

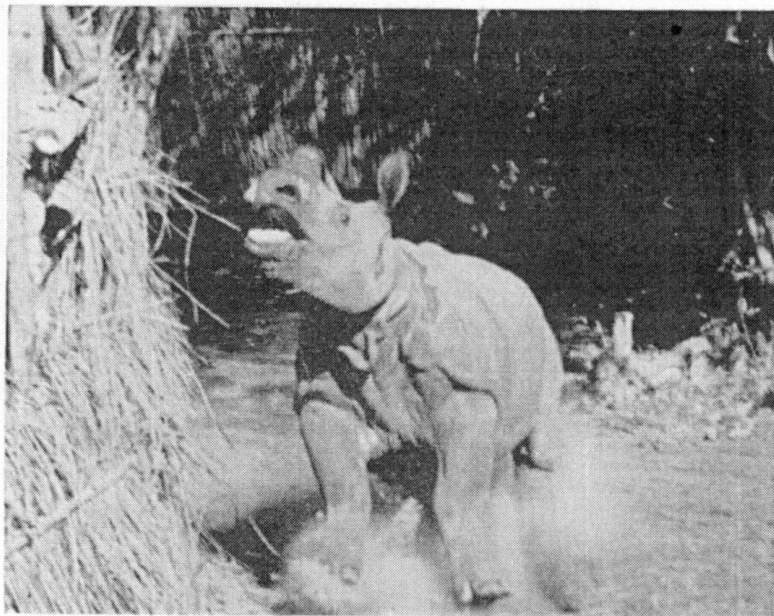
The author and his two-year-old pet cheetah, a fierce-looking but comparatively gentle jungle cat.

MY BEAUTY and MY BEASTS

A wild-animal trapper's true account of romance and high adventure. In his dangerous profession, he has willingly risked his life—and his wife's—to bring 'em back alive.

First of Three Parts

By PETER RYHINER, as told to Daniel P. Mannix



A retreating native (note foot in upper left corner) barely outran this angry rhinoceros. When Ryhiner captured it—a rare one-horned Indian rhino—there were only about 350 living specimens.

I believe that I am the last of the great wild-animal trappers. I have caught gorillas in the Cameroons, orangutans in Borneo, rhinos in India, jaguars in South America and king cobras in Siam. I have brought into the United States over 120 elephants and handled shipments of wild animals valued at from \$80,000 to \$100,000. Today, such shipments are no longer possible, and I doubt if they will ever be again. Currency restrictions, conservation laws, regulations against importing or

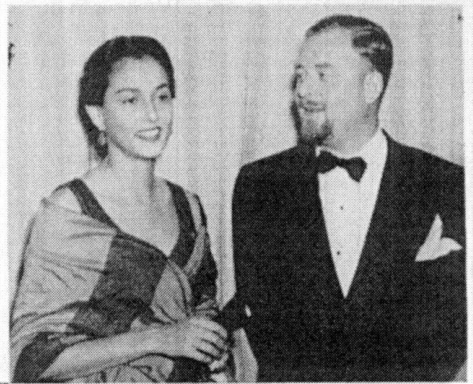


exporting many animals and increased transportation costs have all taken their toll.

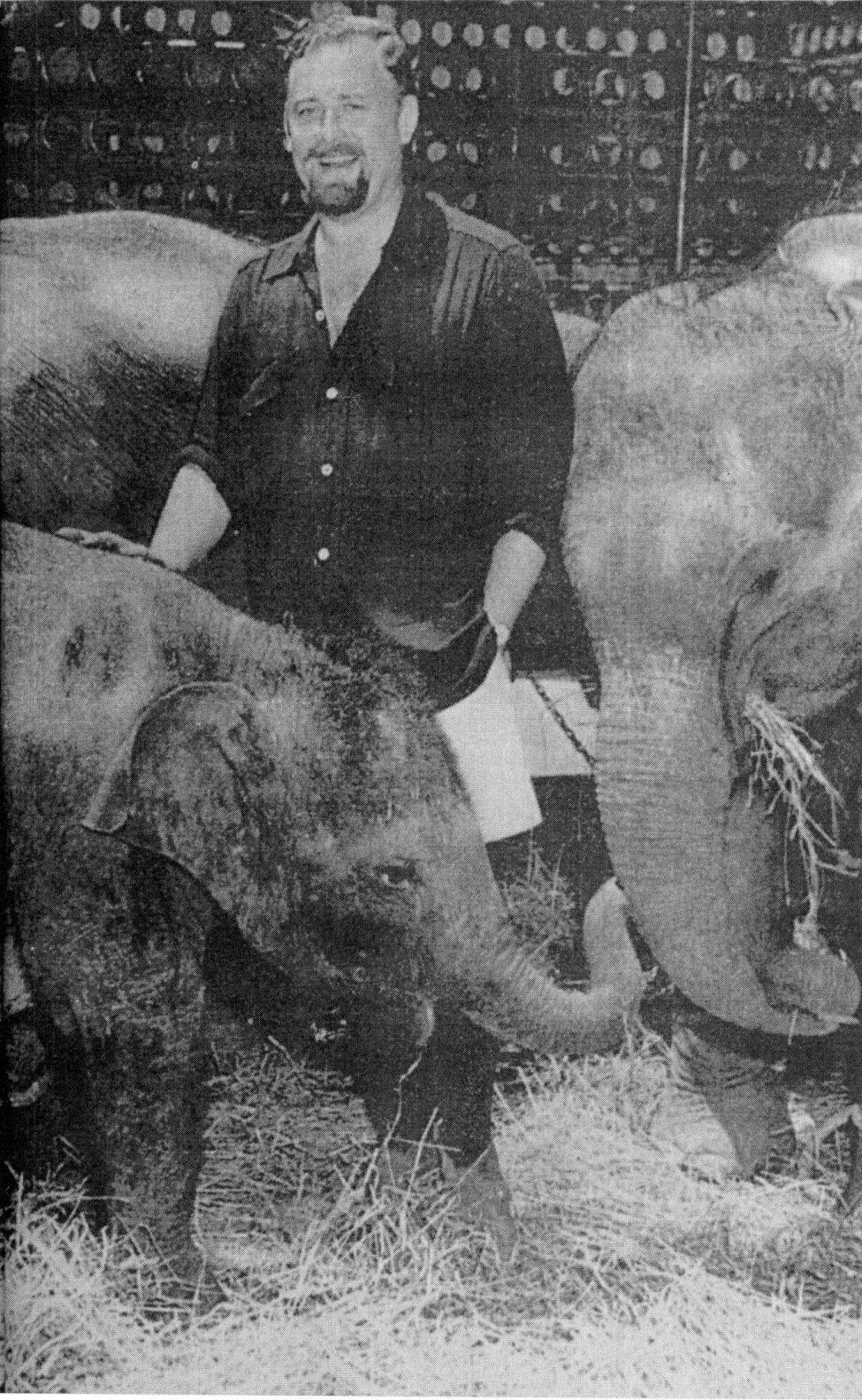
Fifteen years ago it was different. Any young man with a knowledge of wild animals could plunge into the jungles of the Amazon, take his chances among the untamed tribes in the interior of Africa or strike up an acquaintance with an Indian rajah in hopes of being able to trap tigers in his state. You needed little capital; only a willingness to take risks and a feeling for animals. You might die of

fever, a native spear or be mauled by one of your trophies—or you might clear \$35,000 on a single shipment, as I once did.

I was born in Basel, Switzerland, on January 1, 1920. My father was a doctor who had traveled much in out-of-the-way places, and my mother had been born in Singapore, the daughter of civil servants who had spent all their lives abroad. In our household, distant lands were as common a subject for discussion as the next town. Even as a child I had a



Mr. and Mrs. Ryhiner during a 1955 visit to civilization. Peter is now back in Southeast Asia tracking down another rare beast—a hairy Sumatran rhinoceros.



longing to travel and a passion for animals, for nearly every European community has its “traditional craft” and the traditional craft in Basel was working with animals. Many of the world’s great naturalists have come from this little town. As a boy, I kept mice, guinea pigs, salamanders, frogs, toads, a baby crocodile, snakes, lizards and a fox. I spent so much time with my pets that I flunked out of two schools, and at last my despairing parents, who had hoped that I’d enter my father’s profession, allowed me to follow my own bent.

For a time I made a living by meeting ships at Marseilles, Genoa or Antwerp, and buying pet animals that the sailors had acquired in various ports, which could be resold to zoos. When I was twenty-five, I left for South America. For five years I traveled from the mountains of Peru to the jungles of India, collecting animals that varied from poisonous frogs to giraffes. I learned the maze of conflicting regulations covering the capture and exporting of animals, but then I had a run of bad luck, and in 1950 I found myself in Singapore with seventy-two cents in my pocket at a time when the country was full of Communist bandits and the animal business was at a standstill.

I was staying at the Adelpia Hotel on credit, and one afternoon as I passed through the lobby, I heard an outburst of “Ohs” and “Ahs” and cries of “Woo! Woo!” A girl was walking across the lobby toward the “horsebox”—the booth where plane tickets were sold. She was the most exquisitely lovely girl I’d ever seen, sexy, but with a touch-me-not attitude toward the crowd. She stepped into the horsebox, relieving the other girl there. She was obviously the new clerk.

In a matter of seconds, the horsebox was surrounded by a crowd of men asking for timetables, folders, general information, and trying desperately to make dates. I fought my way to the front. On closer inspection, the girl was even prettier than she’d seemed from a distance, although she’d made the mistake of using a very heavy, almost dead-white make-up. She was naturally graceful—just seeing her bend down to take a folder from a pigeonhole was a thrill. The crowd was trying to push me away

(Continued on Page 74)

Left: Peter Ryhiner and his Eurasian wife with Josephine, an elephant that became one of their favorite pets. Peter has captured over 120 elephants.

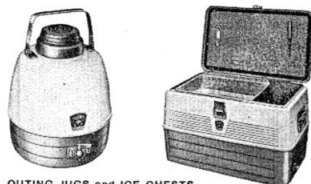
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My Beauty and My Beasts (Continued from Page 23)

from the booth, but I clung to the edge and stared and stared. Her figure was perfect—full, rounded hips which swayed slightly as she moved, and she was wearing a close-fitting blouse that showed off her beautiful form to perfection.

An Indian had forced his way through the crowd to see what all the excitement was about. He took one look at the girl, and then asked sneeringly, "What are you—some sort of Eurasian?"

"Yes, I am a Eurasian," said the girl quietly, and turned to wait on another customer.

The Indian laughed loudly. "I thought that's what you were!" he said proudly, as though with great shrewdness he'd detected the girl in some despicable crime. He looked at the rest of us contemptuously and then forced his way out of the mob.

I didn't care what the girl was, and apparently neither did anyone else. When my turn finally came, I asked for a folder or a timetable or some such thing, and then begged her to have dinner with me. She quietly refused and then turned to the next man.

As I couldn't get into the jungle because of the bandits, my collecting was limited to the town and its environs. I found that I could often pick up mangrove snakes or sometimes even small pythons in the city reservoir, so I spent much of my time there. That evening I picked up a nice little eight-foot regal python and hurried back to the hotel with my capture. In the lobby, I ran into the girl again, just going off duty. The girl's eyes widened when she saw the python, and she jumped out of my way, looking at me curiously as I hurried past. The next evening I happened to meet the girl again in the hotel lobby.

She smiled and asked, "How's the boa constrictor?"

"He's not a boa; he's a regal python," I told her.

The girl laughed. "You're like the scientist in Africa whose wife rushed in to tell him that their child had been eaten by an alligator. He said indignantly, 'My dear, it must have been a crocodile. There aren't any alligators in Africa.'"

I was delighted that she knew a little something about animals. "Why don't we have dinner together and I'll explain the difference between a boa and a python?" I suggested.

She hesitated. "I'll have dinner with you, but don't talk about snakes. I hate them."

Fortunately, I was able to sell the python to a native dealer for a few Straits dollars, so I had some money. We ate at a little Chinese restaurant where they served *satée*—meat on sticks roasted over charcoal and served with chili and hot peanut sauce. The girl's name was Mercia and before the evening was over we told each other our life histories.

Mercia's father was an English rubber planter and her mother a beautiful Eurasian woman, half English and half Malayan. Her parents had separated when Mercia was five and she was put in a Singapore institute for children of mixed

parentage. When the war came and the threat of a Japanese invasion was imminent, the children were sent to India. Mercia was taken in by a school for English girls. She had no money, but occasionally she was able to earn a few annas doing odd jobs around the school. When the other girls bought fruit in the market, the fruit was peeled for them by the merchants. Mercia would then buy the peels and suck them, pretending that they were real fruit. When the girls went to hill stations during vacation, Mercia remained behind in the school, but she helped the other children pack. "Then I could pretend that I was going away too," Mercia explained. Her most painful time came after the war when the other girls went Home—Home always being England. Mercia had no home to go to, but she packed up for the other girls for the last time before going out into the world to make a living.

Mercia had no training that fitted her for any business or profession, so she took whatever jobs she could find. She had been a receptionist, a clerk, a saleswoman and a tourist guide. Her remarkable beauty was both an advantage and a handicap. It gave her an enormous power in dealing with men, which she had learned to use with cold calculation, but in Singapore society it was taken for granted that a handsome Eurasian girl would naturally become the mistress of some wealthy white man, so Mercia's attempts to support herself were regarded with exasperated amusement.

Mercia agreed to help me with the animal business as a sort of unpaid secretary. I soon learned to leave all business arrangements to her. Mercia was willing to bargain with a native trapper all day if she could pick up an animal for a few Straits dollars less than the asking price. I've never seen anyone like her at publicity. Publicity is vitally important to an animal collector, for, unless the zoos and big dealers have heard of you, they ignore your letters. Every newspaper photographer in Singapore wanted pictures of Mercia, but it was a problem how to include the animals we wanted to sell.

Mercia would pose with any animal except snakes. I had several dozen mangrove snakes—shiny, bluish-black reptiles with neon-yellow bellies and chins. I got Mercia to pose for some press photographers, reclining on a couch in a skin-tight, green bathing suit. Then I quickly dumped a basketful of mangrove snakes over her, counting on Mercia's business sense to keep her from screaming or showing any panic. Mercia didn't disappoint me. She continued to smile sweetly with the snakes crawling all over her. As a result of the publicity, I was able to sell the snakes for a good price. Mercia wasn't mad at me. She only said, "After this, I'll pose with any snake if you'll only tell me about it ahead of time; not dump it on me unexpectedly."

I'd fallen in love with Mercia almost from the first moment I'd seen her, and at the end of a month she agreed to marry me. We spent our honeymoon at



"One thing I've got to say for Umlak—he's a good provider."

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Bedok, a real Malay village with houses on stilts. Often we spent the whole night on the beach under the palm trees, cooking little meals over driftwood fires and watching fishermen catching crabs in their scoop nets by the light of the moon.

Since Bedok was too far from the docks where the animals had to be shipped, we were forced to move to Singapore and stayed in a hotel that did not allow animals. Mercia used to smuggle small animals up to our room under her blouse and this gave rise to the rumor that she was pregnant. Mercia encouraged the belief and used to stage fainting fits in the lobby. After she had been revived with cold water and smelling salts, she would weakly thank the clerks and stagger out the door, returning an hour or so later with anything from a bagful of snakes to a pair of mouse deer hidden about her person. No one dared to interfere with her.

However, there weren't enough animals in Singapore to make collecting profitable, and it soon became obvious that we'd have to move to a better territory. By the greatest of good luck, I got a check from the Bristol Zoo in England for £300 in payment for a jaguar that I'd sent them many months before. There was a considerable demand for Siamese animals, so we decided to try our luck there. We flew to Bangkok and then went on by rail to a village named Suratthani in the heart of the jungle. Suratthani was a lovely place built on both sides of a river full of valuable crocodiles, and the natives assured us it was an excellent place for king cobras, worth \$200 each in the United States or Europe. We rented a small native house on the outskirts of the village and formed a partnership with a Swedish mining engineer who was prospecting for wolfram, a mineral used in the production of steel.

Suratthani turned out to be an animal collector's paradise. There were black leopards, tigers, gibbons, the rare spectacled langur and plenty of king cobras. The first day we arrived, the natives told us of a pair of king cobras that were nesting near a little waterfall in the jungle. We rented an elephant to go in after them. Mercia stayed in Suratthani while the Swede and I set out on the elephant with a native trapper and guide.

There was no trouble finding the pair, even in the waist-high grass. As soon as they saw us, both snakes reared up nearly as high as a man. We went after the female first, still riding on the elephant, using a fifteen-foot pole with a sliding noose on the end. We got the female without any trouble and popped her into a bag. Then we went after the male.

He was the biggest king cobra I've ever seen—a little more than seventeen feet long. As I advanced the pole toward him, he dodged the noose and charged. He struck the elephant on the foot before I could get the noose around his neck. The native trapper slipped off the pad and grabbed the giant snake by his little mouse head just above the hood. We got him into the bag, the poison still dripping from his fangs—although he put up a tremendous struggle.

The elephant stood trembling, and the mahout said quietly, "He has had it."

"Nonsense," said the Swede. "A cobra bite can't kill anything as big as an elephant."

The mahout repeated dispassionately, "He has had it," and sat down to wait. The elephant stood shaking for about twenty minutes. Then he sank slowly to his knees, groaned a few times and fell over dead.

The Swede said in an awe-struck voice, "Good God!"

We could do nothing but walk back to Suratthani. The mahout made us go first, as he said the country was full of cobras and no one in his right mind ever went on foot. Forcing our way through waist-high grass in cobra country was an unpleasant experience, especially as the death of the poor elephant was still in our minds. We saw several other cobras, but they slipped away into the grass before we could catch them.

The mahout charged us 8000 ticals—about \$400—for the elephant. However, there were still plenty of king cobras

around, and we spent days catching them. They are very aggressive snakes and will charge a man at astonishing speed. Luckily, they generally rear up before striking, which gives you a chance to jump out of their way. The Swede didn't like the cobras and used to take along a shotgun for protection. He killed one that attacked him—a fine fourteen-foot female—and Mercia was furious at the loss. She wouldn't allow the Swede to go out after that, but went herself, with a noose pole, although she still disliked snakes, especially poisonous ones.

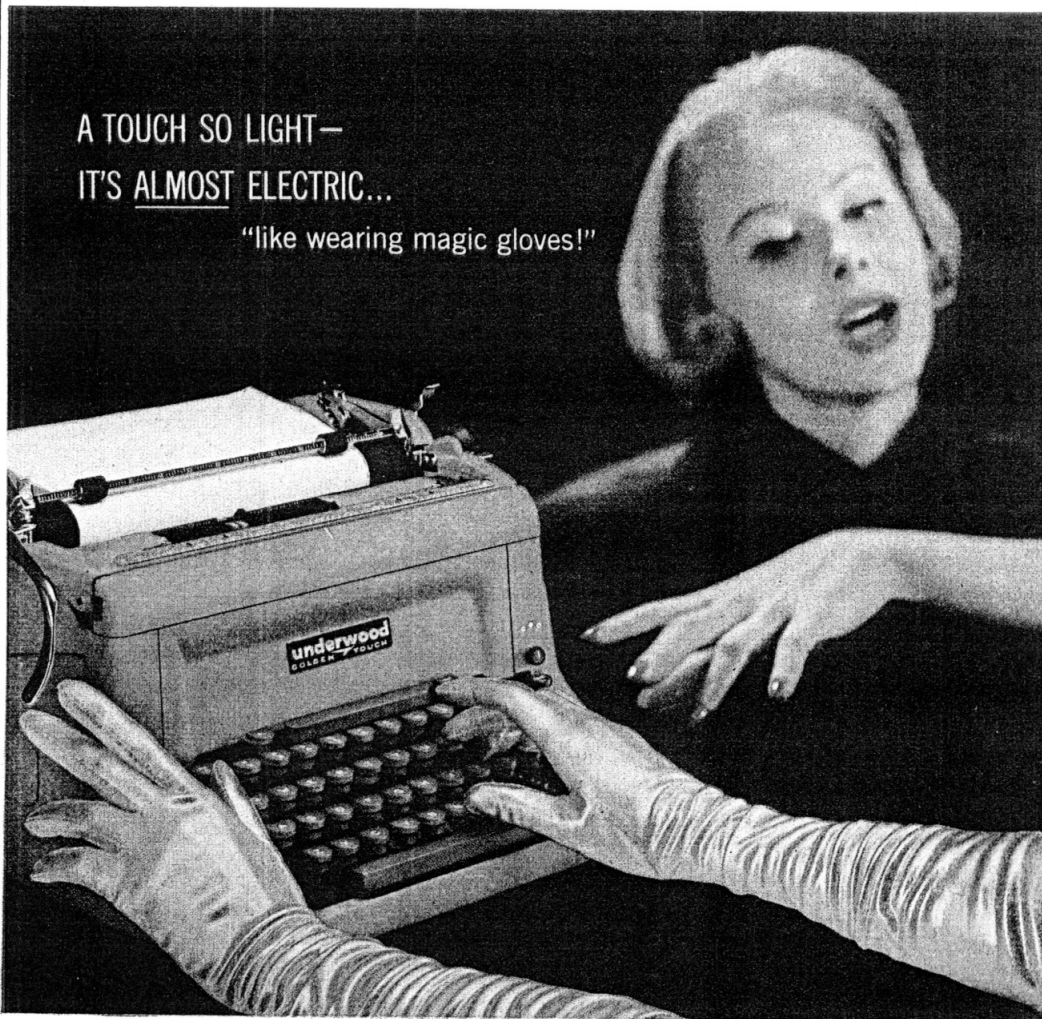
Mercia kept all the accounts, doling out to the Swede and me whatever sums she considered necessary for liquor and tobacco. As a business manager, Mercia was splendid, and I was happy to find that she was remarkably good with baby animals too. Only a woman can be really successful in raising baby animals. A collector has too many other things to do. The babies require constant care and, what is equally important, affection. Without love, they pine away and die.

Mercia raised several young leopards on bottles and was the best person I've

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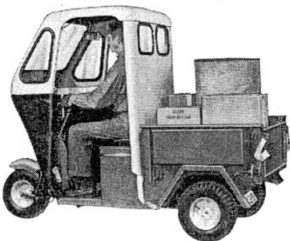
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ever seen with baby gibbons. Gibbons are apes, like gorillas and chimps, and so belong to a higher order of primates than do monkeys. They are extremely intelligent and in captivity are absolutely dependent on human love.

The natives shot gibbons for food, and would sometimes find a baby clinging to the dead mother's breast. Mercia raised the babies on goats' milk. The gibbons used to sit in a circle on Mercia's desk, watching while she made out the accounts. They were fascinated by the pencils and papers, but, after a scolding or two, never touched them. They were perfectly tame, but we had to keep them chained most of the time because they were insanely jealous of the village children and would make the most murderous attacks on any child who went near Mercia. Whenever she could, Mercia would take a troupe of five or six for walks along the edge of the jungle, Mercia keeping to the paths and the gibbons swinging through the trees by their long arms. Except possibly for chimps, gibbons are my favorite primates. They have only one bad habit. Every morning at dawn they set up a loud "hoo-hooing" that carries for miles and makes sleep impossible.

There was only one animal that didn't get along with Mercia—a huge, red-faced monkey the size of a small child, and far more powerful than a man. He was the roughest, meanest monkey I've ever seen. He hated Mercia and whenever he could escape from his chain he took a fiendish delight in tearing the clothes she'd hung up to dry. Old Red-Face loved durian, which is a horribly smelly fruit, and Mercia used to gather it for him, although the odor made her ill. But it never changed his dislike of her. Mercia didn't think much of him either.

Siam is excellent monkey country, especially for rhesus. Rhesus are so common that there is little use in collecting them, but a native boy brought in a little rhesus he'd caught when the mother had put the baby down to get some grubs from under a log. We gave him a tical or two for the baby and, as the mother was hanging around our camp, tried to return the baby to her. She refused to accept him and we had to bottle-raise the orphan. A few days later, the mother kidnapped a kitten, which she nursed as though it were her own baby—although, curiously, she continued to ignore her real child. I'm afraid the kitten had a short life. I saw the mother rhesus trying to train it to swing from branch to branch and then beating the poor thing severely when it refused to learn.

At the end of six months' hard work, mixed with some real dangers and plenty of disappointments, we had collected about \$75,000 worth of animals. Subtracting expenses, shipping charges, permits, and so on, each of us should have realized a profit of about \$10,000—no fabulous sum, but we were well content. Then occurred what seemed to us a crushing disaster, but which was to establish me as an internationally known animal collector.

We were making our final arrangements to ship the animals when a telegram arrived from my old friend, Theo Meier, who is an artist. Theo was in Bangkok, passing through on his way from Europe to his home in Bali. He wanted me to have a drink with him.

Leaving Mercia in charge of the animals, I took a train to Bangkok. I arrived the next day still wearing my jungle clothes, sandals and a stained pair of old khaki drills, and met Theo at the Swimming Club. Theo is a short, dark man, who seems almost Oriental from his years in the Far East. He, too, was wearing

sandals and a brilliant Balinese blouse of his own design.

"Peter, my old friend!" he shouted in a voice that could be heard halfway to the Floating Market. "Come and have a glass of this *mekong*! It's nearly as good as the *tuak* we used to drink in Bali."

We had a glass, and then another and another. At two o'clock the next morning we found ourselves in an obscure bar, drinking gimlets and eating coriander leaves mixed with fried, hair-fine spaghetti, shrimps and limes. I suddenly remembered that I had no hotel reservations.

"Think nothing of it," Theo assured me. "I'm staying at the palace. Prince Rangsit will give you a room there."

Still in our disreputable clothing, we got a taxi and drove to the palace. It was a huge, rambling, white building, partly European and partly Oriental in architecture. Servants in brilliant blue-and-white livery led us to our room. We stripped off our clothes and fell asleep on the beds.

When I awakened, it was late afternoon. A slender, dark man was standing by the bed regarding me somewhat curiously.

I said, "*Savadee* (greetings)."

From the next bed, Theo roared, "Get up, you fool! That's Prince Rangsit! Don't lie in bed when you're talking to a prince!"

I sprang up and the prince and I shook hands. He asked if I'd enjoyed my sleep, invited us both to dinner to meet his father, the regent, and then passed on.

We had dinner that evening in the great dining hall. Each of us had three of the liveried servants standing behind his chair and a little lamp by his plate, as the lights in the room were purposely kept dim. We were presented to the prince's father, a very old man who knew a surprising amount about the animal business. He was also the king's uncle and regent. The king was a young man finishing his education in Europe and was the grandson of King Mongkut, the sovereign of Anna and the King of Siam.

Dinner finished, we sat back to enjoy our cognac and Havana cigars. The regent suddenly said casually to me, "Oh, by the way, I just signed a bill that will affect you. All shipments of wild animals from Siam are forbidden." Then he continued his talk with Theo as though he had asked if I were enjoying my cigar.

I sat stunned. Six months' work and all my savings had gone into this expedition.

And Mercia—after months of hard work, enduring jungle fever and insects, handling leopards and the terrible cobras she dreaded so—she would have to be told that it was all for nothing. What would she think of me? Although I was not conscious of making a noise, Theo later told me that I groaned aloud.

Prince Rangsit said gently, "But, my father, surely this law doesn't apply to this man, as he came here in good faith and has spent much time and money making his collection."

"I know, I know," said the old regent somewhat irritably. "It will be hard on him. But the people will have it so. They know that animals are worth a great deal of money and they resent having them taken out of the country. With the Chinese Reds in the north and our hills full of their hired bandits, we must have the people's confidence. We cannot risk their resentment for a few leopards and monkeys."

What he said was true, and looking at the sad faces of Prince Rangsit and Theo, I knew I was ruined.

I returned immediately to Suratthani. As I crossed the river in the sampan ferry, I dreaded most of all having to break the news to Mercia. She met me at the gate of our compound. In the graceful sarong that showed her beautiful slim legs and perfect figure, she looked as though she had just stepped off a South Sea set in a Hollywood studio, but for the first time, my heart did not jump at the sight of her. Instead, I tried to think of what I would have naturally said.

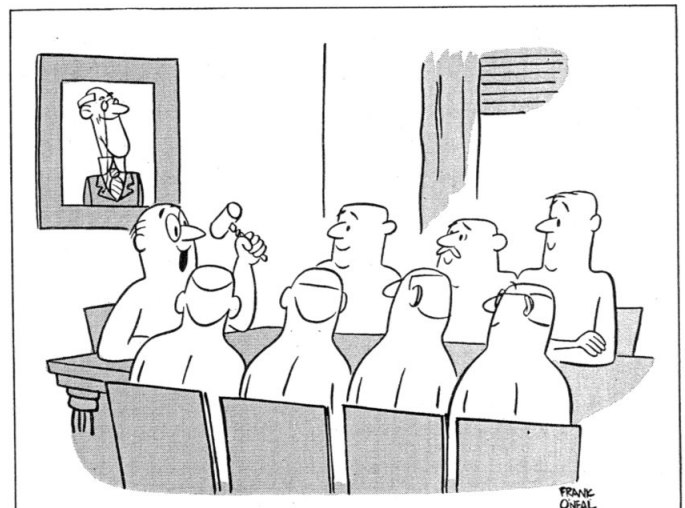
I called, "How are the animals? Oh, yes, and how are you?"

I was never able to fool Mercia for an instant. She said at once, "What has happened? Tell me the worst."

I told her. If there is too much seasoning in a dish or a train is five minutes late, Mercia often goes into fits of violent temper, but in a crisis she is always calm. She stood with her hands folded in front of her like a child, her delicately carved face as expressionless as that of a Buddha.

She said slowly, "Then there is no help for it. We must get the rhinos."

I gave an angry laugh and went by her. Mercia knew nothing about the animal business. All she possessed was a savage determination that would listen to no reason and admit of no obstacles. Her remark about the rhinos was typical of her fierce obsessions.



"Then it's agreed. We air-condition the building!"

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Three months before, I had received a cable from Doctor Hediger, director of the Basel Zoo, which read simply, "Ship rhinos at once." Puzzled, I had cabled back that I was not in Africa. I got a longer cable in reply. An old animal dealer who had been my partner at one time had cabled Doctor Hediger that as long as I was in the Far East, it would be easy for me to pick up a pair of Indian rhinos. He might as well have said that I could get a pair of Abominable Snowmen.

There are only about 350 Indian rhinos left, which makes them one of the world's rarest animals. Approximately 300 of this number live on a reserve in Assam, a province of India north of Burma and East Pakistan and bordering on Tibet. Another fifty or so are in Nepal. Both lots are carefully protected and rightly so. No one can get a permit to shoot or capture a rhino and no one but an idiot would even try.

However, after getting Doctor Hediger's second cable I'd begun to think a bit. A couple of years before, I'd been having drinks with an English tea planter in the bar of the old Spence Hotel in Calcutta. I'd told the man that I was in the animal business, and he at once assumed a knowing look.

"I'll wager you'd like to get your hands on an Indian rhino," he said, hiccuping and placing his finger alongside his nose. "Tell you what. Write Pat Stracey. That bloke can get you anything. Senior conservation officer of the forests at Assam. Just mention my name."

"What is your name?" I'd asked.

The tea planter winked at me. "That's a secret. 'No names, no pack drill,' eh? Just tell old Pat you know me." And putting his head on the table, the planter had gone fast to sleep.

I'd mentioned the incident to Mercia as a joke, together with the information that an Indian rhino was easily worth \$10,000. After that, Mercia was determined to get a rhino—several rhinos. She'd persuaded me to write to Pat Stracey, but I'd got no reply. I didn't really expect one.

The next morning we sold our animals to local merchants for whatever they would bring, splitting 50-50 with our Swedish partner, who left Suratthani that afternoon. Most of the animals were bought by an old Chinaman, who, I learned later, sold them to the Peking Zoo, sending them by a cargo ship that had been smuggling arms to the Red guerrillas in the hills. Apart from the financial loss, it was heartbreaking to lose the ones that had become pets. That's the worst part of the animal business—having to sell the ones that love and trust you. Mercia even had to sell her clothes. Since she always took great pride in being well dressed, especially in the presence of the rather dowdy British *memsahibs*, this was the greatest of deprivations to her, but there was no help for it.

Before leaving, we went to the post office to get our mail. To our astonishment, there was a whole sack of it.

The clerk explained indifferently, "There have been serious floods which held up all the mail for a month."

We sat down on the porch of the post office and tore open the letters. They were the usual thing. A crazy American millionaire wanted to buy a white elephant for the Pope. An English lord wanted to get a dozen zebras to train for polo, having heard that zebras can turn very quickly. Then I found a letter from the India Forest Department. It was postmarked "Assam."

Mercia snatched the letter out of my hand and ripped it open. She screamed,

"Stracey is giving you two permits to get a pair of rhinos!"

"Why?" I asked, astonished.

"He doesn't say, and who cares? But the permits cost twenty thousand rupees each—about five thousand dollars. You'll have to go to Assam to catch the rhinos yourself, but Stracey promises you the help of the forestry department and the free use of elephants."

Thank heaven we had enough from the sale of the animals to cable Doctor Hediger. Doctor Hediger was willing to advance us 30,000 Swiss francs—about

\$7000. For that, we could fly to Assam and get at least one rhino.

We arranged to leave Suratthani that once. We had disposed of all our animals except the big red-faced monkey. No one would accept this monkey even as a gift, but he refused to leave us, out of sheer contrariness. Finally Mercia put a pile of his favorite durians on the bank of the river, and while he was eating them, we jumped into a sampan and the boatman shoved off.

When old Red-Face saw we were leaving him, he went into a perfect spasm of

fury, turning somersaults with rage and dancing up and down on the bank.

Mercia screamed at him, "Now you can go and gather your own durian! And I hope a python gets you!" We crossed the river with Mercia screaming at the monkey and the monkey screaming back at her. But I couldn't worry about Mr. Red-Face. He'd go back to the jungle. Meanwhile, Mercia and I were starting out on what proved to be the most difficult and dangerous job of my career.

Editors' Note—This is the first of three articles. The second will appear next week.



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