

MAN AND BEAST IN AFRICA

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clear view of the bait and giving him comfortable room to use his gun. Hides of this kind occasionally led to tremendous slaughter. J. A. Hunter records in his fascinating book the story of a young Scotswoman, a beginner at the game, who killed eight lions single-handed during one night's ambush.

CHAPTER IX

The Rhinoceros

SQUAT, horned, creaking at the many joints of its thick armour, turning awkwardly and with difficulty, snorting through its great nostrils, and staring fixedly with its small myopic eyes, the rhinoceros was obviously not created to please the eye of the beholder. To make matters worse, its ugly form is matched by a suspicious, uncontrollable temper which produces sudden outbursts of violence that induce the lumbering brute to charge indiscriminately a termite heap or a column of porters, scattering their burdens all over the place. Nor are cars immune from its belligerence, or even railway engines. In short, the rhinoceros has thoroughly earned its reputation as an ugly, stupid and extremely evil-tempered beast.

Usually, it stays in its own haunts, seldom wandering outside a comparatively restricted area. It is never met with in large numbers, three including mother and calf being the usual limit. Often the mother will keep her calf with her until it is almost adult and quite as big as she is. The rhino leads a regular life and its daily habits are monotonously repeated again and again. The paths stamped out by its ponderous feet are faithfully followed day after day, and if by mischance a hunting party pitches a camp on one, everything movable will probably be turned upside down during the night and scattered to the winds by the irruption of this lumbering creature of habit. I know this from experience, for it once happened to me in Tanganyika. Since then I have always chosen the sites of my camps with especial care.

In spite of the rhino's vicious reputation, I am of the opinion that its aggressiveness and constant ill-temper are more impressive than dangerous. I prefer to describe it as a very disagreeable animal, although its lumbering articulated movements, its double horns, one behind the other, and tapering

dangerously, make it an undeniably disquieting sight. But when experience has taught one to allow for its bellicose temper and to realize that it is incapable of swift movement and is as short-sighted as a bureaucrat, the element of danger seems less acute.

Like the other big animals, the rhino does not charge at every contact with man, though it is the beast most frequently likely to react violently and without provocation.

In Kenya and Tanganyika, there are semi-wooded bush regions on the verge of mountain forests which are the haunt of large numbers of rhinoceros, where it is relatively easy to observe their habits and where I have spent many hours watching and photographing this stupid but not altogether unlikeable beast. I found that its belligerency, its utter lack of cunning and its general awkwardness offset to some extent its ugliness and its manifest stupidity and made me regard it with a tolerance I hadn't suspected.

Apart from the tick birds, the rhinoceros is intolerant of all forms of animal life near it; knowing this from long experience, the majority of other animals take care to get out of its way when it comes anywhere near. At night it emerges from the thickets and goes to feed in the plains, making repeated journeys to and from the water, where it makes its toilet, wallowing in the thick mud to relieve itself of the parasites which infest the joints of its armour. It is most frequently met with in the early morning or late evening. During the heat of the day it retires to the bush or forest, where about noon it sleeps in the shade with its legs tucked under its huge body, its head resting on the ground or on its knees, and its hair-fringed ears twitching the flies away from its little eyes. At the slightest alarm it will clamber heavily to its feet, sniff the air, and turn about as though cast in one piece, its little eyes glinting with suspicion. Then with a warning grunt it will hurl itself in whichever direction it imagines its adversary to be—which may be any direction but the right one. But occasionally it will not make off at once but will stand, planted firmly before the enemy it can see, or thinks it can see, striving to intimidate him. With one foot it will paw the ground, lower its head like a bull about to charge, its nostrils raising little clouds of dust from the earth at every snort. It may even advance a few tentative steps in the

direction of its foe. Suddenly it makes up its mind and, as though loosed by a spring, will charge headlong at what it supposes is an enemy—be it man, beast, termite heap or trunk of a tree—or will turn and go off in another direction at a lumbering trot, the joints of its armour creaking and grating as it thrusts aside bushes and finally disappears in a cloud of dust.

I find the rhino the most fascinating big-game animal of all—not so much to hunt as to approach and bait. Its brutal strength, its robot-like articulation, its blunt snout with its two tapering horns, combine to make it the bull of the African arena. Its charge, guided by sense of smell or hearing, is most impressive, and it is great sport to allow it to thunder past you while you stand still, or step to one side if necessary. Once past you, it will stop in its tracks and cast round in bewilderment at having lost its objective. Then, sniffing the air and pawing the ground, it will finally go off altogether.

Four or five years ago when I was on my way from Nairobi to Voi in Kenya I was invited by Ritchie, the Chief Game Warden of Kenya, to visit the reserve to the south of the River Tsavo. A car was waiting for me at Nairobi, and on the way the chauffeur gave me details of the fauna of the neighbourhood. For some considerable distance the road skirted the edge of the reserve, and it was remarkable to note with what accuracy the wild animals knew and respected the limits of their sanctuary. Gnus, zebras, hartebeest, giraffes, ostriches, and Grants and Tommies were there in great numbers.

As we drove along I spotted the sombre massive outline of a rhino under a mimosa tree at some little distance from the road. I stopped the driver on some pretext or other. Taking my camera, I got out of the car and made my way towards the great beast. But in my haste to get a picture I had taken no account of the wind, which was blowing from behind me, so that by the time I came up to the beast it was already alert and standing in readiness. It was then that I first noticed that the big animal was a female, with a baby accompanying it, a calf about the size of a big pig. I took cover behind a termite heap and tried to find a good angle from which to take my photographs. But the mother rhino was irate at being disturbed and quickly made up her mind to charge. She thundered towards me, followed by her calf. They passed the

termite heap on one side as I skipped round to the other, and the process was quickly repeated in a comic game of hide-and-seek. Running from one termite heap to the other I did my best to shake off the persistent brute, but each time she caught up with me and on one occasion, in my efforts to avoid her, I came face to face with her calf. Nevertheless, I took pictures at intervals which incidentally turned out badly. Then, seizing my chance, I made for the road, only to see the car disappearing into the distance. I was thus forced to continue my dodging until mother rhino grew tired of not finding me impaled on the end of her horn. She stopped, snorted in disgust, wheeled half round and made off; her baby, which seemed to have enjoyed the game tremendously, trotting along obediently behind. I caught up with the car which had stopped to wait for me at a safe distance, and was forced to listen to the indignant reproaches of the driver.

The female rhinoceros, like certain kinds of antelope and some buffalo, has bigger horns than the male. The foremost is less thick at the base than that of the male but is longer, sometimes attaining a considerable length. Some of the horns obtained by the early hunters forty or fifty years ago measured between four and five feet in length. Today it is possible to obtain horns measuring a little over two feet and occasionally more. The second horn, situated behind the first, is shorter and usually less rounded at the base, being ellipsoid in section like a blade.

The rhinoceros, like other really big game, is hunted by tracking or on encounter. Its tracks in the soil, easily recognizable on account of the over-developed middle toe, are easy to follow. It is very susceptible to bullet wounds because it loses blood quickly. Its thick hide tends to flatten a bullet, which enlarges the resultant wound. If it is hit in the heart, a rhinoceros will go round and round in circles like a dying top until finally it crashes to the ground.

It is relatively easy to photograph, and in order to obtain really thrilling films men have been known to fire a small .22 calibre bullet in its face to enrage it.

CHAPTER X

The Buffalo

THE African buffalo is often spoken of as though it were a single type disseminated over the whole continent. This, however, is not so; in fact, there are very few species which can show so great a variety of quite dissimilar types.

First of these is the great black buffalo of the east, the *Syncerus caffer*. It is an enormous beast, entirely black in colour, its powerful horns having a maximum spread of between forty-five and sixty-four inches. Particularly heavy beasts can weigh up to a ton and a half, and sometimes more.

Then there is the red buffalo, which lives in the forests of the Congo Basin. This is the dwarf buffalo or *Syncerus nanus*. As its more popular name suggests, it is chestnut in colour. Its crescent-shaped horns have a spread of only twelve to sixteen inches. Good specimens have a maximum weight of 700 lb. It is sometimes thought that the dwarf buffalo is a forest animal, whilst the bigger black buffalo inhabits only the plains. But this is not strictly accurate in the case of the black buffalo, since comparatively recent geographical upheavals have noticeably modified the climate of the northern half of Africa. In prehistoric times there was dense and continuous forest right across North Western Africa up to the Sahara, even encroaching to some extent on what is now desert. When this forest land was suddenly transformed into desert and plain, the dwarf buffalo which lived there had to adapt themselves to the changed conditions. New feeding possibilities opened up and they grew larger. They increasingly made contact with the black buffalo of the east as they extended their habitat eastwards and the two types began to interbreed. According to an interesting theory developed by Christy and Malbrant, the process of mingling between the dwarf forest buffalo and the black buffalo of the plains produced a medium-sized buffalo found throughout North Africa, called *Syncerus caffer aequinoctialis*.