

# RETROSPECT

REMINISCENCES AND IMPRESSIONS  
OF A HUNTER-NATURALIST  
IN THREE CONTINENTS

1851-1928

By ABEL CHAPMAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOSEPH CRAWHALL, W. H. RIDDELL (20 IN COLOUR)  
AND ROUGH SKETCHES BY THE AUTHOR

"The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and to tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think: but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, all in one."—RUSKIN.

[The seeing eye reveals but does not invent.—A. C.]



GURNEY AND JACKSON  
LONDON: 33 PATERNOSTER ROW  
EDINBURGH: TWEEDDALE COURT

1928

## CHAPTER VI

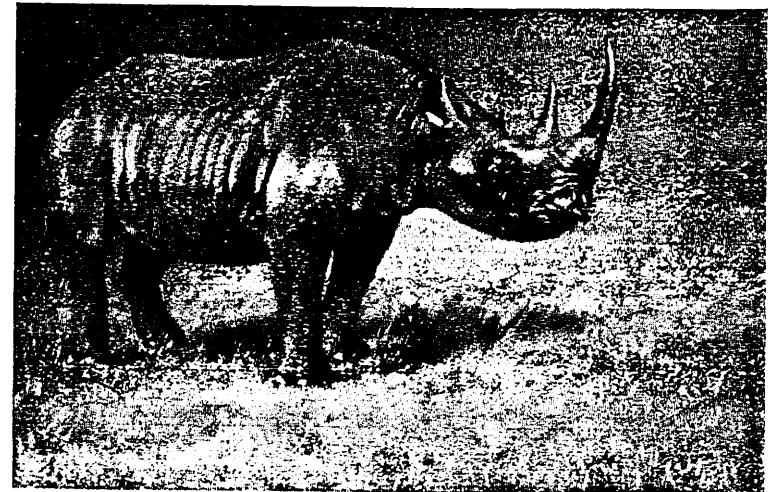
## MEMORIES—FAR AND WIDE (BIG-GAME)

## PROLOGUE.

WHAT multitudes of memories crowd in upon the retrospect of a long and active life—incidents of forest, flood, and fell; ventures with wild beasts and wildfowl, many that in these latter days would be denominated “thrills.” That term, quite probably, might be justifiable enough: but in a previous generation a measure of modest reluctance influenced writers to shrink from anything approaching sensationalism. There was a fear—nowadays superseded—that such writing might be confused with an ambition unduly to magnify personal exploits or dangers. It would be difficult to deny that encounters with dangerous game—say lions, elephants, buffalo, rhino—when the issue of success or failure (with all that the latter might import) hung evenly in the balance over perceptible periods, might without hyperbole be described as “thrilling.” Yet in the writings of the old Masters of African Game—Selous, Arthur Neumann, Baldwin, Oswell, and the rest—one reads of hair-breadth escapes told in cold, matter-of-fact terms. That older style had at least the advantage of holding back *something* in reserve; whereas to-day one often sees—even in comparative trivialities—the resources of the vocabulary used “all out.” Individual temperaments, moreover, differ widely and, in my view, the sensations evoked in moments of real danger would quite inadequately be described as “thrilling”—that is, assuming it to be possible so precisely to analyse and to classify human feelings in a crisis. So completely must a man’s whole attention be concentrated on the one vital object—that of keeping his own end up—that there is neither time nor opportunity for extraneous joys such as thrills—though it is quite probable that



BUFFALO-BULLS. RIGHT-AND-LEFT, WHITE NILE, February 19, 1914.

THREE-HORNED RHINOCEROS (*Rhinoceros bicornis*), 28-inch horn.  
Shot at Midnight, Elmenteita, B.E. Africa, February 10, 1906.

a dead branch. Klaas, nevertheless, remained positive, and the result proved that Savage eyesight can exceed in discrimination a powerful prism-binocular. For, on recovery, we found that that impala actually had only *one* upstanding horn, the other being bent downwards.



IMPALA. Transvaal, 1899.

#### VI.—“BRITISH EAST AFRICA,” NOW KENYA COLONY.

One recalls as it were but yesterday—(after all, it is less than thirty years ago)—the howls of indignation that greeted the project of the Uganda railway. There were newspapers—whose horizon was bounded by the corner of the street—which revelled in reviling the Government of that day—I think it was Lord Salisbury’s—for squandering several millions of “hard-earned wealth . . . wrung from poor overburdened taxpayers,” on a madcap scheme to push a 600-mile railway track through lion-infested bush! At first these shrieking jeremiads received a measure of corroboration when the said lions actually did hold up the work of construction, devoured some scores of coolies, and incidentally added another million or two

to the cost! There were other incidentals not provided for in the original estimates. Giraffes, for example, walked off with miles of telegraph-wire around their necks; elephants and white ants combined to destroy the poles; while three-ton rhinos disputed the right-of-way to intrusive locomotives.

There were those (including the Author) whom the



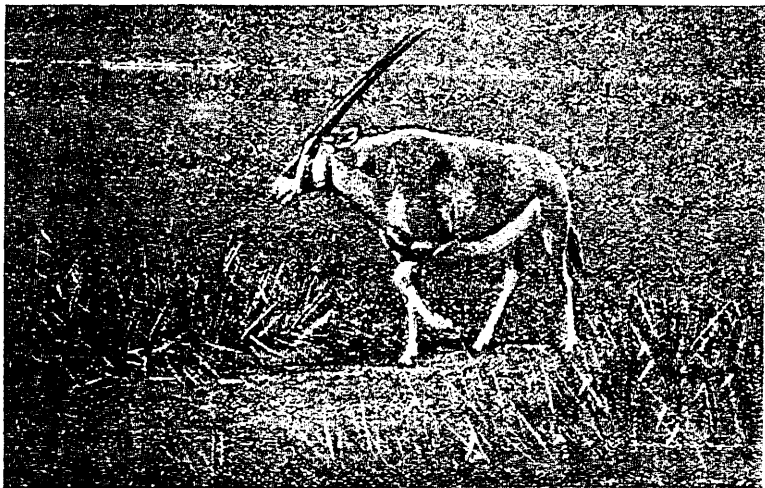
ELEPHANT EIGHT YARDS LONG.

Lake Solai, B. E. Africa, February 23, 1906.

impugned project struck in quite a different light. To them it imported 600 miles of virgin wilderness opened up to hunter and explorer by what Roosevelt described as “a railway in the Pleistocene,” and personally I decided to take out my dividends in kind. A first and purely superficial glance might, in those early days, have conveyed some suspicion that, in one sense, the croakers at home had some reason. For the first-comers—prospectors and big-game hunters—literally had both railway and country all to themselves (presumably at the cost of the said tax-payer?)—a glorious 600-mile preserve teeming with

big-game and a variety of strange types of wild-life the like of which they had never seen before, nor their philosophy ever dreamt of. Read *On Safari* and realise that! Nairobi was then a Tin Capital, without a building beyond rude timber-shacks, and the bulk of its "citizens" still abode in tents. Its population now exceeds 40,000.

Not a British steamship line then served the East-African coast. My own first voyage to Mombasa was aboard an



ORYX BEISA. Lake Baringo, B. E. Africa, August 1904.  
Note extreme thickness of neck in both Oryx and Roan antelope (at p. 88).

Austrian-Lloyd from Trieste—she had only seven passengers and the captain told me that our outfit represented a fair proportion of the cargo: so the *Austrian* tax-payer must also have contributed to our joy-ride?—the next by a German ship, the *Burgermeister*, and homewards by the *Kanzler* of the same line; others by Messageries Maritimes' steamers, which called at East-African ports on their route to Madagascar.

Those were glorious days—days spent in a primordial world. They bequeath vivid memories which will never fade while life lasts—memories of encounters with the biggest beasts

black blotches on its body, bars on its tail; whereas its equally predatory neighbour, the mongoose, is whole-coloured throughout—clad in a pepper-and-salt monochrome. A thousand such instances might be cited. Hardly a creature in the Realm of Wild Nature but cries out against being forced to fit into some hypothetical niche. Nature, in short, resents being dragooned into pretty poetic schedules and watertight compartments that look so imposing in print. "*Nimum ne crede colori*" is the maxim of every self-respecting wild creature of active life and habit.

Here may appropriately be interpolated a remark on the various coloured plates by Mr Riddell which adorn this work, since several of them (though bearing directly upon our present subject) are not precisely co-related with the text—some, rather, illustrate scenes and episodes described a few years earlier in SAVAGE SUDAN and my other works. Specially would I refer to that facing p. 94, representing mixed Game on the plains of the Rift Valley in Kenya Colony—one of the wondrous everyday spectacles familiar both to the artist and the author. Within a single glance, the eye may catch herds of brindled gnu—which are blue; hartebeests which are red, or impala redder still; zebras in black and white, or gazelles in varied shades of fawn—colours, moreover, which alter from moment to moment in accordance with light and shade and with every variation in the angle and the impact of light. Sometimes a lofty giraffe may be included in the eye-scape, or a troop of oryx, as shown at p. 145; a black buffalo, or even a prehistoric rhinoceros. The latter may appear in any colour, from dull black to snow-white—or red! according to the hue of the mud in his latest wallow. But whoever studies these plates and can afterwards swallow the theory of a universal "Colour-protection," must surely rival in assimilative powers the fabled ostrich, which breakfasts on two-foot iron tent-pegs and opened sardine-tins—with nice jagged edges!—and enjoys as a second course a few coils of barbed wire? Similar remarks would apply to the plate of the Desert antelopes of Kordofan at p. 126; also to the great bustards on Spanish prairie at p. 294, and several more—including specially the striking drawings of wild-life on

White Nile, showing groups of elephants and hippos, the exquisite Nile lechwi (*Onotragus megaceros*) and harnessed bush-buck, and the hordes of basking crocodiles surrounded by an amazing variety of bird-life—these three at pp. 116, 128, 210, besides several others *passim*. Should any poetic theorist still contend that any, or all of these animals—whether on paper or in Nature—"blend with the landscape," or "sink into their surroundings," he may (charitably and most respectfully) be recommended to consult an oculist.

But, after all, it is not to their colour but to their perfected mastery of all the Arts and the Science of hunting-craft that these nocturnal beasts-of-prey owe their well-being and their survival. Colour counts not at night—one can't rub that in too often. Having all my life been a hunter, both at home and far overseas—stalking, still-hunting, spooring, punt-gunning both by day and by night, besides (not least) my half-century's hunting-over-dogs on our Border moors—I claim an almost personal community of thought with the other predatory creatures—am half a raptor myself! Bear in mind (what is too often forgotten) that there still survives—and probably always will—a minority of our Race within whom elemental Man yet predominates; a select few to whom the charm of the lonely wild, the spell and the solitude of the unspoilt wilderness, together with the joys and the risks of the chase, appeal beyond those more artificial excitements, the "thrills," the "stunts" and crowded moments that (we read—probably quite wrongly!) fill the cup of the more gregarious and city-loving majority—*Sua trahit quemque voluptas*. Neither need envy the lot of the other, since the two are cast, as a rule, in separate moulds that will not coalesce—though occasions exist when they might possibly co-operate. Meanwhile, on technical topics such as this, the latter-day Esau, though clad in pelts, may yet "leave standing" the Learned and Erudite—not necessarily arrayed in purple and fine linen! Esau, moreover, drew his inspiration from the dear school of experience, and from the Rigour of the Game.