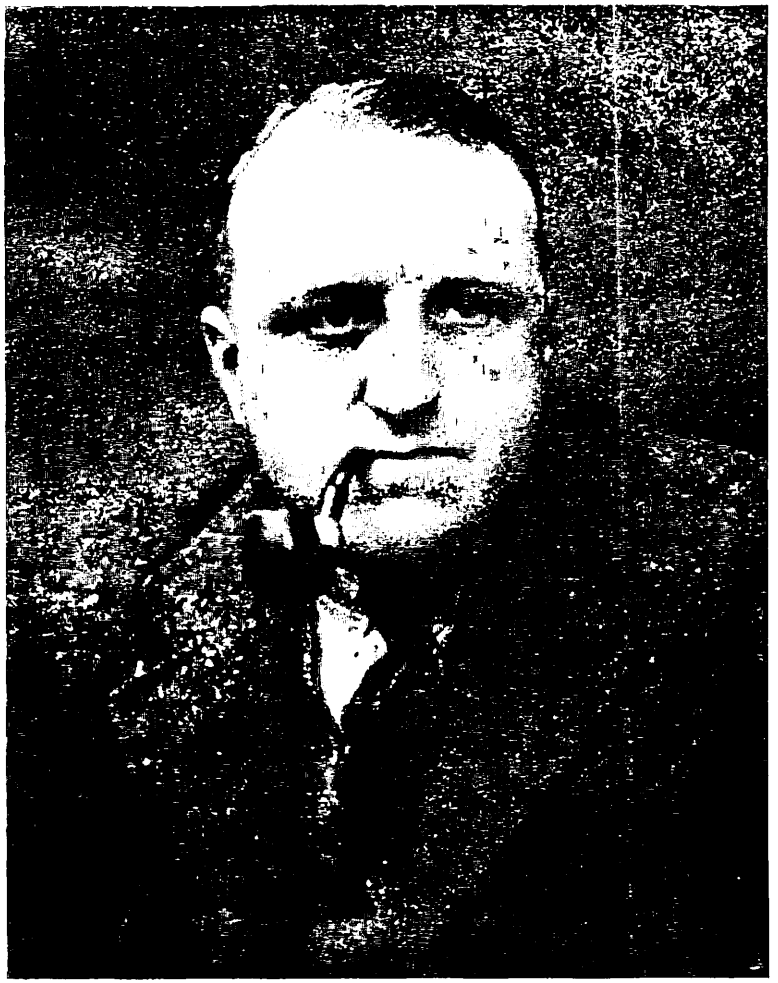

The Author

FROM HOBO TO HUNTER

The Autobiography of

C. T. STONEHAM

11 Half-tone Illustrations

JOHN LONG LIMITED

LONDON * MELBOURNE * SYDNEY * AUCKLAND
BOMBAY * JOHANNESBURG * NEW YORK * TORONTO

CHAPTER I

RHINO BEFORE BREAKFAST

BEFORE dawn I had taken my rifle and haversack out on to the veld and hidden them in the grass under a thorn bush. In my haversack was my water-bottle, some hard biscuits, and a hunk of cheese. I intended to be out all day and was prepared to miss my breakfast.

Reveille sounded. There were twenty of us in the tent; we awoke groaning, and the mess orderlies hurried off to get "gun-fire": tea tasting strongly of onions, having been brewed in kettles used for cooking stew the night before and not properly cleaned. We cleaned them with cold water and mud, which was not very satisfactory.

We fell in for roll-call. The sun had not yet risen, the light was grey and the air cold. As soon as we were dismissed I faded quietly away before the sergeant could detail me for guard duty or fatigue. There would be trouble when I was missed, but that was a small price to pay for a day's freedom. Having little liking for Army discipline, I was generally in some kind of trouble, anyway.

I wandered about on the edge of camp, gradually getting farther from the tents, until I reached the spot where my gear was hidden; then I seized it and scuttled down into a hollow, out of sight of the curious. As I hurried along a winding gully I was elated; wild Africa lay before me.

It was early April 1915. My battalion, the 25th Royal Fusiliers (Legion of Frontiersmen), had arrived in British East Africa a month before and been conveyed by train straight to Kajiado, fifty miles from Nairobi. This was an administrative post comprising a few bungalows, where officials lived, and a couple of

Indian-owned shops. It was a station on the line which ran down to the Magadi Soda Lake, where crude soda was mined; it had a large godown, a locomotive shed, and a large water-tank. Twenty miles away towards the border of German East Africa lay Bisel, and at Bisel the East African Mounted Rifles, recruited from settlers and local business-men, interposed a frail barrier between General Von Lettow's forces and the conquest of our colony. The Germans, in unknown strength, were at Longido, fifty miles beyond, and they kept up continual patrol activity, so that clashes between them and the Mounted Rifles were frequent.

Every few days we escorted a waggon convoy to Bisel to supply the troops there. It was a hot, dusty, wearisome march over vast treeless plains, and we hated it. This was the Southern Game Reserve and it teemed with wild animals, but though there was considerable danger of their molesting us we were not allowed to molest them: shooting, except at the enemy, was strictly forbidden. We did not see any enemy and we longed to shoot the game, not only for sport but because our stomachs were poorly catered for and venison would have supplied a pressing want.

After two years of adventuring in Canada I had joined this unit in hopes of seeing "antres vast and deserts idle". Here they were, all round me, but I was withheld from exploring them. I resolved to pleasure myself for at least a day and pay for it with whatever punishment was exacted.

The veld stretched in endless undulations to a distant line of low rambling hills, rugged and saw-edged against a sky of intense blue. Here on this plateau I was six thousand feet above sea-level and the air was intoxicating. But the sun, though lately risen, was burning hot, and in a few hours it would be trying to fry me like an egg. Over this unbroken carpet of knee-high grass, which seemed the very dome of the world, rushed a cool steady wind; it served to discourage the flies which are the biggest curse of the game country. The air was amazingly clear, the hills, at least twenty miles away, looked to be within an hour's walk.

Gazing over the high-veld you might think it almost flat,

every part in view, and all devoid of life. But in walking I descended long slopes into unsuspected valleys where meandered dry watercourses, or dongas, as they are called, filled with tangled bush and tumbled rocks, and there innumerable animals found harbourage. As I proceeded many herds of antelopes appeared, distributed far and wide over the grassy expanse: kongoni, gazelle and wildebeest were there in thousands and ostrich and zebra mingled with them. The grass-eaters are very neighbourly and mix freely. I knew that in the dongas would be lions, leopards, and other carnivores, hiding from the daylight.

Looking afar, I saw the immense white crown of Kilimanjaro hanging in the southern sky. It seemed floating far above the earth, for by some magical trick its base was obscured by vapour which appeared empty of substance as the surrounding sky. So the snowy dome perched up there without visible support, a veritable heaven where the gods might live, as is the Masai belief. It looked about five miles away instead of five days' march.

The blue sky arched above, the wind blew free, and, so far as I could tell, there was no other human being anywhere near. The endless plain of grass waved gently, the game wandered at careless ease, or lay basking in the sun. Here I was in the home of elephants and lions—the Sportsman's Paradise! I had never thought to experience it. But it was here around me—I was part of it. The fact was difficult to realize.

A year before I had crouched over an inadequate radiator one night in a hired room in University Street, Montreal, reading a book obtained from the public library. I forget the name of that book, but it described the adventures of two amateur sportsmen on a safari through the little-known land called British East Africa. It contained photographs, mostly of dead animals, with their slayers standing or seated on them, and funny-looking black men in the background. The author had told how from the window of a carriage on the Uganda Railway (so named because it ran from Mombasa to Port Florence on the borders of Uganda) one might view big herds of game grazing peacefully, indifferent

to the passing train. Thus he had seen giraffes, lions and rhinoceroses. The wild animals were so numerous that one could see thousands in the radius of a mile.

Allowing for the exaggeration proper to the chronicles of an Odysseus, the inferences were astonishing. It appeared there was a part of the earth where conditions resembled those of prehistory and man played second fiddle to the beasts. I longed to visit that land and witness those marvels. I wanted to be a big-game hunter, though at thought of facing elephants and lions with only a rifle for protection I quailed in spirit. However, there was little prospect of such a challenge to my fortitude. Outside the snow lay deep and the temperature was well below zero; I was in the land of cold, discomfort and hard work, and I had better turn my thoughts to more practical matters, such as how to earn the dollars to buy food and pay my rent.

But little more than twelve months later I was standing on the African veld, rifle in hand, proposing to hunt big-game all by myself.

The war had made it possible. There was a German colony in East Africa well equipped with troops and arms, inimical to British possessions. I had joined a battalion on the point of leaving for the front, and by sheer chance it had been sent to this country.

I was prepared to acknowledge that the author of that book had not lied; from where I stood I could see thousands of wild animals, possessing the land as their progenitors did before the Flood. I told myself that the quirks of Fortune make all things possible, and I might yet become a Chinese bandit, or a male ballet dancer. The most exhilarating thing about life is its unpredictableness, and the modern slogans of "Security" and "Safety First" are stultifying.

I had hopes of coming upon a stream, or water-hole, for in my ignorance I supposed that animals must drink as often as men. Actually there was no water for ten miles in any direction, other than was pumped out of the ground to meet the railway's requirements. Some of the animals I saw, such as gazelles, do not

drink at all, others would cheerfully forgo drinking for days in succession. The zebra would think a trek of ten miles every third day to get a drink a concomitant of existence and no disadvantage. Food and safety were the chief preoccupations; near water the killers were active, and one was better off on the wide dry plains where living was easy and the hunters had difficulty in approaching unseen.

I had covered about five miles when I reached a big donga in the bottom of a broad shallow valley. This river-bed, a rushing torrent in the rainy seasons, was now quite dry, its bed a deep trough of white sand, sparkling with quartz fragments and mica as if strewn with jewels. Protruding from the banks was a twirling mass of tree-roots, and tree-trunks lay about where the current had stranded them. On either side of the donga a quarter-mile strip of bush was penetrated by innumerable small game trails. There were groves of shady fever-thorns, eighty feet tall, with big jutting branches, all clothed in the brilliant velvety green bark which makes them so picturesque. Green parrots, crimson lories, golden orioles were active in these roosts and when they flew through the sunlight from perch to perch their colours were beautiful. Back from the lines of trees were clumps of numnum bush, dense and impenetrable to everything but the pachyderms; they were interspersed with solitary candelabra cactus trees. Everything was dry as tinder and only under the fever-thorns by the bank was there a vestige of shade. It was very hot down there; I had lost the breeze and flies crawled over my sweating skin with maddening persistence.

I came on a troop of baboons. They were aware of me, but not much perturbed, they gambolled along the sandy river-bed, turning over stones to find grubs, and climbed the big-rooted trees to gibber at me from coigns of safety. For the first time I heard them barking like big dogs. They were bad-tempered, continually chasing each other with snarl and blow. The old males seemed very savage and the youngsters must have had a difficult time trying to snatch a living under the eyes of those tyrants.

Among gregarious creatures only men and baboons seem to wage continual war on each other. A mother baboon, if her infant was threatened, would pick it up, tuck it under her arm, and scamper away. The youngest whelps, no bigger than a pint pot, rode on their mothers' backs like jockeys in the ring. If they saw anything worth investigation they would jump down to examine it and then run after their transport to seize a quick hold and swing aboard. I was reminded of men catching a moving bus. Occasionally a female, busy with her foraging, would grab a pup impatiently and haul it into a more comfortable position.

I went back from the donga into the clustering bush and made my way along the trails, watching the ground for spoor. I walked slowly, circling the clumps in constant expectation of a surprise, moving as silently and cautiously as I knew how.

In the dust I noticed big round, three-toed prints and knew them to be the tracks of a rhino. I had seen rhino in the distance but had never been close to one. It seemed suddenly that this was the beast's own private preserve and I had no right there. Certainly he knew more about it than I did: the hot silent cover in a moment became inimical and I realized that my proper place was in the open, far from the haunts of fierce prehistoric beasts. But I was ashamed to turn back. At this hour, I had heard, rhinos slept soundly; it should be safe to trespass in his domain taking particular care not to wake him. I went on, very circumspectly.

Presently under the overhang of some bushes I saw a long trough, half-filled with dung. One might have thought half a dozen horses had been stabled there. It was the first thing of its kind I had ever noticed, but later I was to become familiar with such depressions and learn something of the beasts that made them. The rhino retires from the heat of the day to some shady spot and scoops out a shallow hole in the dust in which to lie. He sleeps with one eye open and pays attention to the warnings of the green tick-birds, busily divesting him of parasites. These birds, the size of English starlings, dig the ticks out of his hide,

running into his ears and under his tail as if he were a hunk of inanimate rubber. They often draw blood with their pecking, but the rhino does not seem to mind—when they go into his ears he holds his head on one side and looks patient and long-suffering until they have finished the job. What the rhino would do about ticks if there were no tick-birds I cannot imagine; the parasites gather on him in thick clumps and must itch intolerably.

Having risen from his rest, the rhino tramps and scatters his dung. Sometimes he will go off to the nearest water for a drink, only to remember a duty unfulfilled and return to kick things around. No one knows why he does it. The Swahili say that when the animals were given their skins each was issued with a needle for making necessary alterations. The rhino accidentally swallowed his needle and ever since he has been looking for it in his droppings to adjust that badly fitting hide of his.

At that time I knew nothing of this habit, or I might have observed that the dung here was comparatively undisturbed and Kifaru evidently not far away from his sleeping place.

I walked round a bush-clump and came face to face with him. He was coming across a little clearing twenty yards away, and must have seen a movement, for both of us stopped to stare.

I was petrified. Most hunters encounter their first rhino in the company of other men, black or white, who tell him what to do and lend moral support by their mere presence; I met my first rhino alone, armed with a ·303 Service rifle, equipped only with the knowledge gained from reading the accounts of seasoned hunters, who, despite valour and experience, had often escaped but narrowly with their lives.

As rhinos go this was not a very big beast, but he seemed to me colossal. He was short and stout—as wide and chunky as a luggage truck, heavily loaded. His head was up, his little ears erect, his snout pointed straight at me. Apparently he was staring at me, but probably he could distinguish nothing in a blur of grass and bushes, for rhinos are short-sighted and seldom discern a man until he moves. In this sheltered spot there was

no stirring of the air, my scent could not have reached him. But he was suspicious; some sixth sense informed him of an enemy.

My heart was bumping in my throat. I was irrevocably opposed to this wilderness giant; it was "seconds out of the ring" and the gong would go at any moment. If I moved he would see me and charge and I thought it likely he would catch me no matter how I dodged. There was high grass and thick bush on either side and to start blundering about in that, pursued by something as powerful and weighty as a small fire-engine, would be fatal. I kept still as a pillar and tried to quieten my breathing, which sounded very loud. Perhaps he would feel reassured and go away.

He snorted loudly, a questioning kind of snort which nevertheless was full of menace. It seemed to me he was uncertain, wondering what he had come against, but in half a mind to charge it and show he was not to be trifled with.

Rhinoceroses are inquisitive but in most cases frightened of man. I ought to have shouted at this beast, and there is little doubt that then it would have departed in haste. But I stood still and quiet and he could not make me out. Therefore he walked slowly forward to see what it was that occasioned his disquiet and obstructed his intentions. I realized that this was a showdown: it was he or I.

It seemed sensible to shoot him while he presented such an easy target. If he started a rush I should probably miss him; I was in a state of shakes and had no confidence.

He was advancing warily, little perturbed, but directly raised the rifle he stopped. Then he gave a terrific snort, lifted his head, and put up his tail, stiff as a ramrod. He looked extremely warlike.

I fired at the base of his throat but the foresight was not very steady and even as I pressed the trigger I knew it a poor shot. To my surprise and relief he jumped round with incredible agility and went tearing off towards the donga, blowing loudly, throwing up clouds of dust. I thought I had missed and that the report of the rifle had frightened him.

My impulse was to hurry away from that place and I actually took several rearward steps before shame halted me. At that range I could not have missed; the beast must be hit, he had run away, and every consideration of sportsmanship demanded that I follow and finish what I had begun.

But I was in no hurry; I selected an ant-hill in the middle of an open spot, sat down, and lit a cigarette.

I had been conscious that when I had fired there had been a minor commotion—birds flying out of the bushes, the unseen baboons scampering off barking. Now there was complete silence, except for the hum of insects, a sound which is a mere background to quiet. The sun blazed down into the clearing, flies tormented me, there was no sign of life. What had just happened seemed like a dream; I could hardly believe that a moment ago that monster had confronted me and I had been within an ace of losing my life.

The question was, had he lost his? Was he running, little hurt, into the recesses of the bush, did he stand in cover nursing a grievance, or was he stealing on me from behind, intent on revenge?

At the last thought I began to swivel round, scrutinizing the bushes with anxious care. In a few minutes I was reassured, everything looked much as it had done, there could be no danger in such quiet, prosaic surroundings. But for the blazing sun, this resembled an English common grown with brambles and hazel copses. Having finished my cigarette in leisure, I got up and went slowly along the spoor to see what had happened to my antagonist. I had seen which way he galloped and his round prints were plain in the dust.

The trail led by a winding course among the thickets to the edge of the donga. Under shady fever-thorns a little path dipped down the steep bank to the sand. All was shadow, chequered by dazzling patches where sunlight broke through. I approached the bank a step at a time, my heart beating fast, ears and eyes at strain.

Along the donga against the farther bank the rhino lay

motionless, legs tucked under, broad grey back towards me. I stood leaning against a tree watching it. In five minutes it did not move. Then I went forward, very attentively, rifle at the ready. When within a few yards I stopped and threw a stone at it.

Kifaru was dead. As far as I could see the bullet had struck him between neck and shoulder, probably penetrating one of the big vessels at the top of the heart; he had run down here and collapsed, dead as he hit the ground. He was a young beast, with a short stumpy horn.

Well, here was my first worth-while trophy, and I could make no use of it. Were it to become known that I had stolen out of camp and shot a rhino I should be court-martialled. I could do nothing but leave the kill and strike back to camp, filled with elation at my adventure but regretful that I had killed that animal on its lawful occasions. Even then I regarded the wilderness as belonging to the brutes, and man an interloper.

As I trudged over the veld under the shrivelling midday sun I was jubilant. All right, I was now a big-game hunter! I had shot a rhino all by myself, without benefit of professional guide to counsel and protect me, nor even a black boy to distract the animal's attention by shouting and climbing a tree.

When I reached camp I found that my absence had passed altogether unnoticed; and when I told my intimates I had shot a rhino they jeered their unbelief. I did not mind. I was filled with quiet satisfaction. I knew then that one day I should become a hunter and roam at large over this fascinating land.

CHAPTER II

A BIRCH-BARK CANOE

THERE was a Government employment bureau at the Toronto Railroad Depot, where I asked for a job. That was in the fall of 1912. I had landed from England at Montreal a month before and had been amusing myself in the maritime city until funds dwindled. I was just seventeen and now seemed fairly launched on the career of adventure which I had planned for myself.

My father having died, I had found it simple to leave school on my own authority and persuade my mother that I was now ripe to emigrate and carve out a place for myself in Canada, the land of opportunity for boys like me, who had learnt little except to box and play football. For in my day at a Public School, to work was the act of a cad and a sneak; scholastic attainments were admirable only if they came like manna from heaven. Either you were born clever or you weren't; to try to be clever was disgraceful. The biggest dunce in a form was often admired for his thick head—if he were an athlete he was an object of envy.

My real purpose in going to Canada was to emulate the exploits of Jack London and similar romantic writers, who had lived rough and made good with nothing to help them but courage and hardihood. It did not occur to me that they might have unusual aptitudes and I had no doubt that I was made of the same stuff as these heroes and would be equally successful. In all my reading luck had always stepped in to preserve the hero from serious harm and eventually provide him with a fortune and a rich man's daughter. I had immeasurable scorn for the slow and steady chaps; my pattern was Smoke Bellew, or Dangerous Dan scooping gold out of the ground and squandering it with laughing abandon among a host of good fellows, true