

ROMANCE
OF
NATURAL HISTORY;
OR,
WILD SCENES AND WILD HUNTERS.

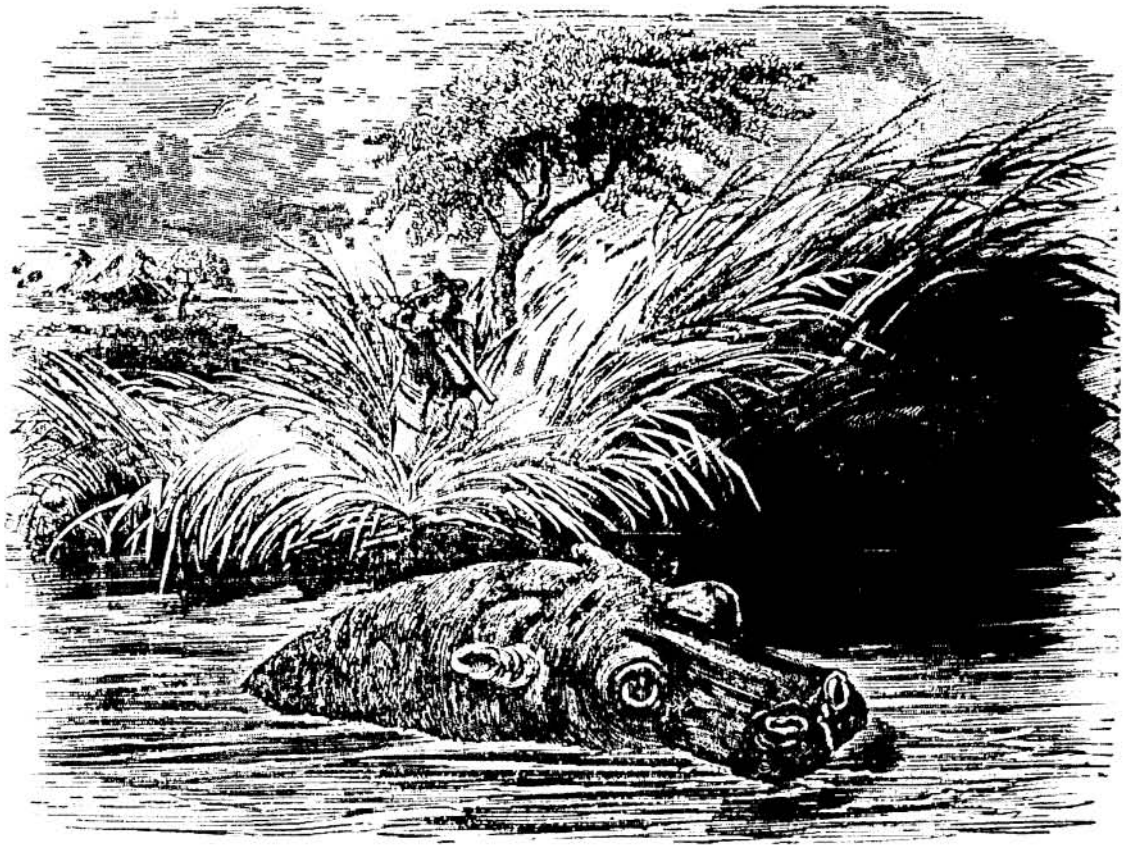
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CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RHINOCEROS AND HIPPOPOTAMUS.

OUR African adventurers plume themselves evidently upon having out-Heroded the Herods of all previous Romance of Hunting—in having capped the climax of dashing extravagance, by combatting both behemoth and the unicorn in their own meadows and beneath forests as hoar as their renown. It certainly constitutes a very striking element of true romance—this picture of two young men penetrating the most ancient solitudes of earth, to battle, single-handed, with these sole representatives of monsters before the Flood, whose huge remains now fill the generations with such awe!

Verily the rifle has brought us back to the antediluvian prowess of that period, concerning which it is recorded, as I have before remarked,—“and there were giants in those days!”

Cumming, in his off-hand way, thus introduces us to the unicorn.

Of the rhinoceros there are four varieties in South Africa, distinguished by the Bechuanas by the names of the borélé, or black rhinoceros, the keitloa, or two-horned black rhinoceros, the muchocho, or common white rhinoceros, and the kobaoba, or long-horned white rhinoceros. Both varieties of the black rhinoceros are extremely fierce and dangerous, and rush headlong and unprovoked at any object which attracts their attention. They never attain much fat, and their flesh is tough, and not much esteemed by the Bechuanas. Their food consists almost entirely of the thorny branches of the wait-a-bit thorns. Their horns are much shorter than those of the other varieties, seldom exceeding eighteen inches in length. They are finely polished with constant rubbing against the trees. The skull is remarkably formed, its most striking feature being the tremendous thick ossification in which it ends above the nostrils. It is on this mass that the horn is supported. The horns are not connected with the skull, being attached merely by the skin, and they may thus be separated from the head by means of a sharp knife. They are hard and perfectly solid throughout, and are a fine material for various articles, such as drinking-cups, mallets for rifles, handles for turner's tools, &c. &c. The horn is capable of a very high polish. The eyes of the rhinoceros are small and sparkling, and do not readily observe the hunter, provided he keeps to leeward of them. The skin is extremely thick, and only to be penetrated by bullets hardened with solder. During the day the rhinoceros will be found lying asleep or standing indolently in some retired

part of the forest, or under the base of the mountains, sheltered from the power of the sun by some friendly grove of umbrella-topped mimosas. In the evening they commence their nightly ramble, and wander over a great extent of country. They usually visit the fountains between the hours of nine and twelve o'clock at night, and it is on these occasions that they may be most successfully hunted, and with the least danger. The black rhinoceros is subject to paroxysms of unprovoked fury, often ploughing up the ground for several yards with its horn, and assaulting large bushes in the most violent manner. On these bushes they work for hours with their horns, at the same time snorting and blowing loudly, nor do they leave them in general until they have broken them into pieces. The rhinoceros is supposed by many, and by myself among the rest, to be the animal alluded to by Job, chap. xxxix., verses 10 and 11, where it is written, "Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee? Wilt thou trust him because his strength is great? or wilt thou leave thy labor to him?" evidently alluding to an animal possessed of great strength and of untameable disposition, for both of which the rhinoceros is remarkable. All the four varieties delight to roll and wallow in mud, with which their rugged hides are generally incrustated. Both varieties of the black rhinoceros are much smaller and more active than the white, and are so swift that a horse with a rider on his back can rarely overtake them. The two varieties of the white rhinoceros are so similar in habits, that the description of one will serve for both, the principal difference consisting in the length and set of the anterior horn; that of the muchocho averaging from two to three feet in length, and pointing backwards, while the horn of the kobaoba often exceeds four feet in length, and inclines forward from the nose at an angle of forty-five degrees. The posterior horn of either species seldom exceeds six or seven inches in

length. The kobaoba is the rarer of the two, and it is found very far in the interior, chiefly to the eastward of the Limpopo. Its horns are very valuable for loading rods, supplying a substance at once suitable for a sporting implement and excellent for the purpose. Both these varieties of rhinoceros attain an enormous size, being the animals next in magnitude to the elephant. They feed solely on grass, carry much fat, and their flesh is excellent, being preferable to beef. They are of a much milder and more inoffensive disposition than the black rhinoceros, rarely charging their pursuer. Their speed is very inferior to that of the other varieties, and a person well mounted can overtake and shoot them. The head of these is a foot longer than that of the borèlé. They generally carry their heads low, whereas the borèlé, when disturbed, carries his very high, which imparts to him a saucy and independent air. Unlike the elephants, they never associate in herds, but are met with singly or in pairs. In districts where they are abundant, from three to six may be found in company, and I once saw upward of a dozen congregated together on some young grass, but such an occurrence is rare.

Here, too, is his first introduction to the unicorn.

Shortly after this I found myself on the banks of the stream beside which my wagons were outspanned. Following along its margin, I presently beheld a bull of the borèlé, or black rhinoceros, standing within a hundred yards of me. Dismounting from my horse, I secured him to a tree, and then stalked within twenty yards of the huge beast, under cover of a large, strong bush. Borèlé, hearing me advance, came on to see what it was, and suddenly protruded his horny nose within twenty yards of me. Knowing well that a front shot would not prove deadly, I sprang to my feet and ran behind the bush. Upon this the villain charged, blowing loudly, and chased me round the bush. Had his activity been equal to his ugliness, my wanderings would

have terminated here, but by my superior agility I had the advantage in the turn. After standing a short time, eyeing me through the bush, he got a whiff of my wind, which at once alarmed him. Uttering a blowing noise, and erecting his insignificant yet saucy-looking tail, he wheeled about, leaving me master of the field, when I sent a bullet through his ribs, to teach him manners.

But the most extraordinary fact connected with the history of the rhinoceros comes under the observation of Cumming immediately after this incident. It is thus introduced:—

On the forenoon of the 23d a native came and informed me that he had discovered a white rhinoceros lying asleep in a thick cover to the south. I accordingly accompanied him to the spot, and commenced stalking in upon the vast muchocho. He was lying asleep beneath a shady tree, and his appearance reminded me of an enormous hog, which in shape he slightly resembles. He kept constantly flapping his ears, which they invariably do when sleeping. Before I could reach the proper distance to fire, several "rhinoceros birds," by which he was attended, warned him of his impending danger by sticking their bills into his ear, and uttering their harsh, grating cry. Thus aroused, he suddenly sprang to his feet and crashed away through the jungle at a rapid trot, and I saw no more of him.

These rhinoceros birds are constant attendants upon the hippopotamus and the four varieties of rhinoceros, their object being to feed upon the ticks and other parasitic insects that swarm upon these animals. They are of a grayish color, and are nearly as large as a common thrush; their voice is very similar to that of the mistletoe thrush. Many a time have these ever-watchful birds disappointed me in my stalk, and tempted me to invoke an anathema upon their devoted heads. They are the best friends the rhinoceros has, and rarely fail to awaken him even in his soundest nap. "Chukuroo" perfectly understands their warning, and, springing

to his feet, he generally first looks about him in every direction, after which he invariably makes off. I have often hunted a rhinoceros on horseback, which led me a chase of many miles, and required a number of shots before he fell, during which chase several of these birds remained by the rhinoceros to the last. They reminded me of mariners on the deck of some bark sailing on the ocean, for they perched along his back and sides; and as each of my bullets told on the shoulder of the rhinoceros, they ascended about six feet into the air, uttering their harsh cry of alarm, and then resumed their position. It sometimes happened that the lower branches of trees, under which the rhinoceros passed, swept them from their living deck, but they always recovered their former station; they also adhere to the rhinoceros during the night. I have often shot these animals at midnight, when drinking at the fountains, and the birds, imagining they were asleep, remained with them till morning, and on my approaching, before taking flight, they exerted themselves to their utmost to awaken Chukuroo from his deep sleep.

This account of the bird guardians of the rhinoceros, though apparently extravagant, is not without many correspondencies throughout the natural world. We have among us a familiar instance in the habits of the cow-pen bird. Audubon says, concerning it:

This species derives its name from the circumstance of its frequenting cow-pens. In this respect it greatly resembles the European starling. Like that bird it follows the cattle in the fields, often alights on their backs, and may be seen diligently searching for worms and larvæ among their dung. In spring, the cattle in many parts of the United States are much infested with intestinal worms, which they pass in great quantities, and on these the cow-bird frequently makes a delicious repast.

Of the abundance of the rhinoceros in the upper part of

the valley of the Limpopo, Harris gives us the following graphic sketch :

The country now literally presented the appearance of a menagerie ; the host of rhinoceroses in particular that daily exhibited themselves, almost exceeding belief. Whilst the camp was being formed, an ugly head might be seen protruded from every bush, and the possession of the ground was often stoutly disputed. In the field, these animals lost no opportunity of making themselves obnoxious—frequently charging at my elbow, when in the act of drawing the trigger at some object—and pursuing our horses with indefatigable and ludicrous industry, carrying their noses close to the ground, moving with a mincing gait, which ill-beseemed so ungainly and ponderous a quadruped, and uttering the while, a sound between a grunt and a smothered whistle. In removing the horn with an axe, the brain was discovered seated in a cavity below it, at the very extremity of the snout—a phenomenon in the idiosyncrasy of this animal, which may in some measure account for its want of intelligence and piggish obstinacy, as well as for the extraordinary acuteness of smell with which it is endowed. Irrascible beyond all other quadrupeds, the African rhinoceros appears subject even to unprovoked paroxysms of reckless fury ; but the sphere of vision is so exceedingly limited, that its attacks, though sudden and impetuous, are easily eluded, and a shot behind the shoulder, discharged from the distance of twenty or thirty yards, generally proves fatal.

On our way from the wagons to a hill, not half a mile distant, we counted no less than twenty-two of the white species of rhinoceros, and were compelled in self-defence to slaughter four. On another occasion, I was besieged in a bush by three at once, and had no little difficulty in beating off the assailants.

But we will dismiss this fierce, grotesque, and ridiculous animal, with the following striking remark from Moffat, which

exhibits its prodigious strength in a more formidable light than any thing else we have yet heard of it. He says, speaking of the black rhinoceros:

They fear no enemy but man, and are fearless of him when wounded and pursued. The lion flies before them like a cat; the mohohu, the largest species, has been known even to kill the elephant, by thrusting his horn into his ribs.

But Harris's account of behemoth is too graphic to be omitted or amended. Here it is:

Of all the mammalia, whose portraits, drawn from ill-stuffed specimens, have been foisted upon the world, the *Behemoth* has perhaps been the most ludicrously misrepresented. I sought in vain for the colossal head—for those cavern-like jaws, garnished with elephantine tusks—or those ponderous feet with which “the formidable and ferocious quadruped” is wont “to trample down whole fields of corn during a single night.” Defenceless and inoffensive, his shapeless carcass is but feebly supported upon short and disproportioned legs, and his belly almost trailing upon the ground, he may not inaptly be likened to an overgrown “prize pig.” The color is pinkish brown, clouded and freckled with a darker tint. Of many that we shot, the largest measured less than five feet at the shoulder; and the reality falling so lamentably short of the monstrous conception I had formed, the “river horse” or “sea cow,” was the first, and indeed the only South African quadruped in which I felt disappointed.

Our next movement brought us to the source of the Oori or Limpopo—the gareep of Moselekatse's dominions. Led by many fine streams from the Cashan range, this enchanting river springs into existence as if by magic; and rolling its deep and tranquil waters between tiers of weeping willows, through a passage in the mountain barrier, takes its course to the northward. Here we enjoyed the novel diversion of hippopotamus shooting, that animal abounding in the Limpopo; and dividing the empire with its amphibious neighbor,

the crocodile. Throughout the night, the unwieldy monsters might be heard snorting and blowing during their aquatic gambols, and we not unfrequently detected them in the act of sallying from their reed-grown coverts to graze by light of the moon; never, however, venturing to any distance from the river, the strong-hold to which they betake themselves on the smallest alarm. Occasionally during the day they were to be seen basking on the shore amid ooze and mud, but shots were more constantly to be had at their uncouth heads when protruded from the water to draw breath, and if killed, the body rose to the surface. Vulnerable only behind the ear, however, or in the eye, which is placed in a prominence so as to resemble the garret window in a dutch house, they require the perfection of rifle practice, and after a few shots, become exceedingly shy, exhibiting the snout only, and as instantly withdrawing it. The flesh is delicious, resembling pork in flavor, and abounding in fat, which in the colony is deservedly esteemed the greatest of delicacies. The hide is upward of an inch and a half in thickness, and being scarcely flexible may be drawn from the ribs in strips, like the planks from a ship's side. Of these are manufactured a superior description of *jambok*, the elastic whip already noticed as being an indispensable piece of furniture to every boor proceeding on a journey. Our followers encumbered the wagons with a large investment of them, and of the canine teeth, the ivory of which is extremely profitable.

It is truly surprising how completely a little cool common sense will sometimes strip a favorite marvel of all prodigious attributes. The thing was never more completely done than by Harris in this instance. Being a clever artist himself, he took sketches of the animal on the spot; which fully confirm his words, if they were not equally strengthened by other travellers in the same region. But Mr. Cumming, however, has chosen to dissent from him after a fashion so peculiarly his own, that I cannot, among other reasons,

resist giving it for the contrast between the mental habitudes of the two men it affords. While Harris is simply content with giving a clear and effective delineation of what he sees, Cumming is so egregiously beset with the mania for the prodigious and for the amplification of his own deeds, that it is evident if he had chanced to have seriously encountered "rats" during his "five years in South Africa," they would have been nothing short of mammoth rats—or colossal at the very least. He had come upon a herd of fourteen hippopotami, several of which he had already wounded and lost, having made his first shot at one which temporarily escaped. He says of it—

The one I had first shot was now resting with half her body above water on a sand-bank in the Limpopo. From this resting-place I started her with one shot in the shoulder and another in the side of the head; this last shot set her in motion once more, and she commenced struggling in the water in the most extraordinary manner, disappearing for a few seconds, and then coming up like a great whale, setting the whole river in an uproar. Presently she took away down the stream, holding to the other side; but, again returning, I finished her with a shot in the middle of the forehead. This proved a most magnificent specimen of the female of the wondrous hippopotamus, an animal with which I was extremely surprised and delighted. She far surpassed the brightest conceptions I had formed of her, being a larger, a more lively, and in every way a more interesting animal that certain writers had led me to expect.

The "certain writers" alluded to so significantly, must include our friend Harris, who so clearly differs with the enthusiastic elephant-hunter in his admiring appreciation of the sprightly graces of the sea-cow. It is always a pity when doctors disagree, but it rather seems like adding insult to injury on the part of Cumming, when he first steals from his master Harris, and then snubs him.