



Thirsty but alert

Frontispiece]

IN THE LAND OF THE LION

BY
CHERRY KEARTON

AUTHOR OF
"PHOTOGRAPHING WILD LIFE ACROSS THE WORLD," "MY FRIEND TOTO"
ETC.

WITH 88 PHOTOGRAPHS



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CHAPTER FOUR

THE RHINOCEROS

A FEW months ago, on a little hill-side, I discovered a very old rhino. He lived in the centre of a clump of dense bush around which had grown a ring of almost impassable thorns, high and prickly, so that his retreat was safe from intruders.

Protection of some sort he must have badly needed, for only a few yards away ran a road along which motor lorries passed, and a few miles to the east were settlements with Indian stores and hundreds of the Masai. Old as he was, he would have been of value to anyone who could have shot him, for his horns (which, by the way, are not in reality horn but matted hair) must have weighed thirty pounds, and rhino horn has a commercial value of £1 per pound weight.* From his wariness I have little doubt that attempts at shooting him had been made.

* Rhino horns are ground down and exported to China, where they are used for the manufacture of a drug.

The surroundings of this rhino's home were so impenetrable that photography was out of the question; but finding the pool, three quarters of a mile away, to which he went each night to drink, I went there and watched, thinking that if he stayed late I could get my picture in the early morning. But the old fellow was far too wary for that and always departed to his fortress at dawn.

By that time I was naturally keener than ever to photograph him, and accordingly I decided that the only thing to do was to try to intercept him on his return to his retreat, when the light would be a little stronger.

I found the track by which he came, and on it a clearing a couple of yards across. Close to this I hid behind an ant-hill, waiting for him.

In due course he came, and I got a few inches of film. But I made a slight sound, and instantly, without stopping to see the cause of it, he slipped through the thorn bushes and made off as fast as he could, home to his shelter.

Now, that state of fear is not the normal condition of the rhino. He will be suspicious, and if he scents

danger he will either bolt or charge ; but he will not show the extreme wariness of this old fellow, nor make for a thorn fortress to stay there till night returns. Nor is it normal for him to live alone, as this one did, the only rhino in many square miles of country. Twenty years ago, in eight square miles, I used to count as many as fifteen or twenty rhino in a day, and then I spent my time largely in climbing trees to get out of their way.

To-day, in most districts, all is changed. The settler regards the rhino as a nuisance, because he is no respecter of private property, and also—quite rightly—as dangerous. The hunter shoots him for sport. Roads now cross his private domain in every direction. Even the natives see advantages in his extermination.

And this extermination is fast occurring. For a time he may, to some extent, escape, because, unintelligent as he is popularly supposed to be, the survivors of his race have at any rate had the sense to leave dangerous areas and to take refuge farther from the settler in districts where the bush is wilder and thicker. But I foresee that in another

twenty years, in Central Africa at any rate, the rhino will be hard to find.

Once it was impossible to help meeting him ; now it is possible, as a friend of mine has recently done, to undertake a journey of thousands of miles through Central Africa without seeing a single rhino except the one old creature to whom I have just referred, who, I imagine, must resolutely have refused to desert the scenes of his youth, even when all his friends had departed.

This may not be the place in which to apportion blame for the extermination of wild life, even when one knows of such incidents as that in which a hunter recently shot no less than one hundred and twelve rhino ; but I must at least record that the rhino is fast disappearing even in what is called the Great Game Reserve, where the shooting of wild animals is forbidden.

As the Reserve covers some thirteen thousand square miles and is in the charge of only a few wardens, it is obvious that preservation is difficult. Nevertheless, difficult as it is, it must be accomplished if wild life in Central Africa is to survive. In South Africa proof has been given that protection—real protection—

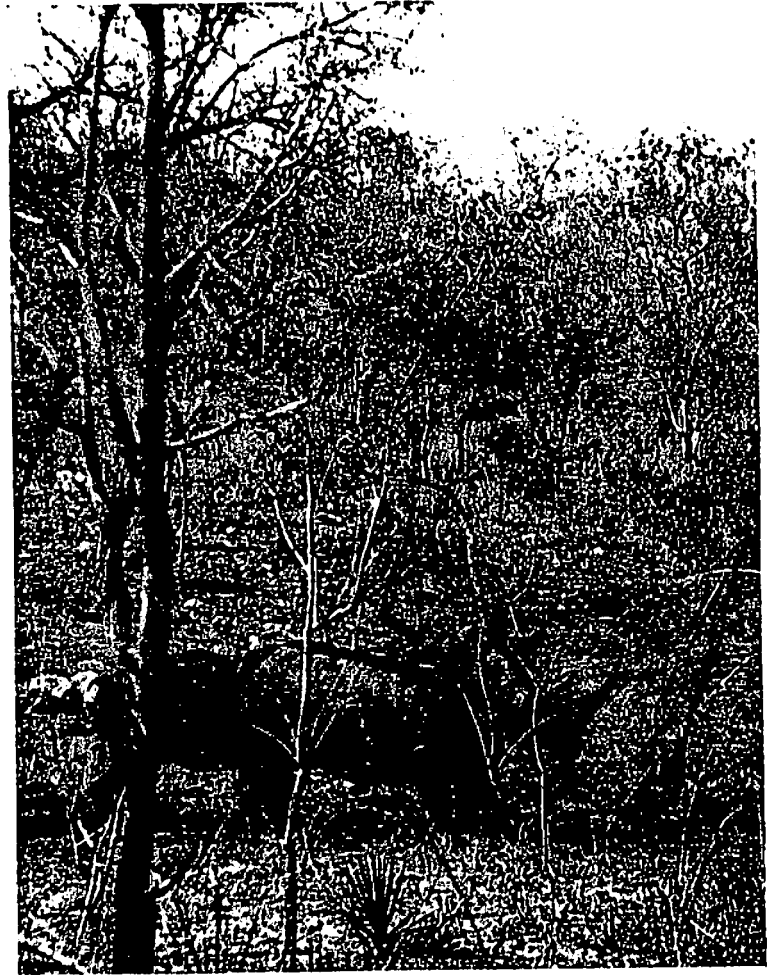
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is possible. And what can be done in South Africa can certainly be done also in Central Africa.

The first step must be the keeping of the Game Reserve for the game on whose behalf it was created. I regret to say that this is not done at present. Indian trading stores are now to be found almost in the heart of the Reserve—and it would be interesting to know who is responsible for allowing them to be there. Motor lorries carry goods from one of these stores to another; and thus the Game Reserve threatens gradually to become a commercial trading ground instead of remaining an animal sanctuary.

Because of these things—the partial extermination of the rhino and the driving of the survivors into exile from their natural and favourite haunts—the man who wishes to study this animal has to follow him into undisturbed districts, in which the settler has not yet penetrated. There, at any rate, he will be found living very much as he lived twenty (or for that matter, I suppose, two thousand) years ago.

There, the rhino lives in country that is comparatively open. He likes to eat short thorn bushes whose branches are soft; and in passing I



White rhino

(This species is larger than the black rhino—and very much rarer)

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should mention that one of the effects of the killing and driving out of the rhino in certain areas is that the bush has grown high and thick because it is no longer eaten, and in growing it has become hard and very prickly—so much so that the mouth of the old hermit rhino whom I found near the road which passes through the Reserve on the way to Tanganyika was torn and swollen because, perforce, he had had to live on the higher-grown thorns.

The rhino is extraordinarily regular in all his habits, and will do the same things day after day at very nearly the same hours. Through the heat of the day he will mostly lie in the shade of a tree, though he may get up and enjoy a mud bath. But in the late afternoon, when the greatest heat has passed, he will begin to feed. Then, in particular, his regularity is seen, for he will browse always along the same path, about two feet wide, which he has worn for himself from his home to his particular watering-place, with probably a path branching to one side to the spot where with equal regularity he leaves his dung: a habit in which he is peculiar. Sometimes his pool will be as much as six miles

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away, but he will never vary his choice or wander very far afield, and his daily route will be to and fro along his well-worn pathway.

Once I fixed my camp near the foot of a hill two or three hundred feet high, on the top of which, in a clump of bush, a rhino had his retreat. Every afternoon he would leave the shade, come to a particular spot at the edge of the hill, and slide on his four feet (like an elephant descending the bank of a river) to the bottom. There he would start to feed, working round the base of the hill till he reached the side opposite to that by which he had descended, and then in a straight line to a water-hole three-quarters of a mile away.

When his thirst was quenched, he would return to the hill, but not, of course, to the slide, for although that was good for the descent it was useless for a climb. The upward journey was always made by a path which he had worn on the side nearest to the pool, the line of it having no doubt been chosen because after his feed and his drink he wanted to return as quickly as possible to safety.

One day this rhino deviated slightly from his regular

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path and walked right into my camp. There was a narrow space between a grass hut which we had built and a tree, and the animal apparently thought that there was room for him to pass. But there wasn't, as he very soon discovered. His head passed through safely, but there was no room for his body to follow. Of course, the sensible thing would have been to withdraw and to go around either the hut or the tree, but that was not in the rhino's mind. Instead, he tried to force his way through, got badly scared because he only wedged himself more firmly, and finally plunged and pushed until at last the hut collapsed. Then he bounded forward, and without a single backward glance raced away as if the Devil were behind him.

He was very badly frightened by that time, and it is probable that he did not stop running for miles, for that is the way of the rhino. Once panic holds him he will run until he is far out of sight of whatever has scared him. Readers of my book, *My Dog Simbá*, will remember how my fox-terrier routed two rhino and chased them until he was found by horsemen in an utterly exhausted state five miles away !

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It is never safe to pitch a camp across a rhino's track, or even very close to it. In my case it was only a hut that was demolished, but it might as easily have been myself.

You can never be sure of the rhino's temper. He is a short-sighted animal, and, like the elephant, apart from the warnings given him by tick birds, he relies for the detection of danger on hearing and scent. He can pick up scent at considerable distances (I have known him aware of my presence at two hundred and fifty yards), but then he does not always know whether or not what confronts him is a source of danger. He therefore has to come closer to investigate and to confirm his suspicions; and as his hearing reinforces the stronger scent he often seems to hesitate whether to charge or to run away. It seems probable that both actions are dictated by fear. I have known him come within a dozen yards, looking as if he were about to charge, and then suddenly turn and bolt; but on the other hand I have also known cases when, though he might have been expected to bolt, a stronger scent made him quite certain of what was before him and he charged. There is, of course, a difference

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between fear of the known and fear of the unknown; and it is possible that the first impels the rhino to charge while the second prompts him to run away.

In any case, it is clear that the saving of his own skin is his first consideration. Sometimes, for instance, he will come up against the wind, pass comparatively close to a man, and then, of course, pick up that man's scent; but then he will not turn and charge for he is already headed for safety, and he will race for it as hard as he can go.

That, however, is a statement which requires a certain qualification. It certainly does not apply to the rhino if he has been wounded: then he is almost certain to charge, directly he discovers his enemy's wind.

Some time ago an adventure-loving lady crossed Africa from the west, and at last complained that the country was lacking in the thrills she had expected. Two days later she encountered a rhino, and although she had no weapon with which she could have killed him, she fired with a small rifle and wounded him. Instantly he charged and killed her.

Then he took shelter in a donga, which was crossed

by a road. Down this road the next day came a local settler with his wife, in a motor-car. The rhino, tormented by the pain of his wound, charged the car directly he saw it. The settler very quickly got his wife out of the car and half-way up a tree; but he himself was caught, and shared the fate of the lady who had thought that Africa lacked thrills.

When a rhino charges he is indeed dangerous, and unless one is prepared to shoot there is only one way to safety: a tree. I probably know that fact from as many personal experiences as any man living, and now, if I am photographing the rhino, I am always careful to see that a stout tree is handy. In the past I have won this knowledge in experiences when only luck has saved me.

The charging rhino puffs and plows like an antiquated steam engine, but he travels fast, and if he gets you he will almost certainly either trample you to death or rip your body with a blow from his horn.

Once I was photographing at night, when the flash just behind the camera so much startled the rhino (and, by the way, I have had exactly the same

experience with a lion) that he charged it immediately. Fortunately, I was up a small tree; but the camera was on the ground—and when I climbed down, the lens was all that I could find intact.

During the war I persuaded the native who had many times acted as my personal 'boy' to enlist, and in due course he found himself serving in the front line, where natives served among the white men because the sharpness of their eyes was an invaluable aid to men unused to the country. One day, whilst advancing on outpost duty, the 'boy' saw a rhino mother and her baby dangerously near both to himself and to the Englishman on his left. In the excitement of the moment the 'boy' forgot his English and shouted the name of the beast in his own tongue: "Kfaru! Kfaru!" The Englishman, of course, failed to understand, and as the rhino was hidden from him by a bush he marched calmly on. Just as the 'boy' remembered the word "rhino" the creature got their wind and charged.

The 'boy,' unfortunately for himself, stayed to shout a warning. The Englishman leapt aside, but the 'boy,' in turning, stumbled, and as he lay flat on

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the ground the foot of the mother rhino caught him a glancing blow and smashed his shoulder. Certainly a lucky escape, for if he had been on his feet nothing could have saved his life.

Once, whilst photographing in open country, I saw a couple of rhino browsing on a long, sloping hill-side. Two members of my party were out on horseback, and I could see them although they could not see the rhino. The horsemen were too far away to catch my warning, and very soon the rhino picked up their wind and promptly charged. I had often seen the rhinoceros pursued by horsemen: now I was to see the positions reversed. The speed of a galloping horse is just about equal to that of a charging rhino, so that the chase was a long one, and for a time the horsemen maintained their lead without being able to increase it. But the rhino has not the horse's staying power, and as the country was flat and open, the horses began at last to draw ahead until, after three-quarters of a mile, the two rhino simultaneously decided that the thing wasn't good enough and branched off, one to the right and the other to the left.

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On another occasion in the open I myself had a very fortunate escape. From a little hill I had seen through my glasses a rhino lying asleep in the shade of a clump of bushes and trees, and as by good luck I was able to advance against the wind, I set out to stalk him. I got successfully within forty yards, when the tick birds gave the alarm. Up jumped the rhino at once, knowing that something was wrong but, because of the direction of the wind, not knowing what was the danger nor whence it came. I waited until the settling of the tick birds reassured him, and then I crept still nearer and began to set up my camera, once more disturbing the tick birds, so that the rhino again became troubled and stood turning his head this way and that, with his nose in the air in an effort to pick up scent. Finally he decided on personal investigation, and as luck would have it he came directly towards me. There wasn't a tree within reach, and the creature that could chase horsemen without losing ground for three-quarters of a mile would very soon overtake a man who tried to run. Therefore the only thing to do was to trust to luck—the luck that the wind would hold and that

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uncertainty of my whereabouts would deter the rhino from charging. And meanwhile, just in case I came through the adventure alive, there was an excellent chance for a film, much too good to be wasted over an attack of "funk." So I started turning the handle of the cinematograph camera, while the rhino came steadily on till he was within fifteen yards of me.

By that time, though he still apparently could not smell me, he must have noticed something to add considerably to his puzzlement—the very faint clicking of the camera. Probably that was something new in his experience, and he didn't know what to make of it. It might be an enemy that he could easily demolish—or it might not. He stopped, hesitated, and then galloped away to the left.

His behaviour then was very odd, and for me not a little exciting. Fear sent him a little farther away from me, then curiosity brought him nearer, so that he completed a small half-circle; then fear again led him away, and once more he came back—another half-circle. And all the while he was gradually working round to my left in an effort to

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find out the cause of the buzzing that came from my compressed-air camera, and to get my wind. Finally he stopped, again only fifteen yards from me, hesitated once more, and at last—very much to my relief—decided in favour of discretion and bolted, making for shelter among bushes half a mile away.

But these pictures of the rhino when he is disturbed do not tell the whole story. With them must be coupled others showing him at peace, for that is the way of his normal life, apart from disagreeable incidents which, no doubt, he regards as very upsetting to one who prefers a quiet and orderly routine. He doesn't want either to hunt or to be hunted; the daily promenade up and down his well-worn path is good enough for him, and these calls for violent exertion, besides disturbing his rest, make him excited and no doubt very hot.

When the rhino gets overheated he immediately goes off to cool himself in a bath, either in water or in mud. I think of the two he prefers the mud. And then, much refreshed, he lies in a little depression to be dried again by the sun.

If he has bathed in mud he does not wash it

off, but lets it dry on his skin while he sleeps, so that—particularly in that part of the country where the earth is reddish—he eventually looks exactly like the remains of a broken-down ant-hill. Once I examined a stretch of open bush through my glasses, decided that there was nothing on it in the way of dangerous game, and accordingly started to walk across it, accompanied by two native ‘boys.’ A reddish, broken ant-hill lay right in front of me, and in another moment I should have stepped on to it—when suddenly it stood up! Rhino! There was no lack of wind then, and no uncertainty in the creature’s mind. He charged instantly, and I was only saved by the bravery of one of my ‘boys’ who deliberately led the beast aside and then succeeded in climbing a tree just in the nick of time to save himself.

The family habits of the rhino are interesting. The youngster always stays with its mother until it is nearly fully grown; but the father, although he may come back at night, is inclined to keep out of the nursery while the rampageous infant is around; and it is not till the youngster is grown that ordinary family life is resumed!

And although the rhino is alert and suspicious by day he relaxes by night—so much so, indeed, that at water-holes I have found him to be positively frisky. You would not think that this word could possibly be applied to a big and cumbersome and at times very terrifying animal like the rhinoceros; but often I have seen two or three rhino at play near a water-hole, chasing each other round and round, and puffing and squealing all the time. It was quite obvious that dangers—men, rifles, clicking cameras and all—were then quite forgotten, and that those entirely peaceful rhino had set out to enjoy themselves in the short hours of the night before wariness and suspicion again became necessary.