

THE LEOPARD WOMAN

BY
STEWART EDWARD WHITE



Illustrated by W. H. D. Koerner

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CHAPTER III

THE RHINOCEROS

In the first gray dusk Simba and Cazi Moto slipped away on the errands appointed for them—to find people and to find water, if possible. The cook camp, too, was afoot, dark figures passing and repassing before a fire. But the rest of the men slept heavily, seizing the unwonted chance.

When the first rays of the sun struck the fly of the small green master's-tent Kingozi appeared, demanding water wherewith to wash. At the sound of his voice men stirred sleepily, sat up, poked the remains of their tiny fires. As though through an open tap the freshness of night-time drained away. The hot, searching, stifling African day took possession of the world.

After breakfast Kingozi looked about him for shelter. A gorgeous, red-flowering vine had smothered one of the flat-topped thorn trees in its luxuriance. The growths of successive years had overlaid each other. Kingozi called two men with *pangas* who speedily cut out the centre, leaving a little round green room in the heart of the shadow. Thither Kingozi caused to be conveyed his chop-box table, his canvas chair, and his tin box; and there he spent

the entire morning writing in a blank book and carefully drawing from field notes in a pocketbook a sketch map of the country he had traversed. At noon he ate a light meal of bread, plain rice with sugar, and a *balauri* of tea. Then for a time he slept beneath the mosquito bar in his tent.

At this hour of fiercest sun the whole world slept with him. From the baked earth rose heat waves almost as tangible as gauze veils. Objects at a greater distance than a hundred yards took on strange distortions. The thorn trees shot up to great heights; animals stood on stilts; the tops of the hills were flattened, and from their summits often reached out into space long streamers. Sometimes these latter joined across wide intervals, creating an illusion of natural bridges or lofty flat-topped cliffs with holes clear through them to the open sky beyond. All these things shimmered and flickered and wavered in the mirage of noon. Only the sun itself stared clear and unchanging.

At about two o'clock Kingozi awoke and raised his voice. Mali-ya-bwana, next in command after Cazi Moto and Simba, answered.

"Get the big gun," he was told, "and the water bottles."

Mali-ya-bwana was not a professed gun bearer, but he could load, and Kingozi believed him staunch. Therefore, often, in absence of Simba, the big Baganda had been pressed into this service.

The blasting heat was fiercest at this hour. The air was saturated by it just as water may hold a chemical in solu-

tion. Every little while a wave would beat against the cheek as though a furnace door had been opened. Nevertheless Kingozi knew that this was also the hour when the sun's power begins to decline; when the vertical rays begin to give place. For it is not heat that kills, but the actinic power of rays unfiltered by a long slant through the earth's atmosphere.

The two men tramped methodically along, paying little attention to their surroundings. Game dozed everywhere beneath the scanty shade, sometimes singly, sometimes in twos or threes, sometimes in herds. Motionless they stood; and often, were it not for the switch of a tail, they would have remained unobserved. Even the sentinel hartebeestes, posted atop high ant hills on the outskirts of the herds, seemed half asleep. Nevertheless they were awake enough for the job, as was evidenced when the two human figures came too near. Then a snort brought every creature to its feet, staring.

The objective of the men seemed to be a rise of land which the lessening mirage now permitted to appear as a small kopje, a solitary hill with rocky outcrops. Toward this they plodded methodically: Kingozi slouching ahead, Mali-ya-bwana close at his heels, very proud of his temporary promotion from the ranks. Suddenly he snapped his fingers. At the signal Kingozi stopped and looked back inquiringly over his shoulder.

Mali-ya-bwana was pointing cautiously to a low red clay

ant hill immediately in their path and about thirty yards ahead. To the casual glance it looked no different from any of the hundreds of others of like size and colour everywhere to be seen. Kingozi's attention, however, now narrowed to a smaller circle than the casual. It did not need Mali-ya-bwana's whispered "*faru*" (rhinoceros) to identify the mound.

Cautiously the two men began to back away. When they had receded some twenty yards, however, the huge beast leaped to its feet. The rapidity of its movements was extraordinary. There intervened none of the slow and clumsy upheaval one would naturally expect from an animal of so massive a body and such short, thick legs. One moment it slumbered, the next it was afoot, warned by some slight sound or jar of the earth or—as some maintain—by a telepathic sense of danger. Certainly, as far as they knew, neither Kingozi nor Mali-ya-bwana had disturbed a pebble or broken a twig.

The rhinoceros faced them, snorting loudly. The sound was exactly that of steam roaring from a locomotive's safety valve. Strangely enough, in spite of the massive structure and the loose, thick skin of the beast, it conveyed an impression of taut, nervous muscles. Though it faced directly toward them, the men knew that they were as yet unseen. The rhinoceros' eyesight is very short, or very circumscribed, or both; and only objects in motion and comparatively close enter its range of vision. Kingozi and his man held

themselves rigidly immovable, waiting for what would happen. The rhinoceros, too, held himself rigidly immovable, his nostrils dilating between snorts, his ears turning; for his senses of smell and hearing made up in their keenness for the defects of his eyes.

Suddenly, without the slightest warning, he stuck his tail perpendicular and plunged forward at a clumsy-looking but exceedingly swift gallop.

An inexperienced man would have considered himself the object of a deliberate "charge"; but an old African traveller, such as Kingozi, knew this for a blind rush in the direction toward which the animal happened to be headed. The rhinoceros, alarmed by the first intimation of danger, unable to get further news from its keener senses, had been seized by a panic. Were nothing to deflect him from the straight line, he would continue ahead on it until the panic had run out.

But the two men were exactly in that line!

Kingozi hitched his light rifle forward imperceptibly. Although this was at present only a blind rush, should the rhinoceros catch sight of them he would fight; and within twenty-five yards or so his eyesight would be quite good enough. As the beast did not slow up in the first ten yards, but rather settled into its stride, Kingozi took rapid aim and fired.

His intention was neither to kill nor to cripple his antagonist. If that had been the case, he would have used the heavy double rifle that Mali-ya-bwana held ready near his elbow.

The bullet inflicted a slight flesh wound in the outer surface of the beast's left shoulder. Kingozi instantly passed the light rifle back with his right hand, at the same motion seizing the double rifle with his left.

But at the *spat* of the bullet the rhino veered toward the direction from which it seemed to his stupid brain the hurt had come. Tail erect, he thundered away down the slope.

For a hundred yards he careered full speed, then slowed to a trot, finally stopped, whirled, and faced to a new direction. The sound of his blowing came clearly across the intervening distance.

A low bush grew near. The rhino attacked this savagely, horning it, trampling it down. The dust arose in clouds. Then the huge brute trotted slowly away, still snorting angrily, pausing to butt violently the larger trees, or to tear into shreds some bush or ant hill that loomed dangerously in the primeval fogs of his brain.

"Sorry, old chap," commented Kingozi in his own language, "but you're none the worse. Only I'm afraid your naturally sweet temper is spoiled for to-day, at least."

He turned to exchange guns with Mali-ya-bwana.

"*N'dio, bwana,*" assented the latter to a speech of which he understood not one word. Mali-ya-bwana was secretly a little proud of himself for having stuck like a gun bearer, instead of shinning up a thorn tree like a porter.

Kingozi slipped a cartridge into the rifle, and the two resumed their walk toward the kopje.

CHAPTER IV

THE STRANGER

By the time the two men had gained the top of the hill the worst heat of the day had passed. Kingozi seated himself on a flat rock and at once began to take sights through a prismatic compass, entering the observations in a pocketbook. Mali-ya-bwana, bolt upright, stared out over the thinly wooded plain below. He reported the result of his scouting in a low voice, to which the white man paid no attention whatever.

"*Twiga,* bwana,*" he said, and then, as his eye caught the flash of many sing-sing horns, "*kuru, mingi.*" Thus he named over the different animals—the topi, the red hartebeeste, the eland, zebra, some warthogs, and many others. The beasts were anticipating the cool of the afternoon, and were grazing slowly out from beneath the trees, scattering abroad over the landscape.

From even this slight elevation the outlook extended. Isolated mountain ranges showed loftier; the tops of unguessed hills peeped above the curve of the earth; the clear line of the horizon had receded to the outer confines of

*Giraffe.

“Hope they don’t wing one another,” he remarked of the *askaris*’ volley. “Rotten shooting! rotten!” as the Nubian stood his ground. At the same time he pushed forward the safety catch and threw the heavy rifle to his shoulder.

A charging rhinoceros—or one rushing near enough a man’s direction to be dangerous—is not a difficult problem. Given nerve enough, and barring accidents—which might happen in a London flat—a man is in no danger. If he opens fire too soon, indeed, he is likely to empty his weapon without inflicting a stopping wound, but if he will wait until the beast is within twenty yards or so, the affair is certain. For this reason: just before a rhinoceros closes, he drops his head low in order to bring his long horn into action. If the hunter fires then, over the horn, he will strike the beast’s backbone. The shot can hardly be missed, for the range is very close and the outstanding flanges of the vertebræ make a large mark. The formidable animal goes down like a stone. In country open enough to preclude the deadly close-at-hand surprise rush, where one has no chance to use his weapon at all, the rhinoceros is not dangerous to one who knows his business.

But in this case Kingozi was nearer a hundred and twenty than twenty yards from the animal. The mark to be hit was now very small; and it was moving. In addition the heavy double rifle, while accurate enough at that range, was not, owing to its weight and terrific recoil, as certain as a

lighter rifle. These things Kingozi knew perfectly. The muscles under his beard tightened; his gray eyes widened into a glare like that of Simba in sight of game.

Just before the rhinoceros dropped his head for the toss, the Nubian stepped directly into the line of fire.

“*Lala !—lie down!*” Kingozi shouted.

Somehow the whip-snap of authority in his voice reached the Nubian’s consciousness. He dropped flat, and almost instantly the white man fired.

At the roar of the great gun the rhinoceros collapsed in mid career, going down, as an animal always does under a successful spine shot, completely, without a struggle or even a quiver.

“That was well shot, master,” said Mali-ya-bwana.

Kingozi reloaded the rifle and started forward. At the same time the occupant of the hammock finally emerged from the tangle and came erect.