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MOMELLA

AN AFRICAN GAME PARADISE



Maximilian von Rogister

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN
BY DIANA PYKE



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... The elephant turned his head suddenly in my direction

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and little red blossoms appeared among the tangled foliage.

"Friends advise us to cut down the wood and plant coffee instead," Rolf told me. "The place is absolutely ideal for it." He stared pensively ahead.

I knew that coffee growing was very profitable. But it would mean sacrificing the beauty of this wild countryside—a heavy price to pay. I was glad that the Trappes appreciated what this loss would entail no less than I did.

After a quarter of an hour we came to the lake. The Masai had named it Ol gek otoito, the Fiery Wood. It was completely surrounded by forest. On the opposite shore the wooded slopes encircled the lake protectively. A dug-out canoe was drawn up on the bank and Rolf and I got into it. Hamissi pushed us off and we paddled slowly down the lake. A little distance away three hippopotami were swimming about; puffing and snorting they would come up for air, their heads showing above the water and then vanishing again. My rifle lay in front of me, ready for any emergency.

We paddled close to a great belt of reeds. Two rhinoceros cows were standing there with their calves, one of which could not have been more than a few months old; the other was already a sturdy little bull. While the cows were quietly feeding the larger of the two young ones played with them, went for them, retreated and went for them again with an agility hardly to be expected from the short, thick legs under the clumsy body. Then he would resume his peaceful browsing beside the others. The smaller calf imitated him and every now and again the mothers themselves were unable to resist the attraction and would punch the calves playfully in the flank.

Meanwhile we had been drawing nearer and nearer to the shore without the creatures taking any notice of us. We were so fascinated by them that we only now became aware of another rhinoceros which had been standing hidden in the reeds



Above: . . . From the acacia hill I looked down upon the Momella farm-houses and across to the Tululusiek (the gatekeeper to Mount Meru) whilst Mount Meru itself was veiled by thick clouds . . .

Right: . . . Mrs. Trappe's house perched above the others with the stream flowing by . . .



CHAPTER SIX

The Marauding Rhinoceros

DOWN by the *magazin* Rolf had planted one or two acres with ramie. Ramie is a plant about three feet high from the stalks of which a valuable fibre is extracted, and Rolf was particularly proud of his ramie. He had sent samples to London and an importer there had written him that this was the best that had been sent to him so far, for that quality he was prepared to pay the top price. Rolf was delighted.

But overnight an even greater enthusiast had visited the place, one who obviously set even higher store by the ramie though it would never occur to him to pay any price at all. For several nights on end a rhinoceros had taken up his position in the field and had enjoyed himself to his heart's content, completely undisturbed by torches, barking dogs, or the continuous yells and rattles of the night watchmen.

We went to inspect the damage. If this sort of thing went on there would soon be very few plants left. There was nothing for it but to attack this intruder. It would not be much trouble we thought, it would be merely a matter of running the lorry down to the edge of the ramie-field and lying in wait there for a few hours. The rhinoceros was supposed to arrive at midnight and then we would catch him!

At about nine o'clock in the evening we set out. The headlights of the lorry penetrated deep into the dense bush on either side of the road. We went through swarms of large fireflies. Night swallows went with us part of the way, flying

THE MARAUDING RHINOCEROS

across the beams of the headlamps and alighting on the ground in front of the lorry, so close that it looked as though they would be run over. Once again however they flew up and vanished into the dark.

We pulled up by the *magazin* behind the ramie-field, where one of the night-watchmen was waiting for us. Having been brought up in a Christian mission he had acquired the name of Philippo. Hamissi and Abdelaman had joined him; they hoped to get some fun out of this.

Philippo was certain we would only have to wait for three hours. He confirmed what we had already heard, that the '*faru*,' the rhinoceros, came out regularly at midnight and Hamissi and Abdelaman agreed with him. Every night, they said, they could hear the creature roaming around. Both men lived only a hundred yards above the ramie-field on the little hill which rose immediately behind it and would know what they were talking about. It really might be quite a simple business. The wind was favourable and from the *magazin* it was easy to command the entire field. The light was good for in four days it would be full moon.

I listened to the night sounds. Night swallows chirped softly; far away a bird called. Otherwise there was silence. We had brought some blankets with us and I made myself as comfortable as possible on the lorry. The moon, so bright that the stars had lost their radiance, shone full in my face, but from time to time it was darkened by racing clouds. In the distance we could see the glow of the night-watchmen's fires.

Rolf kept a good look-out from the driver's seat. The three Negroes had wrapped their blankets closely around them and stood beside us, listening. It was about eleven o'clock when I began to grow weary. I stared dreamily up at the moon and very soon fell asleep. Shortly afterwards I was awakened by a noise; I raised my head and looked intently around me but

could see nothing at all. The ramie-field lay quiet and peaceful in the moonlight. There was no sign of Rolf. Our three men seemed to have disappeared, but when I looked more closely I discovered them on the ground; huddled tight against each other, knees drawn up, they lay there sleeping completely enveloped in their blankets, motionless as the dead. I lay down again and was on the verge of sleep when I felt the gentle touch of a hand. Hamissi's head was above me. I looked at my watch, it was exactly midnight. I climbed carefully out of the lorry, my rifle ready.

Rolf came up to us. "The rhino hasn't emerged yet," he said, "but you can smell it. It's hiding back there in the bush and may come out any minute."

Immediately I was wide awake. My tension increased. I spotted two bush-buck browsing at the edge of the field, but not a sign of the rhinoceros. I did not even smell it. Nothing but the strong scent of the bushes was borne across to us on the wind. Though we stood for a good hour, maybe more, no rhinoceros showed up. Not a glimpse of anything, not a sound. I lay down again and slept, and awoke shivering. The night was cool. The moon had set and the stars were hidden by thick clouds. The ramie-field was in profound darkness. Suddenly from the forest there sounded the harsh cry of the colobus monkeys, breaking off with equal suddenness. Complete silence followed. Only the melancholy call of a bird was again to be heard. This time I was determined to stay awake. A lion roared in the distance; a short, hoarse cough repeated several times. It might have come from as far away as Lake Gosare.

Towards six o'clock the sky began to brighten and it was almost day when we climbed the hill to the farmhouse. The sun was as yet hidden from view behind Kilimanjaro, but the Meru massif was glowing in the first rays. Above the silvery head of

Mount Kibo, suspended in mid-air, the sky was a brilliant yellow. Then the sun rose.

The following evening found us again at the ramie-field. We had again driven down in the lorry, pulled up at the *magazin* and after listening for a while had stretched ourselves out in the car. Once again our three men took up their stand beside us, silent as ghosts, then lay down after a short time and slept huddled together on the ground.

Nothing stirred. It was considerably colder than the night before, or perhaps it only seemed so to me because I was impatient. Towards midnight I climbed out of the lorry. The three Negroes had vanished. Looking through the glasses I spotted them standing and warming themselves at one of the night-watchmen's fires, stirring the smouldering glow. There was not a movement in the moonlit ramie-field, so I lay down again and slept. But not for long as it was too cold. I listened to the noises of the night; all around in the bush cicadas were chirping.

About two o'clock there was a suspicious sound at the far end of the field. We listened tensely and this time I caught the rhinoceros scent, sweetish, acrid, and rather unpleasant. We waited. I stared into the darkness, but no rhinoceros appeared and soon the noise also ceased. Then we gave it up. It was three o'clock when we started the lorry and drove home.

Next morning we searched the edge of the field for tracks and soon found them. There on the very spot where we had heard it the rhinoceros had stood; repeatedly stopping, it had gone on along the edge of the field and had made off, still under cover of the bush. Perhaps it had smelled us. We now learned from the men that the rhinoceros was not as punctual as all that, and certainly did not invariably arrive at midnight. Sometimes even two or three days would elapse before it came again. Tired after watching for two nights we decided to rest.

Not until two days later were we down at the ramie-field again. The moon was almost full. This time Tahani, the chief herdsman, had come along. True, he could not be of any assistance, but the rhinoceros always passed close to his hut on its way to the field. This bothered him and he was profoundly disappointed that so far we had not caught the beast. He was all the more convinced that tonight we would be successful because he was with us. But it did not come off at all, and, I believe, for that very reason. Tahani was anything but a hunter and made such a noise that had I been a rhinoceros I should certainly have stayed away. And as is usual with bad examples, the three other men, who on both previous nights had glided around like shadows, on this occasion were noisy too, they coughed and talked and bustled about. I lost all pleasure in it.

"I'm not coming any more," I told Rolf as we drove home in the early morning. I let him have the full brunt of my irritation but he only laughed. "The rhino can't possibly have got our scent with that wind," he declared, "and the noise would hardly have disturbed it. But I'll gladly do my best for you—next time I'll fix up everything the way you want."

We were still at breakfast when Tahani arrived. He told us that soon after we had driven off the *faru* had been to the field and had done a lot more damage. It had come to within ten paces of the spot where our lorry had stood. The creature's tracks, the many plants which we found torn up and destroyed confirmed his report.

So of course the following evening we were there again. Whereas previously we had driven the lorry to the edge of the ramie-field, this time we left it behind the *magazin*. The men had the strictest orders to remain absolutely quiet and thus we waited. Within the past few days the clouds had increased and it looked like rain, but the moon gave enough light to shoot. Once again midnight came, the night crept slowly on, and a

fine drizzle set in. Yet there was no sign of the rhinoceros and in the morning we drove home disappointed.

By this time we had become determined to get him and returned that same evening. We decided to take Selemani with us and sent the other men home. Rolf and I immediately went to the *magazin* to get some sleep.

"If Selemani is on the look-out we don't need to keep watch," Rolf said, "we can rely on him." With these words he lay down and fell asleep.

I myself could not sleep, I went outside again and listened in the silence. Selemani, like a statue of bronze, stood at the corner of the *magazin* watching the ramie-field like some Indian scout, leaning on his spear, motionless and alert. I stood a while with him listening into the silence, then turned back and lay down beside Rolf. It was a long time since I had slept as soundly as I did that night. Dawn was already breaking when I awoke. I looked around. On my right lay Rolf, breathing quietly, on my left Selemani, and he too was sound asleep.

What had happened was that during the night rain had set in and Selemani, seeking from time to time shelter in the *magazin*, had ended by following our irresistible example.

Since we had all slept so well we tried again next night, taking only the penitent Selemani with us. That night none of us slept. The moon had a large halo. The weather had become distinctly warmer and the sky was once again heavily overcast. It might have been towards four in the morning when I heard a whispered *faru* beside me and Selemani pointed to where the rhinoceros had emerged from the bush. The clouds had parted and the rhinoceros stood there, a monstrous figure in the bright moonlight. I heard it munching, saw it move, and the wind blew its sharp scent towards me. It was no ghost but a creature of flesh and blood, standing a bare fifty paces away. I did not feel like shooting yet, I was too spellbound by the

apparition. The rhinoceros came still closer. It was making straight for me. Then it stopped and stood still at about thirty paces, its grotesque contours showing clearly. The front horn rose prominently, the small ears twitched. Still I was reluctant to shoot. Then it turned and began browsing slowly on the right—turned, and came back again, but this time not along the same track. It slowly moved farther away, grew smaller and smaller, and if I did not shoot it now it would vanish as mysteriously as it had come. I shot, it staggered, and before it could dive into the darkness I fired again. It crashed into the bush and, after some commotion, all was still.

Rolf, who all the time had been standing at the other side of the *magazin*, called across to me: "That was a good shot. We'll find him in an hour or so. Maybe he's already lying dead there in the bushes."

He was glad the beast had not collapsed in the ramie-field. If lions had devoured the carcass there during the next nights they might have ruined the entire field.

In the morning we searched for the rhinoceros. After it had left the ramie-field it had slackened speed and lain down, but had risen once again to its feet and was now some three hundred yards away in the thickest part of the bush. We heard it panting heavily. But no matter how I tried to approach it I could not get a glimpse of it in the dense undergrowth. And I could not make the rhinoceros attack me. For a second I caught sight of the upper shoulder-blade and fired quickly, but it managed to get away. Not wishing to drive it farther off we did not follow and hoped that, severely wounded as it was, we should find him that same afternoon. But though we stayed out till dark we failed to find him. For a short distance we could still distinguish traces of blood; then this ceased and the spoor was lost in the tangled bush. All search proved fruitless. The vultures would have to come to our aid.

The following day I had to go to Arusha and when I got back that evening I heard that the rhinoceros had been found. We rode out to the spot and in the middle of the bush lay the rhinoceros. The vultures flew sullenly off at our approach; I counted over twenty of them awaiting our departure on a flat-topped thorn-tree; two marabous towered among them.

The rhinoceros was a bull with horns of more than average size. I watched while the men separated the horns, until the stench became unbearable. The vultures, however, would have found it all the more tasty, as would the lions, hyenas and jackals that took their turn at the carcass the next night. When I reached that same spot two days later nothing was left of the rhinoceros except its mighty skeleton.