

THE RAMBUNCTIOUS RHINO

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE

ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR

THE rhinoceros is, with the giraffe, the hippopotamus, the gerenuk, and the camel, one of Africa's unbelievable animals. Nobody has bettered Kipling's description of him in the *Just-so Stories*,—"a horn on his nose, piggy eyes and few manners." He lives a self-centered life, wrapped up in the porcine contentment that broods within nor looks abroad over the land. When anything external to himself and his food and drink penetrates to his intelligence he makes a flurried fool of himself, rushing madly and frantically here and there in an hysterical effort either to destroy or get away from the cause of disturbance. He is the incarnation of a living and perpetual Grouch.

Generally he lives by himself, sometimes with his spouse, more rarely still with a third that is probably a grown-up son or daughter. I, personally, have never seen more than three in company. Some observers have reported larger bands, or rather collections; but, lacking other evidence, I should be inclined to suspect that some circumstance of food or water rather than a sense of gregariousness had attracted a number of individuals to one locality.

The rhinoceros has three objects in life—to fill his stomach with food and water,—to stand absolutely motionless under a bush,—and to imitate ant hills when he lies down in the tall grass. When disturbed at any of these occupations he snorts. The snort sounds exactly as though the safety valve of a locomotive had suddenly opened and as suddenly shut again after two seconds of escaping steam. Then he puts his head down and rushes madly in some direction, generally up-wind. As he weighs about two tons, and can, in spite of his appearance, get over the ground nearly as fast as an ordinary horse, he is a truly imposing sight; especially since the innocent bystander generally happens to be up-wind, and hence in the general path of progress. This is because the rhino's scent is his keenest sense; and through it

he becomes aware, in the majority of times, of man's presence. His sight is very poor indeed; he cannot see clearly even a moving object much beyond fifty yards. He can, however, hear pretty well.

The novice, then, is subjected to what he calls a "vicious charge" on the part of the rhinoceros, merely because his scent was borne to the beast from up-wind, and the rhino naturally runs away up-wind. He opens fire; and has another thrilling adventure to relate. As a matter of fact, if he had approached from the other side, and then aroused the animal with a clod of earth, the beast would probably have "charged" away in identically the same direction. I am convinced from a fairly varied experience that this is the basis for most of the thrilling experiences with rhinoceroses.

But whatever the beast's first mental attitude, the danger is quite real. In the beginning he rushes up-wind in instinctive reaction against the strange scent. If he catches sight of the man at all, it must be after he has closed to pretty close range, for only at close range are the rhino's eyes effective. Then he is quite likely to finish what was at first a blind dash by a genuine charge. Whether this is from malice or from the panicky feeling that he is now too close to attempt to get away, I never was able to determine. It is probably in the majority of cases the latter. This seems indicated by the fact that the rhino, if avoided in his first rush, will generally charge right through and keep on going. Occasionally, however, he will whirl and come back to the attack. There can then be no doubt that he actually intends mischief.

The fact of the matter is that the rhinoceros is neither animated by the implacable man-destroying passion ascribed to him by the amateur hunter; nor is he so purposeless and haphazard in his rushes as some would have us believe. On being disturbed his instinct is to get away. He generally tries to get away in the direction of the disturbance, or up-wind, as the case may be. If he catches

sight of the cause of disturbance he is apt to try to trample and gore it—whatever it is. As his sight is short, he will sometimes so inflict punishment on unoffending bushes. In doing this he is probably not animated by a consuming destructive blind rage; but by a naturally pugnacious desire to eliminate sources of annoyance. Missing a definite object, he thunders right through and disappears without trying again to discover what has aroused him.

Owing to his size, his powerful armament, and his incredible quickness, the rhinoceros is a dangerous animal at all times; to be treated with respect and due caution. This is proved by the number of white men, out of a sparse population, that are annually tossed and killed by the brutes; and by the promptness with which the natives take to trees—thorn trees at that—when the cry of *faru!* is raised. As he comes rushing in your direction, head down and long weapon pointed, tail rigidly erect, ears up, the earth trembling with his tread and the air with his snorts you suddenly feel very small and ineffective.

If you keep cool, however, it is probable that the encounter will result only in a lot of mental perturbation for the rhino and a bit of excitement for yourself. If there is any cover you should duck down behind it and move rapidly but quietly to one side or another of the line of advance. If there is no cover, you should crouch low and hold still. The chances are he will pass to one side or the other of you, and go snorting away in the distance. Keep your eye on him very closely. If he swerves definitely in your direction, *and drops his head a little lower*, it would be just as well to open fire. Provided the beast was still far enough away to give me "sea room," I used to put a small bullet in the flesh of the outer part of the shoulder. The wound thus inflicted was not at all serious, but the shock of the bullet usually turned the beast to one side, and as usual, he went right on through. If, however, he seemed to mean business, or was too close for comfort, the point to aim for was the neck just above the lowered horn.

In my own experience I came to establish a "dead line" about twenty yards from myself. That seemed to be as near as I cared to let the brutes come. Up to that point I let them alone on the chance that they might swerve or change their minds: as they often did. But inside of twenty yards, whether the rhinoceros meant to charge me, or was merely running blindly by did not particularly

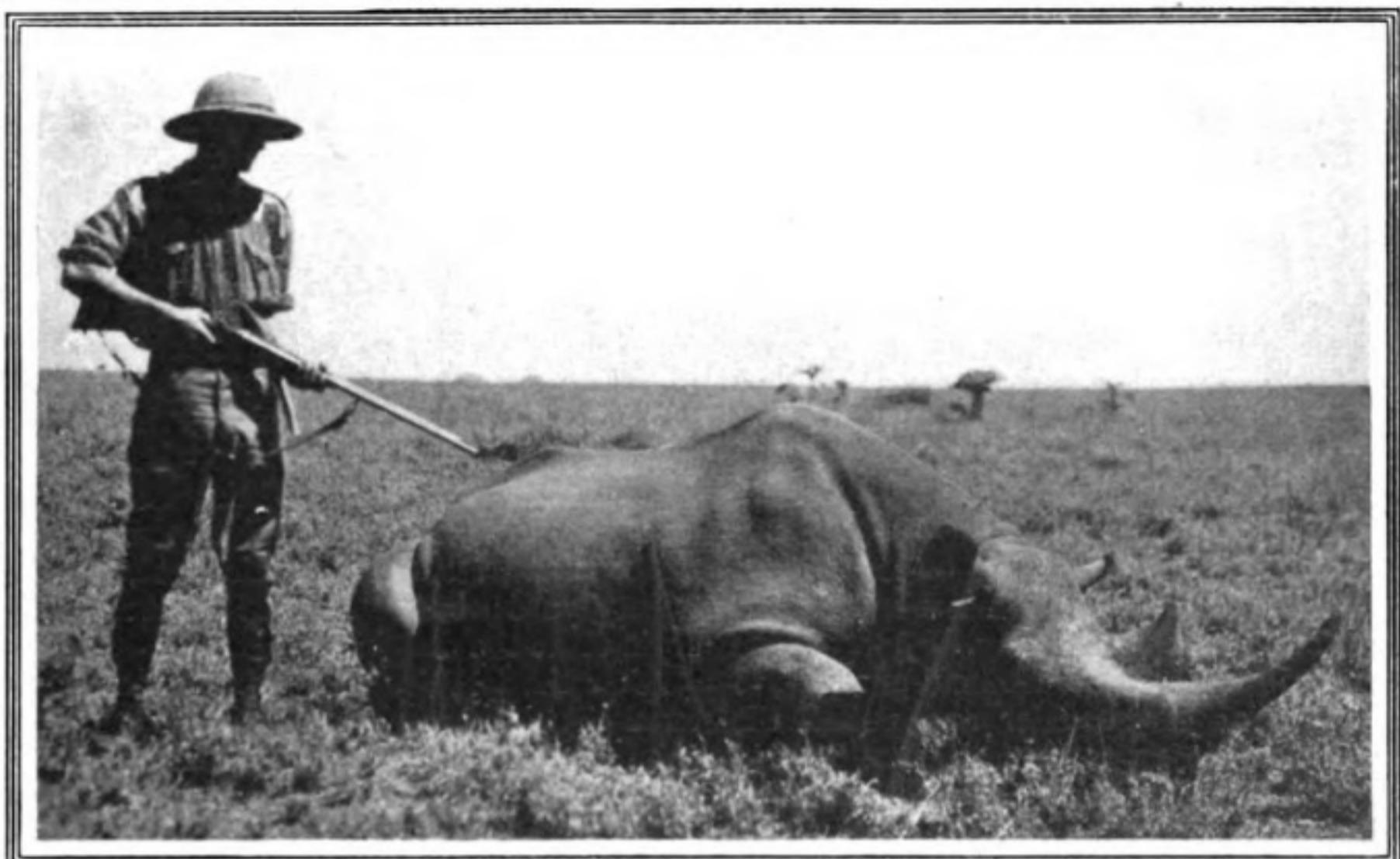
matter. Even in the latter case he might happen to catch sight of me and change his mind. Thus, looking over my note-book records, I find that I was "charged" forty-odd times; that is to say, the rhinoceros rushed in my general direction. Of this lot I can be sure of but three, and possibly four, that certainly meant mischief. Six more came so directly at us, and continued so to come, that in spite of ourselves we were compelled to kill them. The rest were successfully dodged.

As I have heard old hunters, of many times my experience, affirm that only in a few instances have they themselves been charged indubitably and with malice aforethought, it might be well to detail my reasons for believing myself definitely, and not blindly, attacked.

The first instance was when B— killed his second trophy rhinoceros. The beast's companion refused to leave the dead body for a long time; but finally withdrew. On our approaching, however, and after we had been some moments occupied with the trophy, it returned and charged us viciously. It was finally killed at fifteen yards.

The second instance was of a rhinoceros that got up from the grass sixty yards away, and came headlong in my direction. At the moment I was standing on the edge of a narrow eroded ravine, ten feet deep, with perpendicular sides. The rhinoceros came on bravely to the edge of this ravine:—and stopped. Then he gave an exhibition of unmitigated bad temper most amusing to contemplate—from my safe position. He snorted, and stamped, and pawed the earth, and ramped up and down at a great rate. I sat on the opposite bank and laughed at him. This did not please him a bit; but after many short rushes to the edge of the ravine, he gave it up and departed slowly, his tail very erect and rigid. From the persistency with which he tried to get at me, I cannot but think he intended something of the sort from the first.

The third instance was much more aggravating. In company with Memba Sasa and Fundi I left camp early one morning to get a waterbuck. Four or five hundred yards out, however, we came on fresh buffalo signs, not an hour old. To one who knew anything of the buffalo's habits this seemed like an excellent chance, for at this time of the morning they should be feeding not far away preparatory to seeking cover for the day. Therefore we immediately took up the trail.



Stewart Edward White and his first rhino

After hours of hard work in the hot sun, and many interruptions and misfortunes which I will not relate in this particular connection, we came at last upon one of the big bull buffaloes of the herd—asleep under an outlying bush at the very edge of the thicket.

Luck seemed with us at last. The wind was right, and between us and the bull lay only four hundred yards of knee-high grass. All we had to do was to get down on our hands and knees; and, without further precautions, crawl up within range and pot him. That meant only a bit of hard hot work.

When we were about half way, a rhinoceros suddenly arose from the grass between us and the buffalo, and about one hundred yards away.

What had aroused him, at that distance and up-wind, I do not know. It hardly seemed possible that he could have heard us, for we were moving very quietly; and, as I say, we were down-wind. However, there he was on his feet, sniffing now this way, now that, in search for what had alarmed him. We sank out of sight and lay low, fully expecting the brute would make off.

For just twenty-five minutes by the watch that rhinoceros looked and looked deliberately in all directions while we lay hidden, waiting for him to get over it. Sometimes he would start off quite confidently for fifty or sixty yards, so that we thought at last we were rid of him; but always he returned to the exact spot where we had first

seen him, there to stamp, and blow. The buffalo paid no attention to these manifestations. I suppose everybody in jungleland is accustomed to the rhinoceros' bad temper over nothing. Twice he came in our direction, but both times gave it up after advancing twenty-five yards or so. We lay flat on our faces, the vertical sun slowly roasting us, and cursed that rhino.

Now the significance of this incident is twofold: First, the fact that, instead of rushing off at the first intimation of our presence, as would the average rhino, he went methodically to work to find us; second, that he displayed such remarkable perseverance as to keep at it nearly a half hour. This was a spirit quite at variance with that finding its expression in the blind rush or in the sudden, passionate attack. From that point of view it seems to me that the interest and significance of the incident can hardly be overstated.

Four or five times we thought ourselves freed from the nuisance; but always, just as we were about to move on, back he came, as eager as ever to nose us out. Finally he gave it up; and, at a slow trot, started to go away from there. And out of the three hundred and sixty degrees of the circle where he might have gone, he selected just our direction. Note that this was down-wind for him; and that rhinoceroses usually escape up-wind.

We lay very low, hoping that, as before,

he would change his mind as to direction. But now he was no longer looking, but traveling. Nearer and nearer he came. We could see plainly his little eyes, and hear the regular *swish—swish—swish* of his thick legs brushing through the grass. The regularity of his trot never varied, but to me lying there directly in his path, he seemed to be coming on altogether too fast for comfort. From our low level he looked as big as a barn. Memba Sasa touched me lightly on the leg. I hated to shoot, but finally, when he loomed fairly over us, I saw it must be now or never. If I allowed him to come closer, he must indubitably catch the first movement of my gun and so charge right on us before I would have time to deliver even an ineffective shot. Therefore, most reluctantly, I placed the ivory bead of the great Holland gun just to the point of his shoulder and pulled the trigger. So close was he that as he toppled forward I instinctively—though unnecessarily of course—shrank back as though he might fall on me. Fortunately, I had picked my spot properly, and no second shot was

necessary. He fell just twenty-seven feet—nine yards—from where we lay!

The buffalo vanished into the blue. We were left with a dead rhino—which we did not want—twelve miles from camp, and no water. It was a hard hike back, but we made it finally, though nearly perished from thirst.

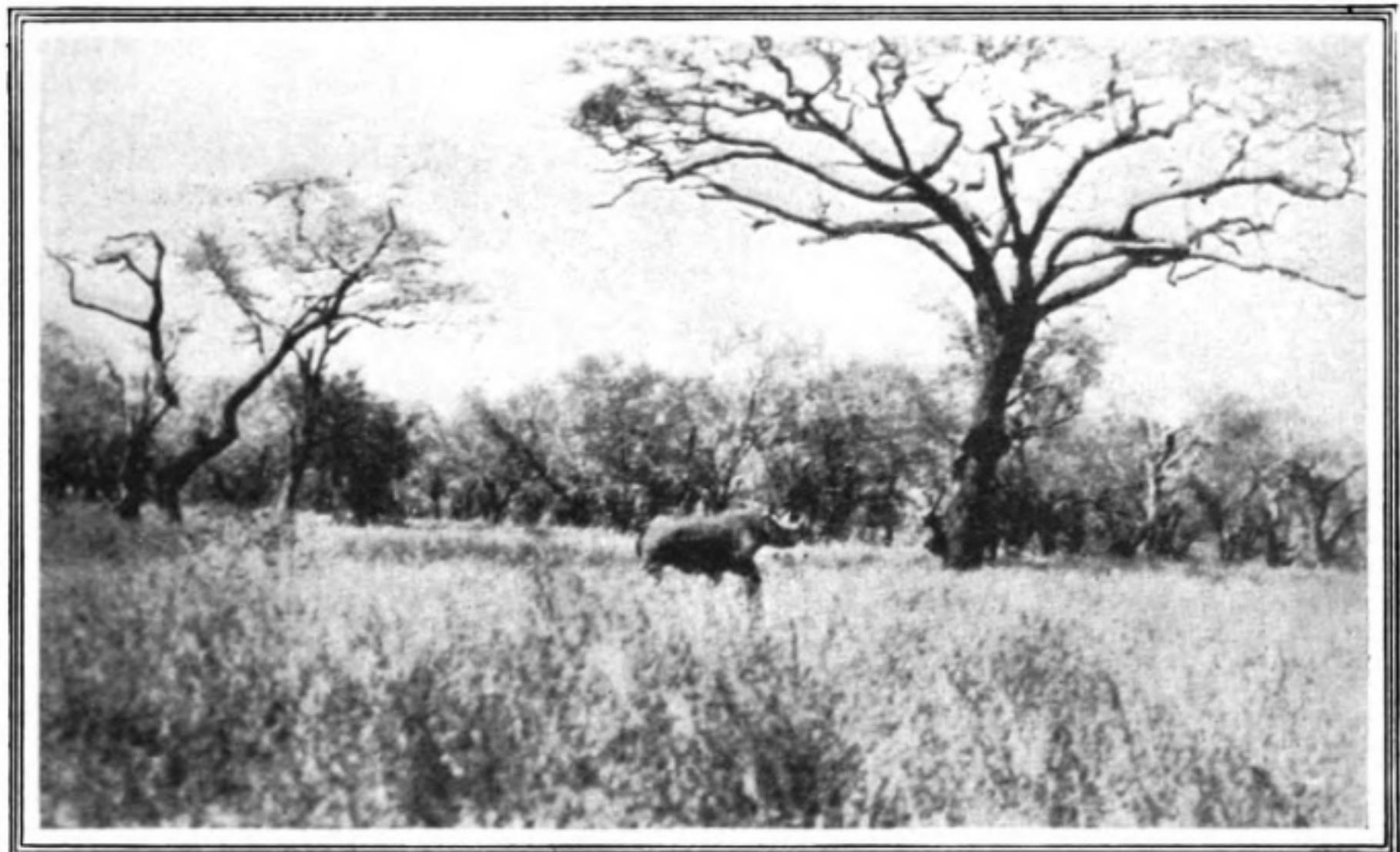
It has been stated that if one stands perfectly still until the rhinoceros is just six feet away, and then jumps sideways, the beast will pass him. I never happened to meet anybody who had acted on this theory. I suppose that such exist: though I doubt if any persistent exponent of the art is likely to exist long. Personally, I like my own method, and stoutly maintain that, within twenty yards, it is up to the rhinoceros to begin to do the dodging.

After the traveler has seen and encountered eight or ten rhinos, he begins to look upon them as an unmitigated nuisance. By the time he has done a week in thick rhino-infested scrub he gets fairly to hating them.

They are bad enough in the open plains, where they can be seen and avoided; but in



An attempt to take a picture with a rhinoceros in it—quite a different thing from a picture of a rhinoceros



Taken at 25 yards

the tall grass or the scrub they are a continuous anxiety. No cover seems small enough to reveal them. Often they will stand or lie absolutely immobile until you are within a very short distance, and then will outrageously break out. In thorn scrub they are the worst; for there, no matter how alert the traveler may hold himself, he is likely to come around a bush smack on one. And a dozen times a day the throat-stopping abrupt crash and smash to right or left brings him up all standing, his heart racing, the blood pounding through his veins. It is jumpy work, and is very hard on the temper. In the natural reaction from being startled into fits one snaps back to profanity. The cumulative effects of the epithets hurled after departing and inconsiderately hasty rhinoceroses may have done something toward ruining the temper of the species. It does not matter whether or no the individual beast proves dangerous; he is inevitably most startling. I have come in at night with my eyes fairly aching from spying for rhinos during a day's journey through high grass.

Fortunately, in the thick stuff especially, it is often possible to avoid the chance rhinoceros through the warning given by the rhinoceros birds. These are birds about the size of a robin that accompany the beast everywhere. They sit in a row along his back occupying themselves with ticks and a good place to roost. Always they are peaceful

and quiet until a human being approaches, then they flutter a few feet into the air, uttering a peculiar rapid chattering. Writers with more sentiment than sense of proportion assure us that this warns the rhinoceros of approaching danger. On the contrary, I always looked at it the other way. The rhinoceros birds thereby warned *me* of danger and I was duly thankful.

The safari boys stand quite justly in a holy awe of the rhino. The safari is strung out over a mile or two of country, as a usual thing, and a down-wind rhino is sure to pierce some part of the line in his rush. Then down go the loads with a smash and up the nearest trees swarm the boys. Usually their refuges are thorn trees, armed, even on the main trunk, with long sharp spikes. There is no difficulty in going up; but the gingerly coming down, after all the excitement has died, is a matter of deliberation and of voices uplifted in woe. Cunningham tells of an inadequate slender and springy—but solitary—sapling into which swarmed half his safari on the advent of a rambunctious rhino. The tree swayed and bent and cracked alarmingly, threatening to dump the whole lot on the ground. At each crack the boys yelled. This attracted the rhinoceros, which immediately charged the tree full tilt. He hit square; the tree shivered and creaked; the boys wound their arms and legs around the slender support and yelled frantically. Again and again the rhinoceros drew back to repeat

his butting of that tree. By the time Cunningham reached the spot, the tree, with its despairing burden of blackbirds, was clinging to the soil by its last remaining roots.

In the Nairobi Club I met a gentleman with one arm gone at the shoulder. He told his story in a slightly bored and drawling voice, picking his words very carefully, and evidently most occupied with neither understating nor overstating the case. It seems he had been out, and had killed some sort of a buck. While his men were occupied with this, he strolled on alone to see what he could find. He found a rhinoceros that charged viciously, and into which he emptied his gun.

"When I came to," he said, "it was just coming on dusk, and the lions were beginning to grunt. My arm was completely crushed, and I was badly bruised and knocked about. As near as I could remember I was fully ten miles from camp. A circle of carrion birds stood all about me not more than ten feet away; and a great many others were flapping over me and fighting in the air. These last were so close that I could feel the wind from their wings. It was rawther gruesome." He paused and thought a moment, as though weighing his words. "In fact," he added with an air of final conviction, "it was *quite* gruesome!"

The most calm and imperturbable rhinoceros I ever saw was one that made us a call on the Thika River. It was just noon, and our boys were making camp after a morning's march. The usual racket was on, and the usual varied movement of rather confused industry. Suddenly silence fell. We came out of the tent to see the safari gazing spellbound in one direction. There was a rhinoceros wandering peaceably over the little knoll back of camp, and headed exactly in our direction. While we watched, he strolled through the edge of camp, descended the steep bank to the river's edge, drank, climbed the bank, strolled through camp again and departed over the hill. To us he paid not the slightest attention. It seems impossible to believe that he neither scented nor saw any evidence of human life in all that populated flat; especially when one considers how often these beasts will *seem* to become aware of man's presence by telepa-

thy.* Perhaps he was the one exception to the whole race, and was a good-natured rhino.

The babies are astonishing and amusing creatures, with blunt noses on which the horns are just beginning to form, and with even fewer manners than their parents. The mere fact of an eight hundred pound baby does not cease to be curious. They are truculent little creatures, and sometimes rather hard to avoid when they get on the war-path. Generally, as far as my observation goes, the mother gives birth to but one at a time. There may be occasional twin-births, but I happen never to have met so interesting a family.

Rhinoceroses are still very numerous,—too numerous. I have seen as many as fourteen in two hours: and probably could have found as many more if I had been searching for them. There is no doubt, however, that this species must be the first to disappear of the larger African animals. His great size, combined with his 'orrid 'abits, mark him for early destruction. No such dangerous lunatic can be allowed at large in a settled country, nor in a country where men are traveling constantly. The species will probably be preserved in appropriate restricted areas. It would be a great pity to have so perfect an example of the Prehistoric Pinhead wiped out completely. Elsewhere he will diminish, and finally disappear.

For one thing, and for one thing only, is the traveler indebted to the rhinoceros. The beast is lazy, large, and has an excellent eye for easy ways through. For this reason, as regards the question of good roads, he combines the excellent qualities of Public Sentiment, the Steam Roller, and the Expert Engineer. Through thorn thickets impenetrable to anything less armored than a dreadnought like himself he clears excellent paths. Down and out of eroded ravines with perpendicular sides he makes excellent wide trails, tramped hard, on easy grades, often with zigzags to ease the slant. In some of the high country where the torrential rains wash hundreds of such gulleys across the line of march it is hardly an exaggeration to say that travel would be practically impossible without the rhino trails wherewith to cross.

* Opposing theories are those of "instinct"; and of slight causes—such as grasshoppers leaping before the hunter's feet—not noticed by the man approaching.