

FLY, VULTURE

by

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with a Foreword by
PETER SCOTT

With fifteen plates in half-tone



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wounded lion will lie concealed in a thicket waiting silently, until his attacker approaches within springing distance; and a wounded leopard will hide in a tree ready to drop on a victim in the footpath below. Can we blame them?

Thus I lived through the days when it was the accepted custom "to bash the bastard," to shoot for the sake of killing, and to vie with others for the finest trophies. I never acquired this desire, but I don't condemn others who did. It is a form of indoctrination through which I had to pass, and I gained greatly from the experience. I also realized the reactions, the emotions, and the tragedies from the back and from the front ends of a rifle, and my sympathies and respect swung from the grown-ups to the animals.

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Kill a Rhino

THE other lesson I had to learn was a bitter lesson, and I can only tell it as a kind of vindication of the crime I committed. On many of my week-end sorties I had seen a rhino with an unusually large horn in a valley below the foothills of Ngong. I was very hard up at the time, earning only a few pounds a month, and I had not enough money to buy ammunition or any other of my urgent requirements. I was out of pocket from the abortive safari with the Australian doctor, which made my position worse. The rhino with the big horn and a good second horn offered a solution to my troubles. Each time I had been to his valley he had been alone and in relatively open country.

In a sinister way I worked out that his front horn weighed at least fifteen pounds, which, together with his second horn, would produce anything up to twenty pounds of saleable product. Rhino-horn in those days was selling at about forty shillings a pound. Here was a potential forty to fifty pounds sterling walking about and waiting to be put to good use. I went to my father and explained my big financial proposition. If he would lend me ten pounds, I said, to buy a rhino licence I stood to make a clear thirty pounds profit. My father smiled and agreed, but added a most telling remark. "You will find," he said, "that it never pays to change the honourable sport of big-game hunting into a commercial racket." The force and wisdom of his remark made no impression on me at the time, but I have often thought of it since.

Off I went triumphantly to the Game Department, with the vast sum of borrowed money, and bought my licence. I could hardly wait until the next week-end to sally forth on my murderous

expedition. My great friend and instructor in the lore of the wilds, Hugh Grant, lent me a beautiful double-barrelled rifle. It was a Jefferies 500, which was my greatest ambition to possess. What could be better?

Saturday came, and Nganga, a half-bred Kikuyu Masai, my faithful gun-bearer, and I set off on the great adventure. Every time a sneaking pang of conscience pricked I dismissed it as sentimental nonsense. All my pals from the old Government co-ed school made money out of shooting game. In any case I argued, what does one rhino matter? If I don't bag him somebody else surely will. On I went, justifying the whole scheme by worthless reasoning, never for a moment stopping to think more deeply than of the prospect of some easily earned money. What the hell — why shouldn't I shoot a rhino? I had a licence, hadn't I? The aggressive brute may easily charge and kill some innocent and unarmed victim. He was living near a native village, which constituted a danger to human life. On I went.

As we entered the valley I was a little worried to find no fresh tracks. We combed through the rhino's favourite thicket, but there were no tick-birds, the usual escort of a rhino. We walked and looked and listened until it was too dark to see. Nganga agreed that it was most extraordinary. All I had were a few biscuits and a water-bottle, but having got to the rhino's valley there was no purpose in going home, and so we dossed down for the night. I avoided making a fire, as I thought if the rhino was near by he might be scared by it and move off to a new haunt. It was one of those amazing African nights, with only a sliver of a new moon, but with a magnificent display of millions of stars, glinting, shining, and twinkling in a completely cloudless sky. It was calm and warm, and all the wild sounds of the night floated through the valley. Using a bunch of grass as a pillow and a dent made in the ground for my hip, I soon fell into a deep sleep, quite content that with the first light of day I would find the rhino.

Soon after midnight I awoke with that horrible feeling that some large animal was near by. Nganga was snoring, and I could hear

would be my guide. Sure enough, Nganga, with his trained ear, suddenly heard the distant screech of the birds. We stalked up carefully, and I could just pick out the fat rump of the rhino through some thick undergrowth in a small belt of forest. I circled round very cautiously and quietly, trying to get a better view to choose a fatal shot. Yes, it was my rhino all right; there was his enormous front horn, and he was sleeping soundly like a dog with his chin on the ground. Everything was set for a careful aim. As I silently raised the big Jefferies 500 to my shoulder all hell was suddenly let loose. Another rhino, which I had not seen, charged from my flank, blowing like a steam-engine and crashing through the bush. I only had time to swing my gun from the big rhino to the direction of my assailant and fire at point-blank range. I jumped aside, and the charging rhino turned and vanished as quickly as it had appeared. The rhino with the big horn also went off like a racehorse.

The reaction was intense, and I shivered with fear and excitement. I collected my wits and established, to my horror, that the rhino was wounded—the wrong rhino. There was a spasmodic but unmistakable blood trail. This left no choice but to follow the unfortunate creature and put it out of its agony. It was not an easy trail to find, as there was very little blood, and the tracks of the other rhino frequently crossed and recrossed the trail and confused the footprints. Every upturned leaf, every fleck of fresh dust, and every little sign had to be checked, to be sure we were not on the wrong track.

After several tedious hours, which took us through forest, over rocky ground, and not by any means in the same direction, the tracks of the two rhinos parted. Here was a problem. No blood was now showing, and it was just a guess as to which track to follow. More time went by, and we were overtaken by the darkness. What a miserable night that was! We perched in a tree, with no food or blankets. It was very cold, with occasional drizzle. I sat staring into the darkness, gradually realizing what an awful mess I had made of this rhino hunt. Instead of killing the rhino with the big horn, here was I perched in a tree, with the difficult task of trailing and finding a

wounded rhino — another rhino, which was probably a female, with very small horns. Above all, I felt such a fool.

I hardly slept at all through that long night. The crickets that I always loved to hear seemed to be screeching derision at me. The owls, instead of saying, "Hoot, hoot," were saying, "You brute." All the animal kingdom was condemning me, and worse still, I had bungled my hunt. I had been stupid enough to imagine that my rhino was alone and still living as a bachelor.

A watery sun rose over a scene of hopelessness. Gloom dominated the valley, and Nganga and I never spoke. We sullenly went to the last point of the trail, but the rain had obliterated any useful tracks. Even an animal as heavy as a rhino leaves few marks in short grass on hard ground. The prospect of finding the wounded animal was very small indeed. We wandered back and forth for most of the day trying to cover each section of any possible refuge. Mile after mile achieved nothing, and I had to admit defeat. I turned to Nganga and, in his language of Kikuyu, said, "Give it up — let's get out of here while we still have enough light and energy to get away." He nodded, and we made a straight course for home. *Tramp tramp*, through the grass was the only sound. It was already getting dark, and another storm was blowing up. Neither of us had any interest in anything. Impalas snorted at us, and warthogs scurried off with their tails in the air. Baboons barked and screeched as we passed through a thicket they had chosen as their roost for the night.

Suddenly Nganga hissed through his teeth and pointed ahead. There was the unmistakable shape of a rhino, half-screened by a clump of thorn bush. We at once changed from limp humans slopping along into alert athletes stalking on our toes. Using the cover of isolated bushes, we crept up to within forty yards. It was my rhino — the one with the big horn, and beside him, flat on the ground, was the other one. We crept up nearer to make use of the last gleam of light. The rhino on the ground was very still, and she was not breathing — she was dead.

The rhino with the big horn nuzzled his companion as if to rouse her and make her get up, and whimpered with a high-pitched

squeal which they use for calling to each other. I watched, and felt like squealing too. Remorse hounded me as I gazed upon the tragedy I had perpetrated. For what? For the sake of trying to make money from the horns of a dead rhino, murdered for commercial reasons. The dead cow had only a little stump of a horn, worth nothing but a few shillings, anyway.

I turned away from this scene with my head hung very low. I somehow hoped that the big horned rhino and all other rhinos would understand that I had made a horrible mistake. I had been tempted to submit to an unforgivable motive. I vowed that I would never shoot another rhino. "Never drag an honourable sport down into a commercial gutter."



Trophies of a River Safari

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The Bag





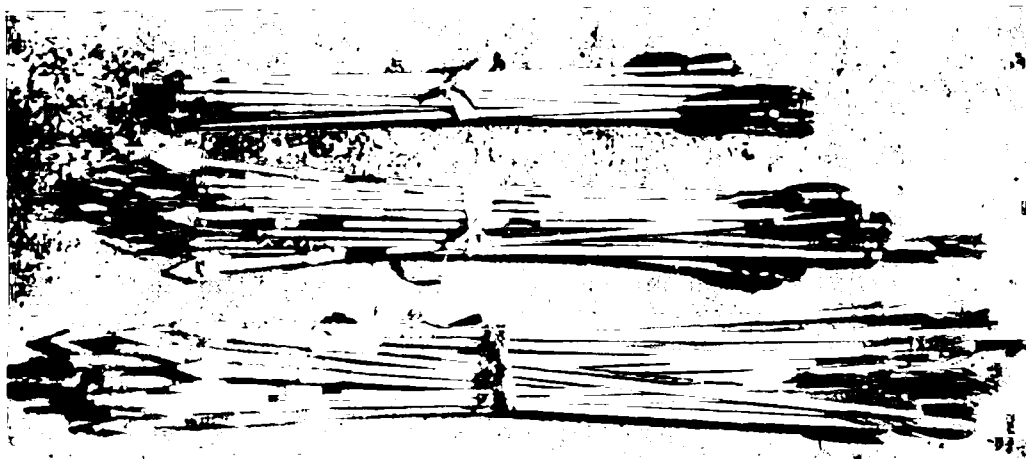
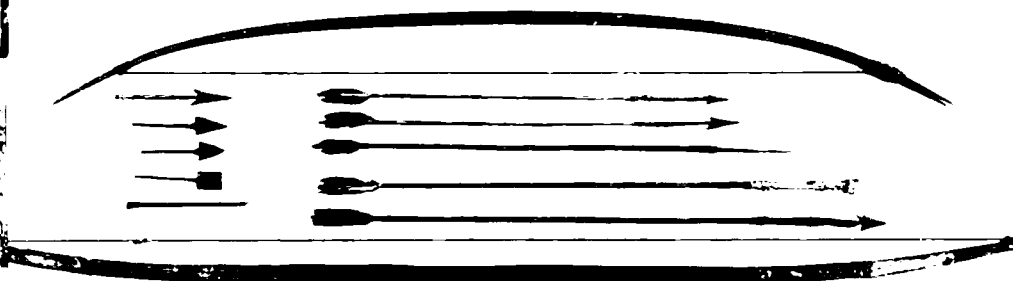
Left: *Poisoned Arrow Heads*

Centre: (Top) *Short Bow and Arrows used by the Wakamba*

(Left) *Arrow Heads showing Stages in Manufacture*

(Bottom) *Long Bow and Arrows used by the Waliangulu*

Below: *Poisoned Arrows confiscated from Poachers*



Poachers

IN 1948 the Tsavo National Park was proclaimed. It was a large and somewhat unknown area straddling sixty miles of the main road from Mombasa to Nairobi. Not the pick, by any means, of the best game country in Kenya, but chosen by the Game Policy Committee because it was the only large piece of unoccupied land available. Ron Stephens was the first Warden — one man and a handful of African rangers to patrol 8000 square miles of semi-waterless bush. Later David Sheldrick, Tabs Taberer, and Tuffy Marshall joined the team who contributed to the immense task of developing and policing the Tsavo National Park.

Soon after we gained control of the Park I was alarmed to find how many animals were being killed by poachers. Evidence of bands up to fifty strong hunting with poisoned arrows, using pits, setting snares, and organizing bush drives, cast a gloom over the Park from every report received. It was known that certain tribes had been hunting in this hinterland for years, but there had been no assessment of the huge scale on which the poachers were operating.

For generations, perhaps for hundreds of years, tribesmen have hunted wild animals, and so have white men. Some hunted for meat, and some hunted for ivory and other trophies. At the turn of the century Great Britain built a railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria, with the main object of stopping the slave trade. Arab caravans used to forge their way from the coast of the Indian Ocean as far inland as Uganda, to buy or seize young men and girls, clap them in chains, and walk them for 300 miles back to the sea, at least those who did not fall by the wayside. The slave traders also bought tusks for the Eastern markets which had to be carried by the

unfortunate slaves. Although the trade in human bodies virtually ceased the traffic in ivory continued.

In the past the number of elephants killed for their tusks obviously did not exceed the rate at which they could breed. Early in the century, according to travellers' records, there were many elephants still roaming the forests and low bush of Kenya. By 1948 the rapid expansion of human populations, with their agriculture and livestock, left little scope for wild sanctuaries. Vast areas had been put under the plough, people and cattle had increased beyond all predictable trends, and the wild animals had to seek refuge in the few remaining remoter zones.

Thus to find that the Tsavo National Park was the hunting ground for a concentrated onslaught by the poachers was most distressing. Nevertheless I have a kind of sneaking admiration for the poacher himself, as he is a tough man with a wonderful knowledge of the wilds. He knows how to travel on foot through waterless country almost as fast as the animals he hunts, and he knows too how to get water from plants or by digging in the sand. If it were not for the Asiatic traders who lurk in the grimy bazaars of Mombasa and Zanzibar, and who finance the smuggling ring for ivory and rhino horn, the poachers would have no market for their booty. These dealers have taken the place of the Arab traders of the past who used to organize the slave traffic. They have no regard for the law, nor have they any shame for causing the death of so many wild animals.

We found that a typical group of poachers operated in this manner. A party of African hunters sets off from their village well outside the Park and makes for a known waterhole or river, travelling anything up to 100 miles on foot and each carrying nothing but a strong bow, a quiver of poisoned arrows, a knife, and a few other small items. Having arrived at a suitable place — suitable because it is a waterhole well used by big game — they merely sit and wait in a safe tree or on a rock ledge. When the first herd of thirsty elephants arrives, arrows fly, and the great animals rush madly off squealing in pain and terror.

The poison is made mainly from a tree of the *akocanthera* species, a small, gnarled dark-green tree that looks like a young oak. The process is to boil the twigs and roots for several days until a thick substance like tar is produced. This is applied to about four inches of the shaft immediately behind the steel point of the arrow. When dry it is wrapped in thin skin for protection. Not every tree of the same species is potent, but those that are really poisonous are judged by the number of dead birds and insects found beneath the tree, victims of the fatal but attractive cherry-like fruit. The poison deteriorates if kept too long. In order to test its efficacy a poacher scratches his arm with the sharp arrow-head. As the blood trickles down he applies the poisoned shaft to it, and if the blood turns black quickly it means the poison is good. Before any poison reaches the incision he wipes it off and plugs the cut with mud or animal dung. It is a primitive although effective test.

Their bows and arrows are most skilfully made by experts in the ancient craft. The bowstring is made from plaited giraffe sinew. The arrow-head is detachable so that the shaft with its trimmed vulture feathers can be recovered after use.

The unfortunate victim rushes off with the poisoned head sticking well into its body. If the poison gets into the blood stream quickly the animal dies within a matter of hours. Otherwise it lingers for several days and sometimes may recover. The poachers watch the sky for a spiral of vultures to show them where to find the carcass. The tusks of the elephant are then hacked out and sawn up into short lengths about one or two feet long so as to be easily carried. Alternatively the tusks are buried, ready to be retrieved another day. The poachers arrange secretly to meet a buyer in some remote place, who produces money and transport to take the trophies away to one of the big traders in the bazaar. The swag may go through several hands before it reaches the final receiver, and each intermediate dealer collects a rake-off. It is then artfully concealed in suitable merchandise, and smuggled out by night on to dhows going to the East. There are, of course, many variations of these methods, according to districts and circumstances.

Ivory carvings are still essential in Eastern countries as part of a bride price. Rhino-horn is valued as a time-honoured aphrodisiac. Skins and meat of smaller animals are dried and sold locally, and giraffes are killed for their sinews and tails. The wastage is appalling as so small a part of the animal is used. It is a grim sight indeed to find five or more tons of rotting flesh, the discarded remains of a lordly elephant which was killed merely for the sake of his tusks.

Another form of trap is the ancient game pit. A hole is dug across a forest path or gap in the bush about ten to twelve feet long and six to eight feet wide, and perhaps ten or more feet deep. It is tapered to the bottom or studded with sharpened stakes. The top is then covered over with flimsy sticks and grass, and so well concealed that even the experienced native tracker has some difficulty in spotting one of these game pits. In case the victims grow wise to the dangers of walking along a path the poachers resort to building miles of bush fences, leaving only a few selected gaps, and in each gap there is a line of game pits. Sometimes the number of animals that fall into these pits is far greater than the poachers can use, and many a disused pit contains rotting carcasses and skeletons.

Another method which has developed in recent years, with disastrous effect, is the use of wire snares. Any kind of wire will do, whether stolen from a fence or picked up from a rubbish heap. One end of the wire is anchored to a sturdy post or tree, while the other is formed into a loop with a slip knot and suspended across a path. Any animal of any size can easily strangle itself or be caught up by a leg. The misery which some of these creatures endure is indescribable. When you see an elephant or a rhino with suppurating wounds and exposed bones caused by wire snares cutting deeply into their legs, you realize the pain they must have suffered for weeks and sometimes months.

Thus the poachers regard wild animals as literally fair game. They have no compassion, nor feelings, for them. Poaching is merely a matter of using part of nature's bounty with which they have been endowed, and they consider that they have every right to take whatever they want. Never do they pause to assess what will happen

when the source of supply is finished, nor what tragedy this will bring, not only to themselves, but to the world at large.

It is admittedly difficult to convince wild people that something they have been doing for hundreds of years is suddenly judged by the white man to be unlawful. The difference, however, is this. In the past they used to cull a reasonable proportion of wild life, for their own use, and for food, but now the slaughter is for monetary gain and has increased so much that it threatens the very survival of the animals they hunt. The destruction is concentrated in the few remaining haunts of big game. The killing is not done for any justifiable reason, but merely for money, which many of them squander on native beer in a glorious post-hunting binge.

Thus I found that the Tsavo National Park, while marked as a National Park on the map of Kenya, was no more of a sanctuary or a reserve than any other place. In fact, it was worse, because it was the main hunting ground for the most active and merciless poachers in Kenya.

A Wild Night

THE Tsavo National Park was as yet somewhat unexplored. It was not by any means new territory to me, but I wanted more information about the distribution of animals and their regular drinking places. This was essential to form a pattern of the poaching problem and the effect of this continual onslaught on the migration of the big herds. Most wild animals in any event lead a precarious existence, and they travel many miles to get water. Any popular waterhole or river is a focal point, as it is also an obvious place for poachers to lie in wait. Consequently, I decided to make a proper examination of Mzima Springs in the western Tsavo.

These springs are like a fairyland. Millions of gallons of crystal clear water gush forth every day of the year to form the main flow of the Tsavo river. Rain which falls on the beautiful forested crests of the Chyulu hills, some twenty miles away, disappears into the lava cinders and ash of this relatively new range which was formed by some volcanic upheaval in the last 2000 years. The water percolates down until it reaches an impervious stratum, perhaps in a huge underground lake, and overflows at the springs of Mzima.

The contrast could not be more impressive. The valley of the springs is desolate and arid. Lava dust and boulders, stunted thorn-trees struggling for existence, mark the approach to the springs, and then without any warning you come upon a magnificent scene of glistening cool water, palms, ferns, lush green grass, and shady trees. The springs converge into pools which reflect the inverted fringe of vegetation, and which are so clear that you can count the pebbles on the bottom.

It is the traditional home of many hippo, which glide through the water or hide their noses under a bank of reeds. It is also the drinking