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CARL E. AKELEY



IN BRIGHTEST AFRICA

Memorial Edition



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CHAPTER V

LEOPARDS AND RHINOS

THERE is a general belief firmly fixed in the popular mind by constant repetition that the ostrich is a very stupid bird. A man might well expect easy hunting of a bird that tried to hide by the traditional method of sticking its head in the sand. But I found that the ostrich, like other African animals, did not always realize its obligation to tradition or abide by the rules set down for its behaviour. I went a long way into the waterless desert of Somaliland after ostriches. We were just across the Haud and were camped in a "tug" or dry stream bed where by digging we could get water for our sixty men and the camels. During two days of hunting in the dry bush of this desert I had seen many ostriches, but none of them had put its head into the ground and left its big black-and-white plumed body for me to shoot at. On the contrary, in this my first experience with them I found them exceedingly wary. They kept their bodies hidden behind the bush. Only their heads were exposed, each head only about large enough to carry a pair of very keen eyes and much too small to serve as a target at the distance that they maintained. As a result of being continually outwitted by them for

two days I began to think ill of the man who originally started the story about their stupidity.

With the difficulties of the chase firmly in mind I set out early on the third day to see if I could get a specimen. Concluding that the smaller the party the better the opportunity, I took only a mule and my pony boy. When only a half mile from camp I met an old hyena who was loafing along after a night out. He looked like a good specimen, but after I shot him, one look at his dead carcass was enough to satisfy me that he was not as desirable as I had thought, for his skin was badly diseased. I had very good reason to think of this very hard later in the day. A little farther along I shot a good wart hog for our scientific collection. Leaving the specimen where it lay, I marked the spot and continued in search of the plume-bearers.

Soon after this I climbed to the top of a termite hill about eight feet high to look the country over with field glasses. As I held the glasses to my eyes while adjusting the focus, I suddenly realized that the letter S that I was focussing on was the head and neck of an ostrich and that there was a second letter S beside it. The birds remained perfectly motionless watching and I did likewise, locating their position meanwhile by the termite hills which were nearly in line between us. Suddenly the heads ducked and disappeared behind the bush. I dropped from my perch and ran rapidly to where they had been, but found only their trail in the sand.

When I had given up tracking them and was about

to start farther afield I came into an opening in the bush that was about thirty yards wide and two hundred yards long. Near the centre of the opening was a dense green bush a dozen feet in diameter. A beautiful cock ostrich broke into the clearing at full speed just below the bush and as I raised my rifle he disappeared behind the bush. I held ready to catch him as he passed out from behind it on the other side, where there was fifteen or twenty yards of clear ground before he would reach cover again. I stood there ready with my gun up until I felt foolish. Then I ran quickly to the bush expecting to find him just on the other side. He was nowhere in sight, but his trail told the story. As he had come into the open he had seen me and when behind the bush he had stopped short, as indicated by a great hole and swirl of sand where he had caught himself by one foot, had turned at right angles and run straight away the length of the clearing, keeping the bush between himself and his enemy. I have not known many animals to do a more clever thing than this. I got one shot at him later—putting my sights at three hundred yards—but the bullet struck in the sand between his legs.

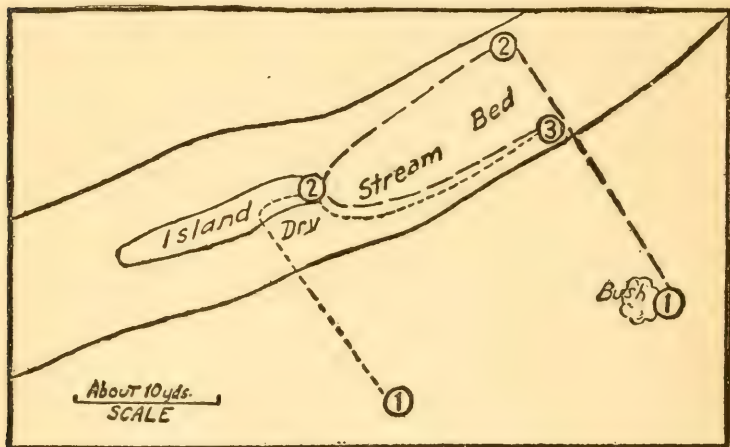
We returned to camp later in the afternoon and after a little rest and refreshment I started out again with only the pony boy and carrying the necessary tools to get the head of the wart hog that I had shot in the morning. We had no difficulty in finding the place where I had shot him, but there was nothing to be seen of the pig. The place was strewn with vulture features, but surely vultures could not make away

with the head. A crash in the bushes at one side led me in a hurry in that direction and a little later I saw my pig's head in the mouth of a hyena travelling up the slope of a ridge out of range. That meant that my wart hog specimen was lost, and, having got no ostriches, I felt it was a pretty poor day.

The sun was setting, and with little to console us the pony boy and I started for camp. As we came near to the place where I had shot the diseased hyena in the morning, it occurred to me that perhaps there might be another hyena about the carcass, and feeling a bit "sore" at the tribe for stealing my wart hog, I thought I might pay off the score by getting a good specimen of a hyena for the collections. The pony boy led me to the spot, but the dead hyena was nowhere in sight. There was the blood where he had fallen, and in the dusk we could make out a trail in the sand where he had been dragged away.

Advancing a few steps, a slight sound attracted my attention, and glancing to one side I got a glimpse of a shadowy form going behind a bush. I then did a very foolish thing. Without a sight of what I was shooting at, I shot hastily into the bush. The snarl of a leopard told me what kind of a customer I was taking chances with. A leopard is a cat and has all the qualities that gave rise to the "nine lives" legend. To kill him you have got to kill him clear to the tip of his tail. Added to that, a leopard, unlike a lion, is vindictive. A wounded leopard will fight to a finish practically every time, no matter how many chances it has to escape. Once aroused, its determination is

fixed on fight, and if a leopard ever gets hold, it claws and bites until its victim is in shreds. All this was in my mind, and I began looking about for the best way out of it, for I had no desire to try conclusions with a possibly wounded leopard when it was so late in the day that I could not see the sights of my rifle.



The dotted line indicates Mr. Akeley's movement during his encounter with the leopard. The dashes show the route taken by the leopard. At position (1), Mr. Akeley fired into the bush. Of the three shots fired at position (2), two went above the leopard and the third inflicted only a skin wound. The hand-to-hand combat took place at position (3).

My intention was to leave it until morning and if it had been wounded, there might then be a chance of finding it. I turned to the left to cross to the opposite bank of a deep, narrow *tug* and when there I found that I was on an island where the *tug* forked, and by going along a short distance to the point of the island I would be in position to see behind the bush where the leopard had stopped. But what I had started

the leopard was intent on finishing. While peering about I detected the beast crossing the *tug* about twenty yards above me. I again began shooting, although I could not see to aim. However, I could see where the bullets struck as the sand spurted up beyond the leopard. The first two shots went above her, but the third scored. The leopard stopped and I thought she was killed. The pony boy broke into a song of triumph which was promptly cut short by another song such as only a thoroughly angry leopard is capable of making as it charges. For just a flash I was paralyzed with fear, then came power for action. I worked the bolt of my rifle and became conscious that the magazine was empty. At the same instant I realized that a solid point cartridge rested in the palm of my left hand, one that I had intended, as I came up to the dead hyena, to replace with a soft nose. If I could but escape the leopard until I could get the cartridge into the chamber!

As she came up the bank on one side of the point of the island, I dropped down the other side and ran about to the point from which she had charged, by which time the cartridge was in place, and I wheeled—to face the leopard in mid-air. The rifle was knocked flying and in its place was eighty pounds of frantic cat. Her intention was to sink her teeth into my throat and with this grip and her forepaws hang to me while with her hind claws she dug out my stomach, for this pleasant practice is the way of leopards. However, happily for me, she missed her aim. Instead of getting my throat she was to one side. She

struck me high in the chest and caught my upper right arm with her mouth. This not only saved my throat but left her hind legs hanging clear where they could not reach my stomach. With my left hand I caught her throat and tried to wrench my right arm free, but I couldn't do it except little by little. When I got grip enough on her throat to loosen her hold just a little she would catch my arm again an inch or two lower down. In this way I drew the full length of the arm through her mouth inch by inch. I was conscious of no pain, only of the sound of the crushing of tense muscles and the choking, snarling grunts of the beast. As I pushed her farther and farther down my arm I bent over, and finally when it was almost freed I fell to the ground, the leopard underneath me, my right hand in her mouth, my left hand clutching her throat, my knees on her lungs, my elbows in her armpits spreading her front legs apart so that the frantic clawing did nothing more than tear my shirt. Her body was twisted in an effort to get hold of the ground to turn herself, but the loose sand offered no hold. For a moment there was no change in our positions, and then for the first time I began to think and hope I had a chance to win this curious fight. Up to that time it had been simply a good fight in which I expected to lose, but now if I could keep my advantage perhaps the pony boy would come with a knife. I called, but to no effect. I still held her and continued to shove the hand down her throat so hard she could not close her mouth and with the other I gripped her throat in a strangle hold. Then I surged down on

her with my knees. To my surprise I felt a rib go. I did it again. I felt her relax, a sort of letting go, although she was still struggling. At the same time I felt myself weakening similarly, and then it became a question as to which would give up first. Little by little her struggling ceased. My strength had outlasted hers.

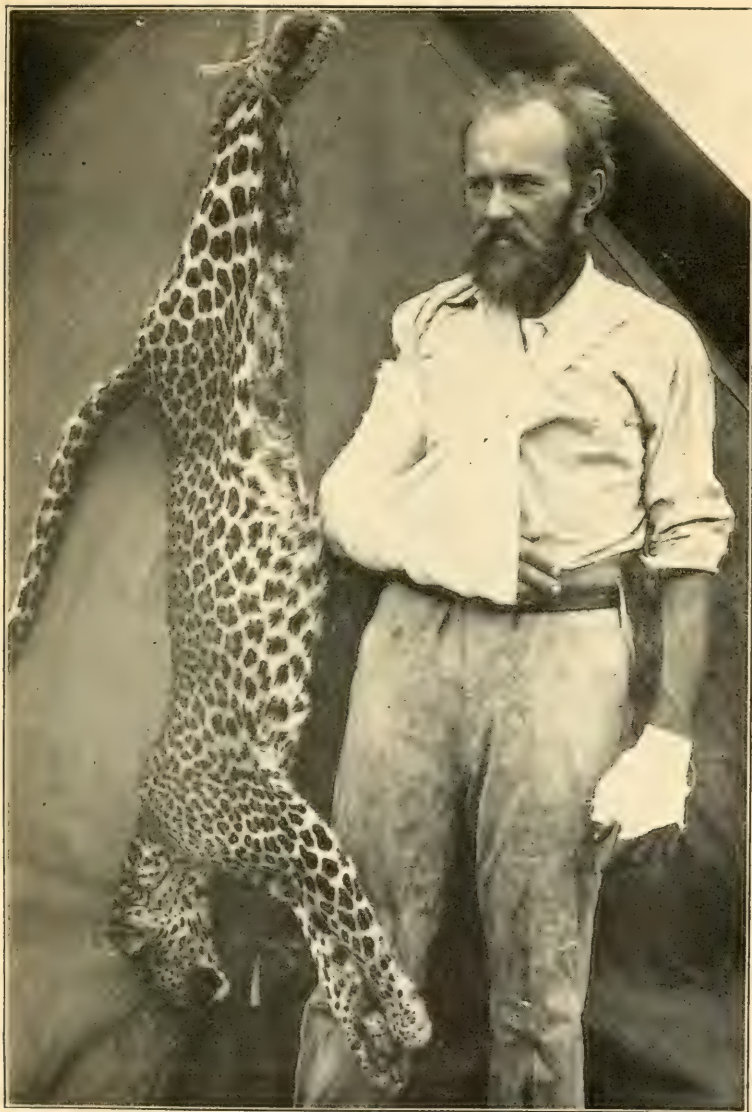
After what seemed an interminable passage of time I let go and tried to stand, calling to the pony boy that it was finished. He now screwed up his courage sufficiently to approach. Then the leopard began to gasp, and I saw that she might recover; so I asked the boy for his knife. He had thrown it away in his fear, but quickly found it, and I at last made certain that the beast was dead. As I looked at her later I came to the conclusion that what had saved me was the first shot I had fired when she went into the bush. It had hit her right hind foot. I think it was this broken foot which threw out the aim of her spring and made her get my arm instead of my throat. With the excitement of the battle still on me I did not realize how badly used up I was. I tried to shoulder the leopard to carry it to camp, but was very soon satisfied to confine my efforts to getting myself to camp.

When I came inside the *zareba*, my companions were at dinner before one of the tents. They had heard the shots and had speculated on the probabilities. They had decided that I was in a mix-up with a lion or with natives, but that I would have the enemy or the enemy would have me before they could get to

me; so they had continued their dinner. The fatalistic spirit of the country had prevailed. When I came within their range of vision, however, my appearance was quite sufficient to arrest attention, for my clothes were all ripped, my arm was chewed into an unpleasant sight, and there was blood and dirt all over me. Moreover, my demands for all the antiseptics in camp gave them something to do, for nothing was keener in my mind than that the leopard had been feeding on the diseased hyena that I had shot in the morning. To the practical certainty of blood poisoning from any leopard bite not quickly treated was added the certainty that this leopard's mouth was particularly foul with disease. While my companions were getting the surgical appliances ready, my boys were stripping me and dousing me with cold water. That done, the antiseptic was pumped into every one of the innumerable tooth wounds until my arm was so full of the liquid that an injection in one drove it out of another. During the process I nearly regretted that the leopard had not won. But it was applied so quickly and so thoroughly that it was a complete case.

Later in the evening they brought the leopard in and laid it beside my cot. Her right hind foot showed where the first shot had hit her. The only other bullet that struck her was the last before she charged and that had creased her just under the skin on the back of the neck, from the shock of which she had instantly recovered.

This encounter took place fairly soon after our



MR. AKELEY AND THE LEOPARD HE KILLED BARE-
HANDED



A LEOPARD SPEARED BY THE NATIVES

arrival on my first trip to Africa. I have seen a lot of leopards since and occasionally killed one, but I have taken pains never to attempt it at such close quarters again. In spite of their fighting qualities I have never got to like or respect leopards very much. This is not because of my misadventure; I was hurt much worse by an elephant, but I have great respect and admiration for elephants. I think it is because the leopard has always seemed to me a sneaking kind of animal, and also perhaps because he will eat carrion even down to a dead and diseased hyena. A day or two before my experience with the leopard someone else had shot a hyena near our camp and had left him over night. The next morning the dead hyena was lodged fifteen feet from the ground in the crotch of a tree at some distance from where he was killed. A leopard, very possibly my enemy, had dragged him along the ground and up the tree and placed him there for future use. While such activities cannot increase one's respect for the taste of leopards, they do give convincing evidence of the leopard's strength, for the hyena weighed at least as much as the leopard.

The leopard, like the elephant, is at home in every kind of country in East Africa—on the plains, among the rocky hills, among the bamboo, and in the forest all the way up to timber line on the equatorial mountains. Unlike the lion, the leopard is a solitary beast. Except for a mother with young, I have never seen as many as two leopards together. It is my belief that like the lion they do their hunting at night almost

exclusively, and I am quite sure that this is their general habit despite the fact that the only unmistakable evidence of day hunting I ever saw myself in Africa was done by a leopard. I was out one day in some tall grass and came upon the body of a small antelope. As I came up I heard an animal retreat and I thought I recognized a leopard's snarl. The antelope was still warm. It had evidently just been killed and the tracks around it were those of a leopard.

One of the leopard's chief sources of food supply consists of monkeys and baboons. I remember a certain camp we had near the bottom of a cliff. Out of this cliff grew a number of fig trees in which the baboons were accustomed to sleep fairly well out of reach of the leopards. They were, however, not completely immune, and we could hear the leopards at the top of the cliff almost every night, and once in a while the remnants of a baboon testified to the success of the leopard's night prowling. Besides monkeys and baboons, leopards seem inordinately fond of dogs. A pack of dogs like Paul Rainey's can make short work of a leopard, but on the other hand a leopard can make short work of a single dog and seemingly takes great pleasure in doing so. One night in a shack in Nyiri, a settler sat talking to his neighbour, while his dog slept under the table. Suddenly, and quite unannounced, a leopard slipped in through the open door. Confusion reigned supreme for a moment and then the men found themselves on the table. The leopard was under the table killing the dog and

somehow in the excitement the door had been closed. One after the other the men fled out of the window, leaving the dog to his fate. A traveller had a similar but more painful experience with a leopard at the Dak Bungalow at Voi. Voi is a station on the Uganda Railroad where there was, and I suppose still is, a railroad hotel of a rather primitive kind known as the Dak Bungalow. One night a man was sleeping in one of the Bungalow rooms and, hearing a commotion outside, he started out to see what it was. As he passed through the open doorway on to the porch he was attacked by the leopard that had evidently come stalking his dogs.

Leopards are not particularly afraid of man. I never knew one to attack a man unprovoked except when caught at such close quarters as the case at Voi, but they prowl around man's habitation without compunction. I had a camp in Somaliland once where the tents were surrounded by two thorn thickets—the inner and outer *zareba*. A leopard came in one night, killed a sheep, dragged it under the very fly of my tent on the way out, jumped the *zareba*, and got away. Fifteen years ago, when Nairobi was a very small place, the daughter of one of the government officers went into her room one evening to dress. As she opened the door she heard a noise and looking she noticed the end of a leopard's tail sticking out from under the bed with the tip gently moving from side to side. With great presence of mind the young lady quietly went out and closed the door. Nairobi had many possibilities of thrills in those days. It

was about the same time that a gentleman hurrying from town up to the Government House one evening met a lion in the middle of the street to the embarrassment of both parties.

There are some phrases in Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" that put me in mind of the rhinoceros, or "rhino," as everyone calls him in Africa.

"Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die."

But it is stupidity, not duty, that keeps the rhino from reasoning. He is the stupidest old fellow in Africa. I know that many experienced hunters likewise consider him one of the most dangerous animals in Africa. I can't quite agree with this. Of course, if he runs over you not only is it dangerous, but it is also likely to be fatal. It is also true that as soon as he smells man he is likely to start charging around in a most terrifying manner, but the rhino is never cunning like the elephant, nor is his charge accurate like that of a lion, nor is the rhino vindictive like the buffalo or the leopard. Most men's estimates of the relative dangers of African animals are based upon their own experiences. The animals that have mauled them worst or scared them worst they hold most dangerous. I have been mauled by an elephant, chewed by a leopard, and scared half to death a dozen times by lions, so that I have the very firmest convictions about the dangers of these animals. On the other hand, I have twice been caught by rhinos in positions where an elephant, a lion, or a leopard would

have had me in no time, and both times the rhinos left me unmolested.

When I first went to Africa I had the same experience as everyone else. Rhinos getting wind of me would charge me and to save myself I'd shoot. I suppose I had stood off twenty of these charges with my rifle before I discovered that if I did not shoot it would not necessarily be fatal. I discovered the fact, of course, quite by accident. I was going along the bank of the Tana River one day with my camera. My gun boys were some distance behind so as not to disturb any animal that might afford a picture. Suddenly I was set all a-quiver by the threshings and snortings of a rhino coming through the bushes in my direction. I very hastily took stock of the situation. There was nothing to climb. Between me and the thicket from which the rhino was coming was about twenty-five feet of open space. Behind me was a 30-foot drop to the crocodile-infested waters of the Tana. The only hope I saw was a bush overhanging the brink which looked as if it might or might not hold me if I swung out on it. I decided to try the bush and let the rhino land in the river, trusting to luck that I wouldn't join him there. The bushes were thrust aside and he came full tilt into the opening where he could see me. Everything was set for the final act. He suddenly stopped with a snort. His head drooped. His eyes almost closed. He looked as if he were going to sleep. The terrible beast had become absolutely ludicrous. While this was going on I felt a poke in my back. I reached

behind and took my rifle from the gun boy who had come up with equal celerity and bravery. I drew a bead on the old fellow but I could not shoot. A stupider or more ludicrous looking object I never saw. I began talking to him, but it did not rouse him from his lethargy. There he stood, half asleep and totally oblivious, while I, with the gun half aimed, talked to him about his ugly self. About this time my porters came into hearing on a path behind the rhino. He pricked up his ears and blundered off in that direction. I heard the loads dropping as the porters made for the trees. The rhino charged through the *safari* and off into the bush.

At another time, somewhat later, three of them charged me when I was sitting down and unarmed. I couldn't rise in time to get away or reach a gun, so I merely continued to sit. This time they didn't stop and doze, but they went by on both sides ten or fifteen feet away. Such a charge was much more pleasing to me and apparently quite as satisfactory to them as one in which they were successful in their attack. These experiences have led me to think that in his blundering charges the rhino has no clear objective, as a lion has, for instance. Even his blundering charge is dangerous, of course, if you are in the way, but I firmly believe that the rhino is too stupid to be either accurate in his objective, fixed in his purpose, or vindictive in his intentions.

This does not mean that a lot of people have not been killed by rhinos. They have; but I do believe that compared with other African animals the danger

of the rhino is generally exaggerated. When he smells something he comes toward the scent until he sees what it is. As he can't see very far, no man with a gun is likely to let him come within seeing distance without shooting. So the stupid old beast goes charging around hoping to see the source of what he smells and in addition to getting himself shot has made a reputation for savagery. In fact, he has blundered around and been shot so much that old rhinos with big horns are growing scarce.

I remember coming up over the top of a little rise one day and seeing across the plain an old rhino standing motionless in the shade of a solitary acacia about two hundred yards away. The usual tick birds sat on his back. It was a typical rhino pose. As I stood looking for more entertainment, a second rhino came mouching along between me and number one. Number one evidently heard him. The birds flew off his back, he pricked up his ears, and broke into a charge toward number two. Number two reciprocated. Their direction was good and they had attained full speed. I longed for a camera to photograph the collision. But the camera would have done me no good. The collision did not happen. When about twenty feet from each other they stopped dead, snorted, and turned around, number one returning to doze under his tree and number two continuing the journey which had been interrupted. I suppose that rhinos have acquired the habit of charging whenever they smell anything because until the white man came along they could investigate in this peculiar

manner with impunity. Everything but an elephant or another rhino would get out of the way of one of these investigating rushes, and of course an elephant or another rhino is big enough for even the rhino's poor eyes to see before he gets into trouble.

The coming of the white man with the rifle upset all this, but the rhino has learned less about protecting himself from man than the other animals. Man went even further in breaking the rules of rhino existence. The railroad was an even worse affront than the rifle. The rhino furnished some of the comedy of the invasion of the game country by the Uganda Railway. In the early days of that road a friend of mine was on the train one day when a rhino charged it. The train was standing still out in the middle of the plain. An old rhino, either hearing it or smelling man, set out on the customary charge. The train didn't move and he didn't swerve. He hit the running board of one car at full speed. There was a terrific jolt. My friend rushed to the platform. As he reached it the rhino was getting up off his knees. He seemed a little groggy but he trotted off, conscious, perhaps, that railroad trains cannot be routed by the rhino's traditional method of attack.