

FIFTY YEARS'
REMINISCENCES OF INDIA

A Retrospect of Travel, Adventure and
Shikar

BY

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ILLUSTRATED

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CHAPTER IX.

INDIAN RHINOCEROS.

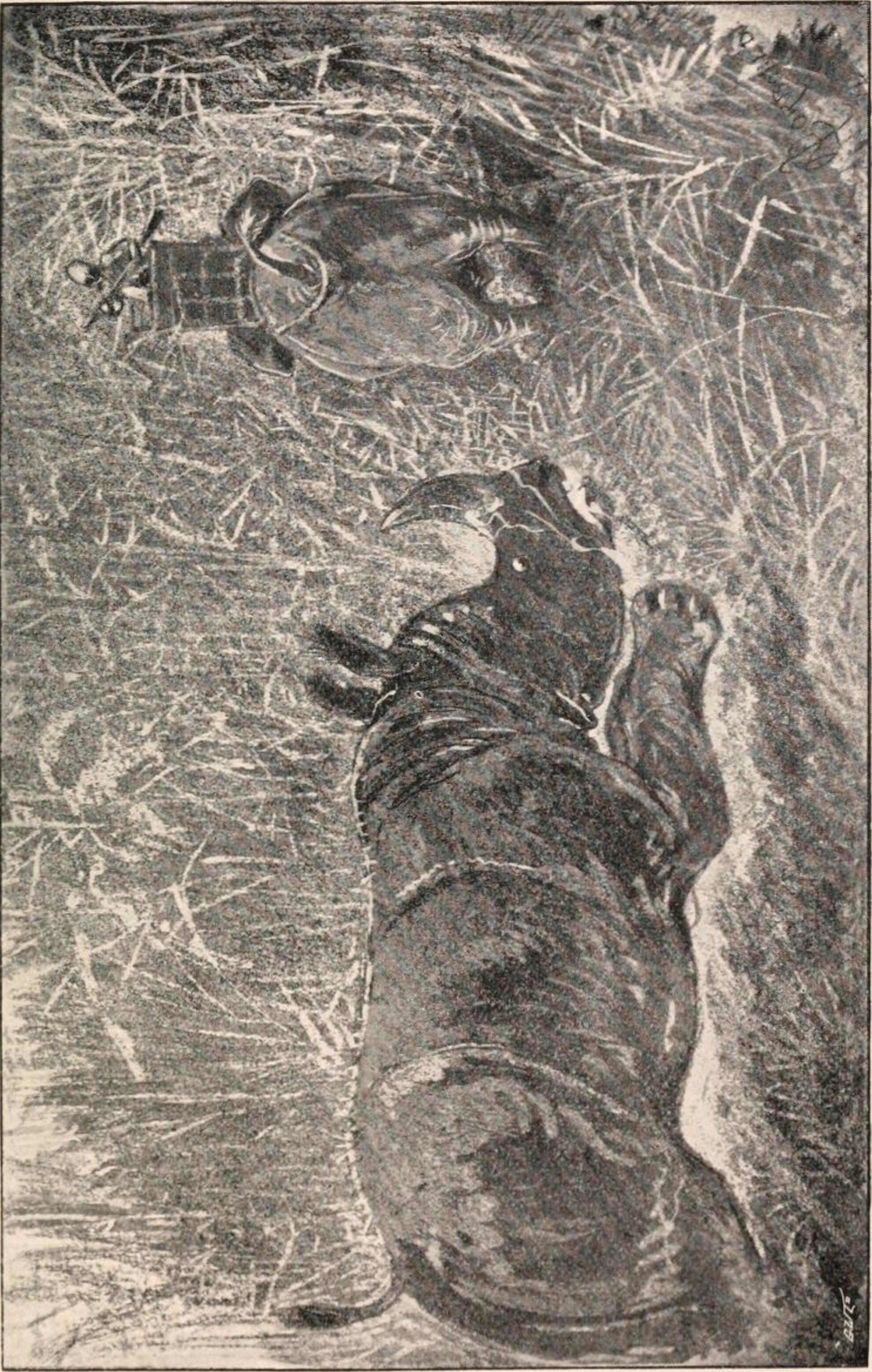
Erroneous ideas as to the impenetrability of a rhinoceros' hide—
 Generally harmless, but dangerous when wounded—Herd with
 elephant and buffalo—Meet them first in Burma, then in Assam
 —Elephants indispensable—Difficulty of obtaining them—My
 first Indian rhinoceros—Make a sad mess of others—Rhinoceros-
 shooting in cold weather—Size of horns—Their value—A savage
 charge—Just in time—Charged by two rhinoceroses.

THE resisting power of the skin of rhinoceros against powder and ball has been much exaggerated. The hide on the living animal offers no greater, if as much, resistance as does that of a buffalo; a heavy charge of powder and a hardened projectile are required, not to penetrate the outer cuticle, but to go through the mass of animal matter lying between the skin and the vital organs. I have seen an ordinary shikar knife driven to the hilt by a blow behind the shoulder; and have killed, and seen them killed, by a lucky shot behind the ear from a smooth-bore loaded with a spherical ball and three drachms of powder. But for all that, let the rhinoceros-hunter have good weapons and plenty of them, for though, if left alone, these beasts are perfectly harmless, yet when wounded they are very savage, charge home and inflict fearful wounds,

not with their horns, like their African congeners, but with a sharp tusk, not as long as a boar's, but far more massive and equally keen. With one blow they will cut an elephant's leg to the bone, and when they fight amongst themselves they score one another all over.

Elephants and buffaloes at certain seasons become very dangerous, lying in wait and charging without provocation man or beast, but I never knew, or heard, of a rhinoceros in India doing so. They are found in the remotest jungles, far away from the haunts of man, and consequently inflict little or no injury; but should anyone, attracted by the richness of the soil, cultivate a patch of ground within reasonable distance of their haunts, and they find it out, they will soon invade it. The African *boreli* often charges on getting the scent of a human being, but the Indian rhinoceros takes no heed. He herds in company with elephants and buffaloes; there is no rivalry between them; there is sufficient food and to spare for them all, and they graze near each other without quarrelling. I have seen buffaloes and rhinoceroses wallowing in the same pool. Mounted on an elephant it is not difficult to get near them, if your beast will only approach them, but, somehow, tame elephants have the greatest dread of the rhinoceros, and if they get its wind or hear the peculiar cry it makes, ten to one they make a bolt to the rear.

The great ambition of my youth was to slay an elephant. When I had accomplished that, I longed to undertake a campaign against the rhinoceros. There are plenty in Burma, but it is almost impossible to get at them, as they take up their abode in such a



"B.'s elephant did not wait, but bolted through the long grass."

boggy country that elephants cannot travel over it. To follow them on foot is equally impossible; to pot them at night is not sport. I had helped to kill the two-horned variety in this way near Cape Negrais, in Burma, but never meant to repeat the experiment.

Running home on short leave, after eighteen years' uninterrupted residence in India, I found amongst the passengers a very nice fellow, who had been an assistant in a tea-garden in Koliabar, and thinking that some day I would take leave and visit Assam on a shooting trip, I got him to give me all the information he could, little imagining that about that very time I had been transferred to that province, and that I should remain in it over seven years.

I will here relate some instances of the killing of these beasts, but not in consecutive order nor in great detail; in truth, there is not much sport in the slaying of these inoffensive pachyderms. I killed forty-four to my own gun, and must have helped to kill, or been present at the death of, fully sixty more. I shot them in various parts of the country. At one time I had the districts of Nowgong, Tezpore, Goalpara, and the Cossyah and Jyntiah hills under me, and these beasts were fairly distributed over them all. Along the foot of the Terai was the best place, but none of the others were bad. The lesser rhinoceros, which is perhaps a foot less in height than the larger, is found more in the *churs** of the Brahmapootra and towards the Garrow Hills. It differs from the other in the arrangement of the folds, but the horn is often longer

* *Churs*—islands in a river.

than in the other variety. The habits of both are similar.

Loquaghat, opposite Tezpore, was a favourite locality for them, and Sir Charles Reid, of Delhi fame, shot two there with me, with one ball each, with a small-bore rifle. I killed many there afterwards. Once in the Dooars with Bowie, of the Police, one very cold misty day, either in December or January, when the whole valley was wrapped up in heavy fog, we had been hunting these pachyderms. I had killed two, to the great disgust of my comrade, who was a jealous sportsman, and rather a disagreeable fellow to be out with. There was a low depression. Bowie was on his elephant, standing on a natural *bund*,* and I had beaten through the long grass without seeing anything, though I knew there ought to be a rhinoceros there. We had been enveloped in this mist, but it was clearing away. Without the slightest warning I heard a movement in the grass, and close to me appeared the form of a rhinoceros; he was in heavy grass, and did not present a vulnerable spot for a certain shot, but Bowie and I fired almost together. There was a squeal and a headlong charge at me; my elephant Lutchmee, generally fairly stanch, took to her heels. I made the rhinoceros shake his head at the visitations he received from my heavy weapons, and he then went for B., whose elephant did not wait for the onslaught, but bolted through a tangled brake, upsetting B.'s guns, and all but causing the howdah to be dragged off by the pendent vines. She did not stop until she got to the bed of a considerable stream,

* *Bund*—corresponding to our word 'dam.'

whence she was taken, with great difficulty, back to camp. I got Lutchmee turned round, and went back; but the rhinoceros, though bleeding, had gone fully two miles before I came upon him. Here he essayed to fight again, though he would have had no chance if my elephant had remained steady; but she was very fractious that day, and it was only by taking snapshots that I mortally wounded the foe at last. He turned and ran into heavy grass, and his stertorous and peculiar breathing (which, when the animal is *in articulo mortis*, once heard, can never be mistaken or forgotten) soon proclaimed that all was over. I took off the horn, which was a good one, about ten inches long, and, as a sop to my companion, I allowed him to have it, for I really did not care for them as trophies at all, and had already several far finer. It was not till long afterwards that I took to selling the small horns, and thereby recouping myself all expenses, which were rather heavy. Many of these trips, with three or four guests, cost me as much as £100, and I was then not as rich as I had been before, or even then I should not have resorted to selling; but the Assamese put a fictitious value on these trophies, which are to us of no value. They will give as much as 45 rupees a *seer** for a fair horn, and many weigh close on three *seers*.

On another occasion Barry, a tea-planter, and I were in the Dooars. I wounded a very large male, but in following him up I found that the right barrel of my No. 10 breech-loading rifle, for which I had paid £64, kept missing fire; I put in several shots with the left,

* A *seer* is equivalent to 2 lbs.

but the brute would not drop. I was getting very angry; I had over and over again killed them with one shot each, but this one declined to die. At last he went a short way into a very heavy patch of grass, and when I got near, out he came for me, his mouth wide open, the upper lip curled back, and uttering the cry elephants so much dread. I tried the right barrel once more; it missed again; the left failed to stop him. My elephant wheeled round, and went off at her best pace; but fast as she ran, her pursuer was gaining. I dropped the breech-loader, and seized my trusty two-groove muzzle-loader; leaning over the back seat, I took a snap-shot downwards. To shoot otherwise was impossible at the racing speed we were going at, and only a man long accustomed to an elephant's back could have fired at all; but I had almost lived on elephants, had acquired the necessary swaying of the body to balance myself, and could generally hit a moderate-sized mark at short distances without requiring my beast to halt. As the mouth of the rhinoceros was not a foot from my beast's quarter, I was afraid she would be cut and ruined for life; but my aim was true. I caught my pursuer just at the junction of the head and neck, and over he went, squealing fearfully; he tossed his mighty head about, but otherwise he was paralyzed. As soon as we had pacified Lutchmee, we got her back, and a shot behind the ear did for my foe. On examining my rifle, I found the nipple had got partially unscrewed, so the striker could not give the necessary blow to the cap of the cartridge to explode it; it was put to rights in a moment, but ever after-

wards I took a nipple-wrench as well as a turnscrew in the howdah with me.

Near Doobrie, on the left bank, I fairly ran a lesser rhinoceros down on Lutchmee, and killed it in two shots.

On one occasion, when in company with another officer of the Police, near the Manass, two rhinoceroses charged me out of the dry bed of a rivulet. I must have interrupted them in some love scene at a critical moment. I had not fired at them—indeed, did not know they were there—when they came at me open-mouthed. I dropped them both, right and left, dead. These were as pretty a couple of shots as I ever made.