

ANIMAL KITABU

by Jean-Pierre Hallet

Jean-Pierre Hallet, a Belgian naturalist, befriended a black rhino (which he named Kifaru, the Swahili word for rhino) in Uganda. Hallet describes how he managed to train the animal in this excerpt from his book Animal Kitabu.

Insatiably curious, the black rhino is at the same time extremely timid and equipped with only limited mentality. His hearing and his sense of smell are superb, but his vision is abysmally defective. Each of his tiny eyes, set on opposite sides of his bulky, elongated head, gives him a different picture to look at; each picture is tantalizing in its wide-angle perspective but horribly frustrating in its perpetual fuzziness. An animal Mr. McGoo, nearsighted Kifaru cannot tell a man from a tree at distances of more than thirty feet, cannot see any object distinctly if it is more than twenty or even fifteen feet away, and has to cock his head sideways to see, with one eye at a time, around the bulk of his muzzle and his massive front horn. Moving forward with the horn lowered, he is running blind.

By day as well as night, Kifaru hears and smells a whole world of fascinating objects which he cannot see. His curiosity drives him on to poke and probe among them—to look for the needle, as it were—but his timid disposition makes him fear, and fear deeply, the very objects that he wants to examine. He hesitates, agonized, while the two conflicting instincts boil within him. Usually he runs away but sometimes rushes forward to investigate with the world's most farcical display of bluff, noise, wasted energy, and sheer ineptitude—the notorious rhino “charge.”

Once, near the Upemba National Park in Katanga, I watched a typically addleheaded rhino stage a typically silly charge. He was busy with a big mouthful of twigs when he heard a frog start to croak about a hundred feet away. He stopped chewing, cocked his head, and listened—with leaves fluttering out of his mouth—then trotted anxiously toward the sound. As he approached, the frog croaked loudly and hopped by chance in his direction. A ton and a

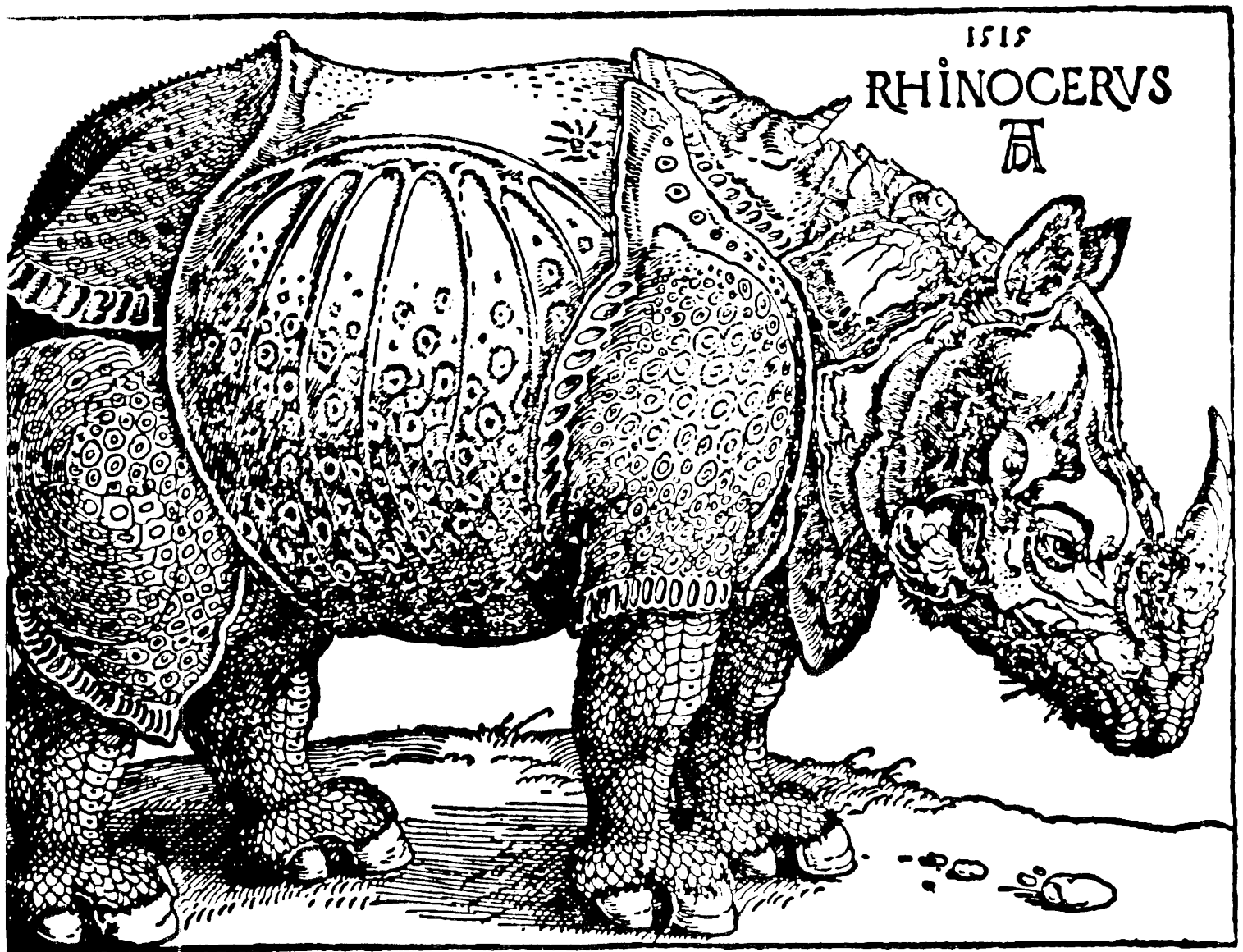
half of spooked rhinoceros made an abrupt U-turn, retreating to “safety.” He sulked for a few minutes before advancing again. This time the frog jumped in the opposite direction, making him feel more confident: he lowered his horn and charged, smashing the frog under his hoofs without even knowing it. He returned to the spot, sniffing until he found it, and pawed at the little blob of pulp with a puzzled expression. . . .

Cursed with equally bad vision, the elephant acts with majestic calm and self-assured determination; his great intelligence enables him to solve the problems that confront him and to keep his warm emotions balanced sanely. Kifaru, commonly and mistakenly believed to be related to the elephant (if elephants could sue, they should sue for slander), behaves very like his real-life relative—the dim-witted, dim-sighted and hysterically skittish horse. . . .

“What the rhino really needs is a good psychoanalyst.” I had long maintained to friends in Africa. “Somewhere, behind the bluff and bluster, the frustrations and neuroses, there's a good-natured animal who would like to make friends.”

No one would believe it. Brainwashed by the hunters' propaganda, they looked upon Kifaru as a hardened criminal rather than a scatterbrained delinquent. Hoping to refute that point of view, late in 1959, I purchased a recently captured, full-grown black rhino from the Uganda Public Works Department, christened him Pierrot, turned him loose in a 250- by 200-foot kraal at my Mugwata game park, and walked into the kraal, determined to tame and train him.

Pierrot heard the gate close behind me, and stared nervously in my direction from his position some 150 feet away. He worried about the problem for several minutes before deciding on the traditional rhino answer—charge. Then he trotted toward me, accelerating, his head held horizontally. In that position his already poor vision was blocked by his front horn, so, as he launched himself into a



This 1515 woodcut by Albrecht Dürer depicting the Indian rhino of King Emanuel I of Portugal served as the model for many illustrations of the species until the end of the 18th century.

ious gallop, he cocked his head to the side, straining to see with a single eye. When he reached a point about thirty feet away, where he could vaguely distinguish my shape, he adjusted his angle, lowered his horn and thundered toward me—a blind juggernaut committed to a fixed direction.

I had about a second to answer or ignore him. If his aim

appeared to be dangerously accurate, I could make a quick sideways jump like a rodeo clown; if not, I could stand my ground and watch his dust.

On this, his first try, Pierror's aim looked a little too good. I jumped. He shot past, snorting, with his tasseled tail held high in the air. Decelerating to a stop more than thirty feet beyond, he turned around and peered anx-



iously, trotting back and forth while he tried to find the target. . . .

This time I didn't have to move. Pierrot misjudged his angle badly, missing by a wide margin. His third attempt was even worse, and after five or six failures he stopped charging. Confused and obviously upset, he snorted, growled, shook his head and pawed at the ground. I let him sulk for ten minutes before I clued him to the target, jumping up and down and hooting like a baboon.

Pierrot raised his head, started to trot in my direction, spotted a small cassia tree at a ninety-degree angle, veered, galloped toward it under full steam, veered again, and wound up 150 feet to my left. He spent the next ten minutes trotting back and forth, head cocked, trying to find me. He was concentrating very hard, but he wasted his energy on two more small trees and a big clump of thorn bush. Then, when he finally spotted me, he charged, missed, charged again, and, of course, missed by an even wider margin.

Disgusted by the whole series of fiascos, a ton and a half of unhappy horned fury sat down on his haunches, grunting. As he did, I charged the rhino, yelling like a Masai. Appalled, he scrambled to his feet and stood, staring, until I got to within twenty feet of him. Then he fled in terror to the far end of the kraal. "The greatest bluffer in all Africa," as Carl Akeley once called him, had been shamelessly outbluffed.

We repeated those absurd maneuvers for the next four days, but I never charged the rhino again. Instead, I simply dodged or stood my ground as Pierrot continued to charge . . . and to miss . . . and to try again. If he became familiar with my appearance, I reasoned, he would be eager to satisfy his curiosity as soon as he decided that I wasn't going to hurt him.

The first signs of understanding came toward the end of the fourth day when I moved to a point within ten feet of the rhino's head and he neither charged nor retreated but watched quietly. After a moment, he started to worry again and backed off. Trying to reassure him, I made a noisy little retreat. That brought him back but he didn't charge: I was well within his field of clear vision and I was

becoming a familiar if a somewhat baffling sight. Encouraged, I took a step toward the rhino. He took a step backward. So I took a step to the rear, and he moved forward one step.

We danced that little waltz, with minor variations, for a full month. It was dull work, especially so when compared to the quick, spectacular results that can be obtained with more intelligent animals. Working with my full-grown lion, Simba, in the backyard arena of my place at Kisenyi, I had tamed him in a couple of days and trained him, in *less* than a month, to sit, stand, lie down, roll over, mount a series of pedestals, and leap through a hoop of fire. Now, working with Pierrot, the pair of us simply stepped forward, backward, forward, and backward again. Friends and family had predicted my atrocious death beneath the rhino's hoofs, but the way things looked, I was more apt to die of boredom—either that or fallen arches.

The big breakthrough came, one day, as I was standing a couple of feet away from Pierrot's head. He suddenly turned his two-foot horn toward me, then rubbed his leathery cheek along my arm. I returned the gesture with a hearty slap on the neck, figuring that a rhino would, like an elephant, prefer a firm caress to an irritating little tickle. He nudged me in the ribs with his horn, rubbing it along my body. I took a dozen steps away from him, curious to see his reaction. He came toward me with an accelerating trot. I was in the direct line of charge but I stood my ground as the rhino advanced. He came to a halt with his horn less than two feet from my chest, then cocked his head and ogled me. . . .

Within a week, the horned fury and I were playing ball. We used a three-foot sphere of cattle hide stuffed with straw. I bowled it to Pierrot with my hand and he bowled it back with his horn. John Grindle's cricket-playing elephants would have laughed us off the field, but the rhino found it thrilling sport, smacking the ball enthusiastically but with very poor aim. His physical handicaps made it difficult to teach him more sophisticated games: he was too nearsighted, unable to jump or even to scramble over any kind of barrier, and he lacked grasping equipment comparable to an elephant's adroit trunk.