

THE sun shall not be up so soon as I. Indeed, I had a whole half-hour's start of him, while I put my house in order. I prepared in my own way for the fair adventure of the morn, and told Cecily where to look for my will. She was in wild spirits, and chaffed me no end. She saw to her armoury, and asked me over and over to eat more. But I said I felt exactly like a man about to be hanged, of whom you read in the next day's papers: "The prisoner made a most excellent breakfast."

Out we started, Clarence, the Somali who joined our forces at the spot where the camels tried a course of mud baths, four hunters, and two syces. We followed the old spoor for miles, but it was at last apparent that the pachyderm we were after had by this time travelled far out of our ken. We sat down to cogitate, and the hunters went off spooring on a detour of their own.

In the thick jungle we disturbed a few baby

ostriches. I could not count how many, because they scattered right and left, thrown into panic by the shameless desertion of the little brood by their father, who making a direct bid for his own safety, took a bee-line out of our radius. I cornered one little fluffy yellow and black bird, and could have caught him had I wished. He was about twelve inches high, very important looking, and his bright black boot-button eyes gazed at me unblinkingly. Stout little yellow legs supported the tubby quaint body, and then I let him pass to gain solitude and his brothers. We did not war with ostrich babies. I had rather a contempt for that cock bird. Imagine leaving his children like that ! And yet, considered in the abstract, an ostrich of all other denizens of the wild world stands for respectability and staunchness of purpose. He pairs for life. None of your gad-about ideas for him. One life, one love, is the ostrich motto, and if he finds the "Ever and ever, Amen" variety of domesticity spells satiety almost invariably, well, he is no different from other two-footed creatures we know. Nature is the same wherever or however we find it.

The ostrich does not *look* a happy bird. His sad pathetic face makes one think something in this "sorry scheme of things entire" does not altogether satisfy. What the ostrich really needs is a matrimonial system whereby these birds might take each other on the lease principle, as we do houses, with the option of renewal. Things would brighten up for them, I am sure, considerably. I don't know how we can arrange it, or even put the suggestion to them. Perhaps

some intensely knowing person could arrange this, the editor of the halfpenny patron of patriotism, for instance. He understands everything. The suggested lease system would add considerable zest to life in the ostrich world, as indeed it would in many others. Just before the lease fell in Madame Ostrich would assure her husband that the very last idea she had would be its renewal. For all masculinity wants is that, and that only, which is denied him. Mr. Ostrich would feel that the renewal of the lease was the be-all of everything, and the fattest slugs, the best bit of ground for finding tit-bits upon, and the least prickly walks in the jungle would all be offered as persuasive arguments. The general pleasantness would last them both for weeks.

A hunter reported he had come on a maze of rhino tracks. Allowing for the usual exaggeration, we judged one rhinoceros might be get-at-able. On investigation, we found that one had passed through the thickish country, and that very recently. Joy!—for Cecily! Hastily we left our ponies in charge of the syces, detailed two other hunters to remain also, and with the remaining followers prepared to stalk. Often the spoor was lost for a hundred yards or so, but our very able shikaris never failed to pick it up again, and though the going was exceedingly heavy, we made fair progress. We saw numerous oryx and dibitag, one of the latter passing so near me that I exchanged glances with her at twenty-five yards. But, of course, “the likes of them” were safe from us now.

We sped across an open bit, and then into another belt of jungle. The whole aspect of the spot looked to me as the very place to see a repetition of the Baron disaster. We plunged into the ubiquitous thorn, starting a frightened dik-dik as I took my header. Crawling, pushing, scratching, we won our way to comparatively clear ground. Clarence raised his hand for utter silence. We heard a scrunching and breaking of thorns. A great beast was a-travelling. Maybe he had winded us or been disturbed. And then "a strange thing happened." I, who had been absolutely impassive up to now, was drawn into the mesh of desire. The effects of rhino shooting on me is like unto the results of champagne drinking on Brillat-Savarin, at first (*ab initio*) most exciting, afterward (*in recessu*) stupefying. I was now thoroughly game for anything. But kept my reason in sufficient bounds to remember that thick thorn cover is not an ideal place to meet a rhino in.

We did a most careful stalk, creeping towards the place of the sounds, under Clarence's complete directions. At last, he alone pressed on with us, the others willingly remaining where he signalled. We were not now in overwhelmingly thick thorn, but it was too dense to be pleasant, and necessitated our handling our rifles with the greatest care. After a hard few minutes we sank down to rest. Our rifles covered a small clearing.

The game of all sizes had made tunnels through the jungly place, high enough in some parts for us to stand upright, and all seemed to lead to this open

glade. Flies in myriads were buzzing about the undergrowth, a reddish squirrel, with bushy tail, jerked towards me on a fallen guda tree, then with a chatter made off among the branches. The air was simply stifling with dry heat, and I was thirsty beyond words.

Wonder of wonders! A dark ponderous bulk loomed on the left of us, under a great guda tree, overhung with armo creeper. The great head came well into view, all unconscious of intruders. The beast was lurching, eating his favourite bushes, and munching steadily. This was not at all sporting—it seemed so simple.

Cecily gently pushed the muzzle of her 12-bore through the sheltering thorns, and was able to take careful and steady aim at the rhino's ear. She was in excellent range. It is no use trying for a rhino at a distance exceeding eighty, or at the most, ninety yards. Bang! The smoke hung for a moment, obscuring everything. The animal seemed to stagger to the shot. And then, on the instant, with snorts and squeals, small out of all proportion to the size of the emitter, charged across the intervening space. Then when he made the jungle he as quickly dashed back again. I was very anxious for Cecily to have this shoot all to herself, and though I had a glorious chance of a heart shot from my position, I held my fire.

I am not very clear what happened next, and when I apply to my cousin she says, "I'm sure I cannot tell you." I think Cecily came dangerously forward. The



DEAD RHINOCEROS

*Living Land - Organized for the Living*



rhino turned on our inadequate fortress of mimosa, and as the peril swept upon us we seemed to gather wit and sense to combat the danger. Separating widely as the beast plunged straight in where we had been, we turned on him, simultaneously, to fire. Then we branched off again, at right angles. I fell into a thorn bush, and took the opportunity of comparative safety to reload. Cecily was now dancing about in the open, in a most sporting but in no sense a common-sense fashion. For a dreadful instant I feared the result. The rhino bull took up a large circle with its careering and struggles, and the dust was so great that from my post I could not clearly see the finish. I heard the rifle crack twice again, and then a ringing shout for me came. There lay the mighty carcass in a kneeling attitude. A mountain of flesh indeed!

Cecily had a great gash on her wrist, caused, I fancy, by some sharp flint stone, and the blood was running down her rifle as she held it at the trail. She was too excited to speak, and there was no calming her down. She really seemed like a person in a dream. I announced to her solemnly it was to be our last rhino shoot. The tension relaxed then, and she laughed at my serious face.

A series of whistles brought up the hunters, and the last phase began. Cecily and I set off to find our ponies, and, full of elation, made for camp and tea. We had tea at all hours of the day, finding it the most refreshing of anything, and I don't really think it affected our nerves one scrap.

It was rather late when our men reached camp,



laden with treasure. They brought the rhino's feet, his tail, his head, and some of his skin. There was no reason why they should not have brought it all. It comes off quite easily. They said they had not time, as they feared being bushed, or that lions would be attracted to the spot by the smell of blood. The skin is very valuable to the Somalis for shields, and many other purposes, and we rather thought it was a put up business to secure half the rhino hide for themselves. We thought of going back then and there and seeing the thing finished, but Clarence said it was such a long way off, the result would be we would all assuredly be caught out in the bush at night. I suppose he was right. They had us fairly.

The Somalis don't care for eating rhino, and I cannot say the flesh looks very inviting, but we got the chef to make us some soup of the tail, which you hear so well spoken of by all travellers. I do not think our opinion can be considered a fair one. It would have been a better soup had we made it ourselves. Our cook could not cook anything properly, and the tail and taste of it, if there had been either in the pan at any time, was drowned in a waste of water.

Before the great pachyderm began to be dismembered we measured him, and his waist, or where his waist should be if he had one, was by the tape, seven feet three inches. I don't know what a fashionable belle rhinoceros would think of that. In length he was a shade over ten feet, but this was not a very large animal as they go. We set to work helping to stretch and clean and saltpetre. The anterior horn

was much blunted at the tip, the result of some accident or wear and tear of some kind, so that it lost half an inch or so in length. But eleven inches looks formidable enough, on such a fearsome head. The eyes are ridiculously small in a rhino. I think to such altogether inadequate optics much of the bad sight put down to the rhino must be ascribed. One would hardly think every single animal of this variety starts its career with bad sight, but that is what every hunter tells you. Go nap every time on the non-seeing powers of your enemy if he happens to be a rhinoceros if you like, but see there is a tree to get behind before you begin. This is advice from myself.

Next day was a poor one as far as sport was concerned. We were very stiff with so much crawling, though at the time we had not noticed it. We sent off a few men to retrieve the rest of the hide from the remains of the rhino, and when the camp was quiet we investigated the trophies, and overhauled them carefully. Some of them cried aloud in their agony for attention. The skin of the last killed lion was beginning to lose some hair in parts. And this was because, when we undid it and looked behind, great lumps of flesh still adhered, making it impossible for the preservatives to do any curing. It took us a long time to set this right, and we rubbed alum in as hard as we could on the inside. Of course, if the skinning is not carefully done, the chances are the trophy will have to be thrown away. I don't know how we should have taken a catastrophe of such magnitude.

The men returned to say the skin of the rhino was not to be found. I don't suppose they had even been to the spot. I am confident they had, in some mysterious way, managed to let their friends know a wealth of shields were to be had for the taking. There was nothing left of our huge friend of the day before, so the men said. Wild beasts had eaten him.

Later, I heard a great shouting in camp and calls for us, and answering in person, I saw Clarence seated on a pony, proudly displaying and offering to me a baby oryx, which he had in front of him. We lifted the mite down, holding it, all struggling, firmly. It was terror-stricken, poor wee thing. I tried to stroke its satin coat, but it only started and looked at me with frightened piteous beseeching eyes. Clarence meant well, but oh, I would a thousand times he had left the kid with its mother. And then a thought struck me. How had he come by this fleet thing? May be killed the doe and then ridden the baby down. Instantly I put it to him. I know I frowned. But he disarmed me by saying the matter was not as I thought, and the mother was alive, unharmed; that he had ridden them down until the little oryx, spent, had to drop, and the mother fled away in fear before his threatening gestures.

I consulted with Cecily, and we came to the conclusion that if we wanted to please Clarence there was nothing for it but to keep the buck, but after mixing it some condensed milk, which we gave it in a bottle with a bit of rubber tubing on the neck, we realised that to retain our little guest meant *our* going

without milk in our tea for weeks. Camel milk was not available, and the baby could not eat. I was thankful of a reasonable excuse to offer Clarence, and he saw the sense of it. I longed to restore the tiny creature to its mother, and Clarence said if we took it back to the place from whence it came the doe would assuredly find it.

We decided to try this, but to secrete ourselves, and cover the baby buck with our protecting rifles. Otherwise, it was quite on the cards that a lion or leopard would make off with it ere its mother could retrieve it. In any case, I should imagine a violent death awaited it. It was so very youthful and easily stalked. I took the timorous creature across my saddle, it seemed all struggling legs and arms, and with Clarence for guide made for the place, some two miles off, where he first started the oryx. I confess I still had my doubts as to his tale and its veracity, but in this I wronged our shikári.

We set the baby down alone, so fragile and small it looked, and then hid ourselves in a great thorn brake. We were as far off as we dared go, and the buck did not wander far. Sometimes it bleated in a little treble, once or twice it lay down, tucking its long legs beneath it, to rise again and wander, all lonely, among the low thorn bushes. Two hours or more we waited and then—a gentle whinny, and almost before we realised it, a perfect oryx doe cantered towards the fawn. She nosed it all over and her joy expressed itself in every imaginable way. It was a most beautiful and pathetic sight. We made some movement, and all alert again,

the graceful creature sailed away, the baby trotting beside. My eyes were full of tears, and I had a lump in my throat. 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful. To think that in all the jungle a mother could find her way to the lost best beloved with nothing to guide her, nothing to tell her. Clarence took it all most naturally, and said all female things are like that. I do almost believe him !

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The sun sailed high in a sky of molten brass, the hot sand blistered the palm set down on it, not a breath of air was stirring. And I, foolish wight, was stalking, on hands and knees, a hartebeest. A family of ants had crawled up my sleeve. I went too near their palace, I suppose, and they mistook the way. A yellow snake, small, wicked-looking, and alert, lay right in my path. Not for a hundred hartebeest would I disturb him ! I made a great detour, to the wonderment of Clarence, who trailed along in my wake. When he saw he wondered no longer. He has learned now, and thinks snakes are a sort of mania of mine, and that I must be humoured. Great bluebottle flies jumped up in our faces from the red-hot sand, then—buzz—and down again. Oh, for some shade—some air—some water ! There was my hartebeest again, with well-groomed coat and flicking tail. The flies were a worry to him too. Now he gets beyond a bunch of aoul—his sentinels. I shall never get within range. I lay my rifle down, myself with it. I can't

see the hartebeest, the aoul, the flies—there is nothing anywhere but a golden maze of light, and a world of noisy hammers in my ears.

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'Twas nothing, just a mild touch of the sun, and next day Richard was himself again, and out with the second hunter, like a French falconer, prepared to fly at anything. Only we chose towards evening for our hunting.

Our ponies carried us through most of the dense country, but sometimes we had to get off and seek an easier way round. We saw tracks of all varieties of game, but for an hour or more had the jungle apparently to ourselves. We were leading our steeds, when we crossed a great find, a place where a lion had been lying, may be after some great banquet. The thorns had taken his size and shape like a mould, and his hairs were all about to betray his whilom presence. The hunter spooed about and picked up the lion trail some little way off. The ground being so loose and sandy made no good evidence of time. The pugs might have been made now, or that morning. We went on silently and after not more than five minutes going, with an electric-like shock, I realised that a lion stood over a kill to our immediate front. He winded us, and stretching his great neck and head upwards to sniff in magnificent disregard bounded into the thicket, the tuft on his tail being the last glimpse I caught of him. I was too taken aback

to even try to get my rifle up. It all happened so very swiftly. We were a very small party to tackle a lion in thick cover, but my man was a little Trojan and did not hesitate when I said I would proceed and he must take a hand at the game. He was carrying my 12-bore, and I had my .500 Express.

First we tethered the ponies, thinking they would be quite safe as we should be in the near vicinity, then we commenced to beat after a fashion of our own. Walking as straight ahead as we could, pushing and struggling through where we couldn't. We fired into the dusky depths in desperation at last, but nothing happened. It was not until we had covered a few hundred yards more before we saw, in a lightening of the undergrowth, a sinuous yellow form streaking along. The hunter in his excitement brought up his rifle. I held his arm. The danger was too great. If a wounded lion turned on us here we were done for, hemmed in as we were. We saw no more of him, he had put some distance between us, and "on my life, had stol'n him home to bed."

It was a great disappointment, but, after all, there isn't much sport in courting disaster. The chances should be almost even, a little in favour of the animal, not entirely so.

The ponies had untethered themselves, it doesn't say much for the way we secured them, I'm afraid, and had betaken their way campwards. We had to track their hoof marks that we might also cut a long journey short. Night was closing in, and we wanted

the shelter of our zareba. And supper, oh, supper ! most of all !

We had no special time for meals in camp. A system that would properly disgust a good housewife. The cook had to produce food whenever we required some, at any time, early or late. It did not make for good cooking ; but then, neither did the chef.