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Eric Rundgren

DENNIS HOLMAN

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Inside Safari Hunting  
with Eric Rundgren

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armed escort, and trees on the path from the car park to the famous water hole are fitted with ladders.

From personal observation, I do not believe the rhino really means to be nasty. It is descended from the hornless, though tusked, *Baluchitherium* of Central Asia, which in the late Oligocene period reached a height of over 17 feet at the shoulder, and an overall length of 25 feet, the largest land mammal known to have existed. The rhino still seems to live in that prehistoric world, half-blind, and with little defence against its enemies, save its great bulk. Its best early warning system is provided by tick birds which feed on its parasites, even those inside its ears. Their sudden flying up with a noisy chattering puts Colonel Blimp into a proper tizzy, and he is off with a snort in another blustering charge, usually up-wind.

The bush-men of Africa know exactly how to handle him. Rundgren remembers standing barely a few feet from a rhino in dense *sansevieria* bush with Garise Boje, the great Liangulu hunter, who had agreed to guide him on a safari in south-eastern Kenya. Rundgren was ready to run when Garise stopped him with a touch of his hand. Then, picking up a lump of earth, he threw it on the rhino's nose, and the animal swung off with a snort in the opposite direction.

The rhino was one animal Rundgren was seldom required to shoot as a control officer, and emergencies when no other course was possible were few and far between. The average bush African is galvanised into instant flight by the warning snorts, and men like Matera and Laiguni were incredibly fast in their get-away. Time and again Rundgren saw one or both escape by a hair's breadth from a snorting blockbuster just behind by a last-moment leap for an overhanging branch.

Rundgren's own agility was not far behind theirs, though he admits he was once caught napping. It was on a farm where the owner, an elderly woman, was having trouble with a sheep-killing lion. When Rundgren arrived with his dogs, she strode out of the house in a large floppy hat, a red shirt, a skirt to her ankles supported by a wide belt with a huge brass buckle and riding boots.

'Young man,' she said, 'you are here to kill just one thing—that damned sheep-killer. But if you dare touch my pet rhinos I'll have your hide.'

'You have pet rhinos?' Rundgren said.

'Yes, I have two pet rhinos. Not that they feed out of my hand. But they live here and they harm nobody. Just you leave them alone.'

'Don't worry, Madam. I want nothing to do with your pet rhinos.'

Rundgren set off looking for lion tracks, followed by his pack which included four of his first generation of young potlickers. The country was fairly open but cut with dongas full of the sort of bush in which lion lie up. It looked a pretty straightforward job. The dogs were on leads, and when, after a while, no tracks were forthcoming Rundgren ordered the pack to be released in the hope that they might chase something out of the bush. Presently they started to give tongue, but it turned out to be one of the woman's rhinos.

Rundgren went as near to it as he dared, then climbed up a tree, called the dogs off and pelted it with sticks till it trotted away.

The party then found some lion tracks which disappeared for some reason, so Rundgren told the men to continue in the same direction with the body of the pack, while he took the potlickers in another direction. He covered perhaps two miles with these young dogs which were loose. The place was scattered with thicket. He was walking with his eyes searching for tracks when suddenly he noticed that the potlickers had stopped with their hackles up, staring at a clump of undergrowth. Thinking it was a lion, he went up to the bush, rounded it and suddenly found himself face to face with a rhino.

As he recalled: 'I was so close I could have touched its nose. It was half asleep, however, but before I could back away up went its head. It saw me at a range of no feet, snorted and gave a lunge which I avoided by throwing myself to one side. The pet charged on, and I thought I was out of trouble. But just as I was about to get up I heard barking, and the next thing my head exploded in stars as I was violently rammed back on the ground. The second pet rhino had run over me followed by the potlickers. It was like being steam-rollered. Dazed, I picked myself up to find my rifle gone, then saw it caught by the sling on the rhino's horn. We recovered it some distance away with the sling broken.'

Of the five surviving behemoths two are found in Africa—the so-called black rhinoceros whose skin is actually a light brownish-

grey, though it normally takes on various shades according to the mud in which it has wallowed; and the white rhinoceros which is a smoky-grey, but I believe appears white in moonlight in the savannah country of the southern Sudan and the contiguous territories of the Congo, Uganda and French Equatorial Africa, where the species is to be found in fair numbers.

The white rhinoceros is the largest of all the rhinos—6 feet at the shoulder, around 4 tons in weight and with an average front horn of 2 feet; the longest horn recorded was 5 feet. The animal is a grazer, possessing a square-shaped mouth adapted for cropping grass, with a long head which it habitually carries very low, the horns sometimes parallel with the ground. It is mild-tempered and slow compared with its aggressive and blustering cousin. The white rhino is classed as a rarity and is generally protected. The species was saved from extinction in South Africa through the efforts of F. Vaughan Kirby, and they have been bred back to a population of, I am told, several hundred. Five were donated by the South African Government to Kenya two years ago. I was staying with Billy Woodley, Warden of the Mountain National Parks, at Mweiga which is near Treetops Hotel, when the white rhinos arrived. They were penned for several weeks in the Aberdares, before being moved to Meru National Park under the protection of its warden, Ted Goss.

The black rhino, which is a browser with a prehensile upper lip for grasping twigs and leaves and drawing them into its mouth, is more common. It is widely distributed in central and East Africa, and in fair numbers in Kenya. It is roughly two-thirds of the weight of the white rhino, stands 5 feet at the shoulder and carries an average front horn of about one foot; the record is a female's horn of 4 feet 5½ inches, but was not well shaped since it tapered off to a thin tip with a tassel of loose hair at the end.

The rhino's horns, which continue to grow throughout the animal's life, are in fact a mass of compressed hair, outgrowths of the nose skin and not connected to the skull by means of a bony core as one might expect. The current value on the Mombasa market is about £5 per pound, but on the aphrodisiac markets of Arabia and the Orient, where in a polygamous society the demands on a man are apparently greater, the raw stuff fetches £10 and more per pound. Why it is thought to possess this property is hard to imagine, since the species itself is not prolific. All that

need be added on the subject is Ritchie's famous reply to a white hunter's client who wanted to know what should be done with his rhino horn to see whether the stuff worked as an aphrodisiac.

'Should I make a brew of some of it and drink it?' he asked.

'I don't really know,' replied Ritchie. 'Perhaps you might begin by using it as a splint.'

Rundgren has shot a few rhino on licence for the horn—'I was always broke in the Game Department.' His best was when he set out deliberately to get a record-class head. He had side-stepped charges from scores of magnificent rhinos when he was carrying out buffalo control on the lower slopes of Mount Kenya. So when he decided to start farming in his spare time, at Naro Moru on the west side of the mountain, he took to spending his Sunday afternoons looking for some of the really big rhinos he had previously seen. For some reason he did not see anything really worth while and, just before his rhino licence expired, he took an animal with a front horn of 32 inches.

He continued the search the following year, systematically examining the rhinos on the mountain, and seeing none that possessed the sort of trophy he was after. His rhino licence had barely a week to run when he went out with Mike Prittijohn whom he was training as a hunter. They climbed high up to the trickling head-waters of the Naro Moru river, and reached the level where the montane rain forest begins to give way to dense bamboo. In this zone the bamboo clumps are interspersed with trees and elderberry bushes. They were looking for a rhino which one of Rundgren's Dorobo friends had told him was in the locality, though after many a wild-goose chase Rundgren had little hope of anything better than the scores of fair-sized rhinos he had already seen. At last they came across the tracks of their quarry.

'We decided to follow these tracks,' he said. 'We hadn't gone very far, perhaps half a mile, when I suddenly spotted the rhino standing in a bush, a single bush in an opening surrounded by big forest trees, elderberry undergrowth and bamboo. It didn't look like anything special, but you couldn't really tell because the front half of the animal was inside the bush on which he was feeding, though I recall now that the tip of the horn was visible. Whether this was because his head was up or because the horn was long I couldn't say, but by that time, I might add, I was pretty

desperate. It was late. I did not think I would see another rhino, so I said to Mike: "Oh, to hell with this, I am going to take it." Well, you won't believe it, because to me it was a chance in a million, like winning a football pool or the Irish Sweep, because it turned out to be the second largest male black rhino ever recorded, with a front horn of 3 feet 9½ inches, very thick at the base and beautifully curved, and a back horn of 2 feet 3½ inches, going straight up like a dagger, and in fact the most perfectly-shaped head I have ever seen. I took off the head skin which I had mounted. I kept it for several years, but not long ago an American banker wanted it and I let it go for £1,500.'

I asked Rundgren if he had considered repeating the performance.

'You mean shooting another rhino in the record class?'

'Yes.'

'No, I will never shoot another wild animal for myself,' he said quietly. 'I am a white hunter now, which means I help other people to get trophies. I have always to be on hand with my gun, but I doubt if I fire more than a dozen rounds of ammunition in the year, and those usually at wounded animals.'

Obtaining a good rhino is not so much a matter of skill as of local information and luck. You cannot judge a rhino's horn from its tracks as you might an elephant's tusks by the size of its spoor and indications of its age from its droppings. Otherwise hunting the black rhinoceros offers comparatively few problems. The animal occupies a certain domain, which it regards as its own and will not leave. It lives on relatively few plant species, and when a few years ago the food supply ran out for a dense rhino population in 800 square miles of the Tsavo National Park, 282 died of starvation.

All the white hunter needs to do in order to obtain a rhino for his client is to send out his scouts to look for a suitable specimen. When the news they are waiting for arrives the party sets out for the domain. The denizen is seldom hard to find. If the wind is right the hunter may even bring the creature up to his client by imitating its mating call. This is a sort of wimpering *mmh, mmh*, which to me always sounds rather pathetic. It trots up snorting hopefully. . . .

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Enigma

Rundgren learnt to hunt elephant from one of the best-qualified teachers of the art—a Liangulu named Garise Boje. The Liangulu, before they were virtually destroyed in a Kenya National Parks campaign to put down poaching a few years ago, were a small tribe of hunters who had devoted themselves principally to one quarry, the elephant, and Garise Boje was one of their great aces. Rundgren first met him in 1946, which was ten years before Garise's capture and trial. As one would expect, it was a strange encounter for two men at that time presumably on opposite sides of the legal fence.

Rundgren was on an elephant control job near a place called Kazakini which is about forty miles from Malindi, the much-publicised tourist resort on the Kenya coast. Kazakini consists of a few scattered huts, chickens pecking in rubbish heaps, desultory scratch cultivation, and a pattern of naked or half-naked Giriama life which has adapted itself to the perpetual hot-house atmosphere of the place. For years the village folk had complained about elephants. Nothing effective had been done, and Ritchie had sent Rundgren to move the marauding herds right out of the area.

Rundgren asked the headman of Kazakini for a guide. 'I want a good man who knows your country well, and can take us to the elephants,' he said. The dense sansevieria bush was a maze of trails. You had to be born in the place before you could hope to navigate through it.

'There is, of course, Garise Boje,' the headman said.

'Who is Garise Boje?' Rundgren asked.

'Garise Boje!' The man could hardly credit that Rundgren had not heard the name. He said Garise Boje was not just an elephant hunter. Garise was the greatest of them all.