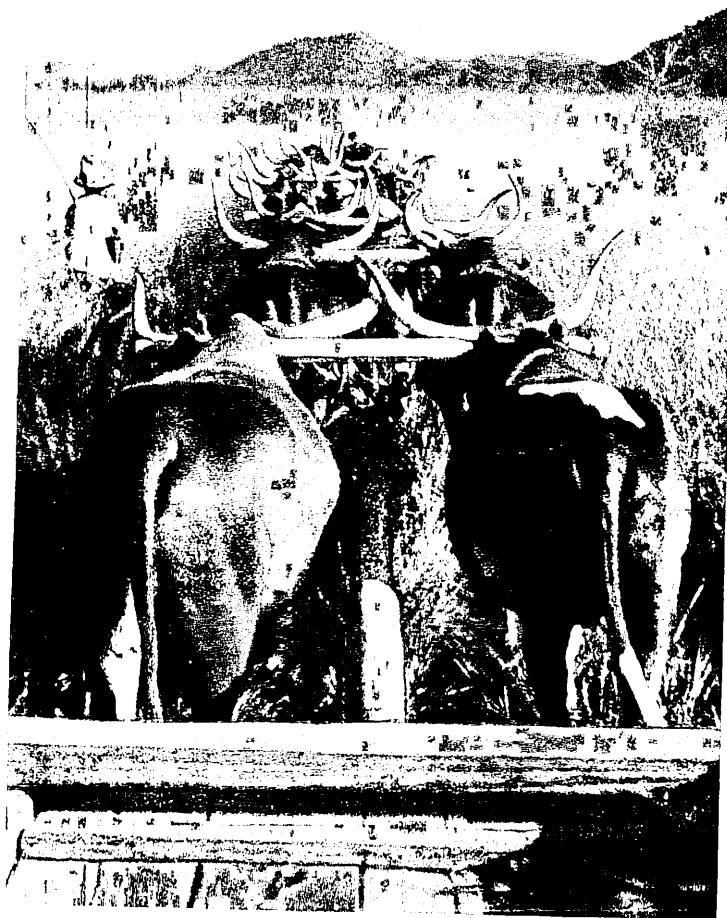


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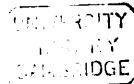
# RHODESIAN RANCHER

BY

WILFRID ROBERTSON



FROM THE TOP OF THE MOVING WAGON



*Frontispiece*



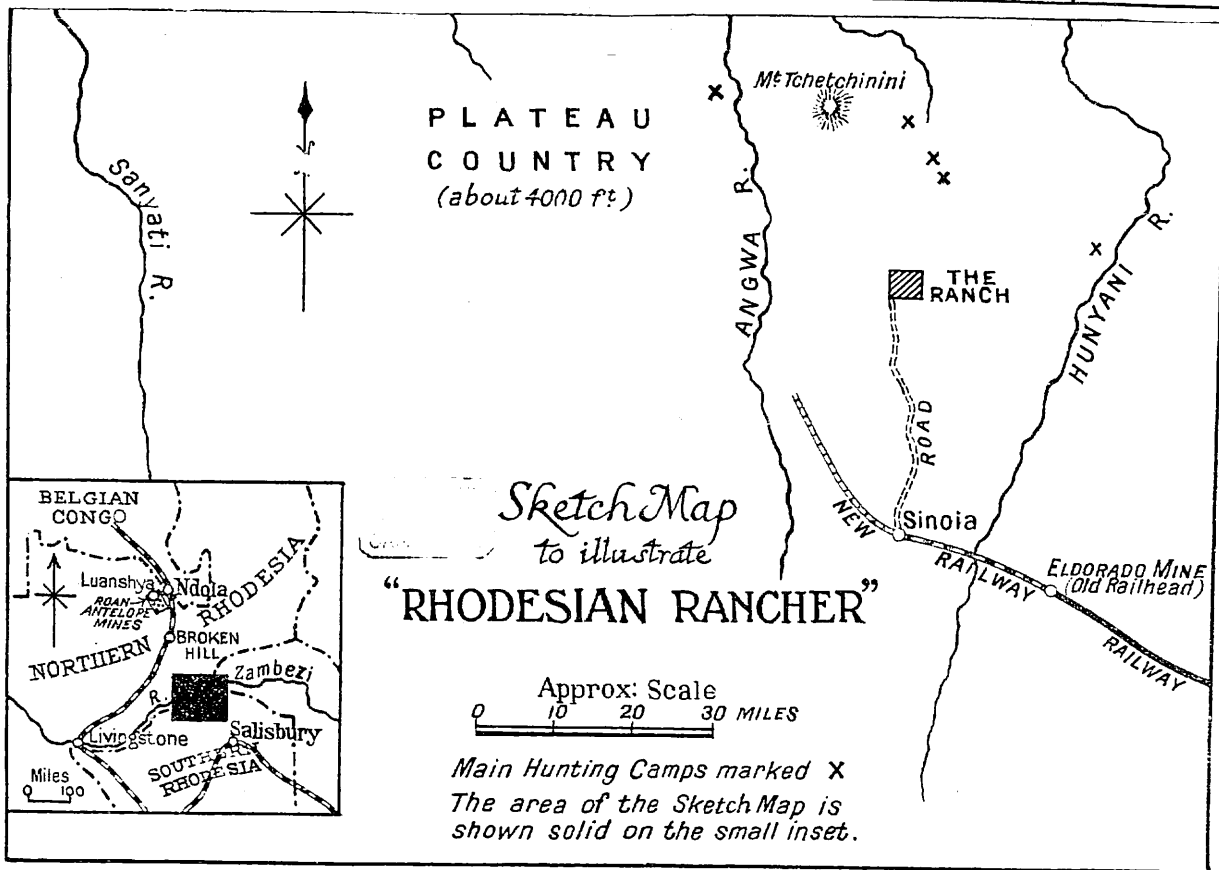
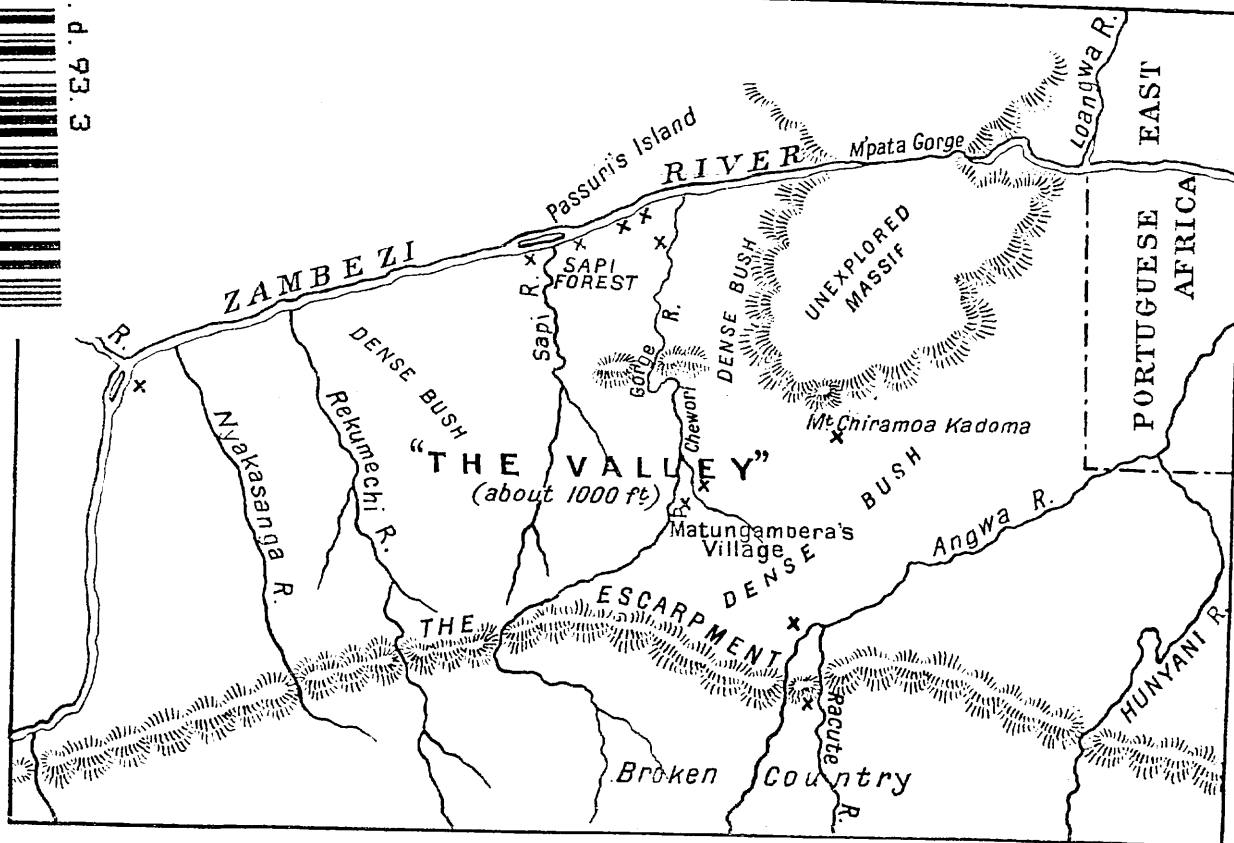
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## CHAPTER XIII

## Gamekeeping

SUCH were the scenes among which I spent my holidays: the colour and life of the Zambezi, the weirdness of the belts of gravel country where dead stems of trees rose in millions and resembled an artist's conception of the infernal fields, and the mingled interest and simplicity of the bushland villages.

But, like all holidays, they had to end. Essential food and ammunition ran short, and the management of the ranch needed my attention. The long homeward marches began. Once more the escarpment was crossed, the carriers slipping and clutching as they climbed beneath their loads of game trophies and ivory that had replaced the outward burdens of foodstuffs. At last I reached the estate once more, to be greeted by the natives I had left in charge, and to receive their reports.

During my absence the routine had gone on steadily—the ploughing for fresh crops, the clearing of a belt of land, and the usual work with the herds of cattle. There had been no serious difficulties. True, one or two beasts had died, a lion had accounted for three more, and a fire had started in one of the paddocks, but had been beaten out. But all these might have

occurred while I was there, and were unpreventable. Conversely a number of calves had been born, the stock all looked healthy, and the work of preparing the ploughed land was well advanced.

My contact with the wild creatures did not end with my return to the ranch; the estate was well stocked with game, and their preservation was no mean item in the running of the place. They represented my main source of fresh meat, and supplied also the necessary occasional ration of flesh for the native employees. There was the pleasure too of seeing the beautiful creatures about the property, grazing among the herds of cattle and slipping away quietly on the approach of man. The game animals were a natural asset to the ranch that was well worth preserving.

The beasts that roamed the property were of many kinds: lordly koodoo and eland, sable antelope and bushbuck, down to dainty oribi and duiker. There were also many birds—bustard and guinea-fowl, francolin and partridge—but these did not require the same attention as the animals; and it was concerning the larger creatures that my energies were mainly employed.

The enemies of the fauna fell into two categories: the natural carnivora, lions, leopards, and packs of African hunting-dogs, and the native poachers with their mongrel curs and traps. To decrease the numbers of the first was also part of the work connected with the cattle, for the flesh-eaters preyed equally on the herds; in checking the second menace I was assisted by the loyal co-operation of the cattle-patrols, who realized fully that a beast poached by strangers meant loss in

herds themselves. Herds of game are very conservative in their habits if not unduly disturbed; and it was not difficult to keep a fairly accurate census of the beasts on the ranch. Any sick or injured buck I killed immediately, partly for its own sake, partly because nothing seems to upset and drive away a herd more than the presence of an injured animal of their own species.

Lastly, I worked with discretion in shooting. I avoided firing at the big herd-bulls which kept together the different parties, taking only the younger bulls that would in any case eventually leave the ranch and seek pastures far from the scene of their youth. Unless under necessity, females were always safe; and the checking of both carnivora and poachers' traps, which kill probably nine females out of every ten beasts slain, helped rapidly to increase the stock.

The return was well worth the trouble taken; the return of being always able to get fresh meat, and of having the pleasure of seeing the beautiful creatures always about the place.

The game birds on the ranch did not need the same attention, for the natives seldom troubled their heads much about them, and all the attacks of their natural enemies, hawk and eagle, lynx and wildcat, made no difference to their numbers.

The black knoorhaan or lesser bustard, with its long neck and tiny head, was rare; though occasionally I saw specimens stalking along with slow steps among the belts of shorter grass. Guinea-fowl were the great standby for the pot, especially in the height of the rainy season when it was impossible to shoot larger game. For succulent eating there are few birds to equal a



THE AUTHOR, AND RHINOCEROS SHOT ON THE RANCH