

Jungle Beasts I Have Captured

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"Trapping Wild Animals
in Malay Jungles"



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CHAPTER VII

"NETTING" A RHINO

TWO weeks had gone by since I had left Abdul Rahman's kampong. One day, as I was dozing on the porch of Hadji Sing, convalescing from a severe attack of fever, a result of my trip in the back country, I was startled out of my day-dreaming of Europe by Hadji softly calling: "Tûan, Abdul Rahman is here." Abdul was as pleased to see me as I was to see him, but, on account of my recent recovery from fever, he was rather shy in telling what brought him. On questioning him, however, he at last told me that before he left his kampong two days before—he had come *down* the river from his kampong "light" in thirty hours; it had taken us six days rowing and poling to cover the same distance *up* the river—one of his men reported seeing a rhinoceros and her calf. He knew how successful I had been on previous trips in securing snakes and all other animals, save the rhinoceros, which I wanted very much to get.

Abdul was quite excited over the prospect of the capture and I myself quite forgot all about my fever

in anticipation of it. I decided to be off the next day, much against the wishes of Hadji Sing who kept shaking his head, saying: "Tuan, better you go back to Singapore." But with a chance of getting a rhinoceros, that was out of the question. So late the next day we started back "light," with one other boat carrying rice, dried fish, canned milk and tea. The hoes and shovels necessary for digging the new pits for the rhinoceros traps immediately on locating the mud puddles of the rhinoceros were still at Abdul's kampong where I had left them.

The rhinoceros is one of the most difficult animals to capture. Its eyesight is very poor but this is compensated for by a super-keen sense of smell. And because of this, it requires the utmost patience, ingenuity, care, and labour to dig a pit-trap or set a snare-net that will deceive them. In the dense jungles of Sumatra it is most difficult to stalk them and impossible to drive them to or toward the pit-trap.

There are two methods used in trapping the rhinoceros: the pit-trap and the large nets. The pit-trap is the more difficult on account of the labour involved in preparing it and the difficulty of removing the rhinoceros once it has fallen into the pit. But it affords less danger to the captors. The nets, on the other hand, are not always as effective because

they offer chances of escape should the rhinoceros not be trapped but only entangled in them. It is extremely dangerous for those trying to get at the animal to rope it to a tree and draw it into a cage. The nets require the careful watching of two men posted in a tree during the day. As soon as they see an animal become entangled, they signal by striking a tom-tom and bring the rest of the party running in their direction to help with the animal.

The rhinoceros is one of the most difficult animals to capture alive even after he has been caught in a pit-trap or net. The difficulties and dangers lie in getting the animal into a cage to be transported to the coast. The cages must be made unusually strong and of a size that a rhinoceros weighing between one and two tons, once in, cannot move about, or use his strength or weight or his vicious horns to break. The rhinoceros cannot be walked or driven, as can an elephant. To draw one of these huge animals, fighting every minute, into a cage is both exciting and dangerous work. And so it can be understood why the natives of the district in which the rhinoceros is taken consider it quite an event.

The natives of Abdul Rahman's kampong on our arrival entered into the preparations for the expedition with all their characteristic excited interest. The

kampong was alive with men and boys getting rattan to be twisted into ropes for the making of nets. I chose Abdul's brother-in-law, Mohammed Tye, who was most courageous and resourceful as my gun-bearer and personal attendant, to take the place of Ali, my brave friend and companion, who lost his life in my service. Tye could hardly believe his good fortune when I told him I would take him to Singapore and other places.

During the ensuing days we were busy with preparations for our capture. We had dug many pits in Abdul's district on previous trips but had never been successful. A new hope now rose in us because of the fact that the rhinoceros and her calf that we were seeking to capture were in an entirely different and more distant district. In this new district we dug our traps, laid our nets, and posted our men in the trees to watch and signal us when anything happened.

One week went by rather uneventfully. But an episode took place one evening which I found amusing. I was told that the men were going out to kill some hare and small deer that were a pest and very destructive to the rice crops. This was their method of procedure: One man carried a pole across his shoulders from the fore end of which was slung an earthen pan full of blazing fagots, arranged so as

to throw the light. The pan was made out of the ordinary earthen water vessels, by knocking out the side. It was balanced at the other end by a basket of fagots. Another man carried a long iron rod with a number of sliding rings that jingled as he walked. Three or four others carried long bamboo poles, fifteen to twenty feet in length. Then the party moved about the edge of the thicket where the unsuspecting hare and small deer come out to feed after nightfall. As soon as one appeared in the streak of bright light thrown across the ground by the fire-pan, the whole party rushed toward it jingling the rings and keeping its terror-stricken form in the circle of light. The poor animal seldom attempted to escape but sat stupefied by the glare and noise until a bamboo rod brought down on its back ended its existence. This was always an occasion for a good feast of fresh meat.

It was nearly two weeks before the tom-toms of the men watching in the trees signalled us, as we were making our daily rounds of the nets and pit-traps, that something was in the nets. We hurried toward the place where the men were signalling. As we approached we heard the tearing of vines and small trees and the snorting and grunting of a rhinoceros. Tye, passing me my gun, ran ahead with Abdul.

Suddenly the lookout in the tree called out loudly to be careful as a young rhinoceros was entangled in the net and the mother rhinoceros was going round and round it, trying to horn it on its feet and to break the meshes of the net. Hearing the breaking through of Abdul and Tye, she suddenly turned and, with tail extended, made a dash at them. They had barely time to spring aside and dodge among the trees before she was after them, bellowing and snorting. I called to them to separate and get up a tree. On hearing my voice, she stopped short and, whirling about, charged me. As there were quite a number of large trees between her and myself, I merely got behind a large one and kept quiet and then gradually dodged from tree to tree. She stood still, trying to wind us. By this time, all the men were pretty well around her and she was undecided which way to charge. Finally, she apparently made up her mind to get back to her calf, and turning suddenly, dashed back to the net fastened to two trees where the small rhinoceros was fast. My sole object now was to try and keep the mother by her calf and hold her there. I called to Abdul to take some men and go as quickly as possible and bring back one or two other nets which were spread near by. My idea was to spread the nets in two different directions and when set, place the men behind them

and lure the rhinoceros to charge toward them and so get entangled in the net before she could reach any of the men. Abdul and his men entered into the spirit of the plan, and hastened away. About ten men, Tye, and I stayed in the trees.

The calf, which by that time had given up struggling, was lying quiet. Puffing hard, the mother stood by it, head up, her small pig-like eyes blinking, ears cocked and tail extended, ready to charge in any direction. The men who were in the tree to which the net was fastened would set up a jabber and back she would turn, shake her head, and snort. It seemed a long time before Abdul and the men returned with the two nets.

As soon as we heard them breaking through the trees I called to Abdul, telling him where to set up the nets and to be quick and careful. The rhinoceros, hearing the men, turned to charge, and as she did so, one of the men in the trees poked the calf with a long limb that had been cut for that purpose. When the mother heard her calf squeal, she turned again, and stood by. In this way, we kept her harried until the two nets were set, fastened, and held up in the trees. As Abdul shouted "Finished," I called to him to get behind the nets, not too close and let the rhinoceros charge into the nets. I had the two nets hung as one, for, by this time, the rhinoceros

was a dangerous animal and the nets needed to be doubly strong in order for us to be sure of the capture. I knew that once she was entangled in the nets, she was ours. My plan worked wonderfully well.

When Abdul and his men were well behind the nets and all within springing distance of low branches of the trees, we were ready for the charge of the rhinoceros. I called for absolute quiet. A dead silence fell in the jungle. Suddenly there was a shrill shout from Abdul. With a snort and a headlong rush, the rhinoceros charged directly into the nets. She went at least ten yards before she went down, rolling over and over, entangled in the nets. She fought and struggled wildly, heaving, twisting, raising her huge body halfway, and falling down again. She kept this up about twenty minutes. At last she lay frothing at the mouth and her struggles became less frequent. Each time she tried to rise, she fell back with a grunt. I will not attempt to describe the excitement of the men—they were nearly wild! I had to get Abdul's and Tye's assistance to quiet them and get them in line for the hardest work of all—the construction of the cage, which had to be strong enough and large enough to hold both the mother and the calf. The calf was about one year old, stood two and one half feet high, and weighed more than two hundred pounds. The mother

weighed between one and two tons and stood about four and a half feet high.

As soon as Abdul and Tye could quiet the men, Abdul started a group to cut young trees, another group to cut and gather rattan, another to return to the kampong to yoke the four water buffaloes and bring them on, and still another to widen the jungle path so that we could draw the sled upon which the cage was to be fastened, back to the kampong.

I told Abdul that we would work all night if necessary until we got the capture safely back in the kampong. I did not fear the animals getting out of the nets but I did fear letting them lie there all afternoon and night at the mercy of both tigers and leopards, who would surely get the calf, if not also the mother. We had had such an experience but a few days before when a tapir fell into a pit. By the time we got around to the pit the next day, there was very little left of the tapir. And so I did not wish to provide for stripes and spots a meal as expensive as this.

Many willing hands made quick work. I have yet to see a woodsman who can work with such rapidity as a Malay jungle-man with his parang. In less than three hours we had the cage made and staked to the ground.

There was no danger and not much difficulty in getting the calf into the cage. With the mother, however, it was different. A rope had to be passed through the rear of the cage and carried out through the door. It was then fastened to the hind legs of the rhinoceros. The other end was hitched to two yoked bullocks which drew her slowly into the cage. As she was drawn in, the nets were being cut away from her. Now she was perfectly helpless and there was no danger to the men who stood on each side of the door hacking at the nets. When well in the cage, the door was fastened and the rope unhitched from the bullocks and bound to a tree, allowing just enough slack for her to scramble to her feet. As soon as she was on her feet the rope attached to her hind feet was pulled taut and she was drawn close against the rear of the cage.

The calf was held by some of the men, who had cut the net clear from the head and had fastened a rope around its neck. The little thing tried to show some fight, but it was exhausted, and the men had no trouble in dragging it into the cage with its mother. The door was then made fast, the stakes holding the cage to the ground were loosened, and the cage was drawn up on a rough sled which had been built for the purpose. With the four water-buffaloes straining at the yokes, the journey back

to the kampong started amid the gay cries and dancing of the happiest lot of natives I have ever met. It was about ten o'clock in the morning when we had first heard the tom-toms, and it was nearly midnight when we reached the kampong with our prize.