

THE  
GREAT RIFT VALLEY

BEING THE NARRATIVE OF A JOURNEY TO  
MOUNT KENYA AND LAKE BARINGO

WITH SOME ACCOUNT OF THE GEOLOGY, NATURAL  
HISTORY, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND FUTURE  
PROSPECTS OF BRITISH EAST AFRICA

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OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM (NATURAL HISTORY)

'Or join the caravan in quest of scenes  
New to the eye and changing every hour.'

JOHN ARMSTRONG, *The Art of Preserving Health*, 1744.

WITH MAPS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

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search for it. Of all hunting there is none so exciting as that for water, none which exacts sounder judgment and greater patience; and on the edge of a cliff 1900 feet high no quarry is more elusive and difficult to stalk. Once or twice my hopes were roused by finding some damp soil on the bed of the brook I was tracking, but I returned to camp unsuccessful. A porter had, however, found water in some rhinoceros foot-holes, and these yielded us a limited supply. We hoped the usual evening's rain would enable us to fill up our bottles; but though a terrific storm of wind nearly blew the tents over the cliff into the lake, not a drop of rain fell. I had in consequence to make a breakfastless start. We continued northward along the edge of the plateau, in the hope of finding some place at which we could descend to the lake. At half-past ten we reached a gully which had cut back the edge of the plateau and offered us a chance of descent. I started down it to prospect. I found some interesting plants and a most instructive geological section, but after a climb of some 800 feet, a vertical cliff of lava formed an absolute barrier to further progress. I tried again in two or three other places, but in vain, and I had to return to the plateau foiled and disheartened. An enterprising porter, Fundi Mabruk, had, however, gone off on his own account, and towards evening succeeded in finding an old game track that led down to the shore. It was then too late to descend that night, so we camped in a hollow, and served out the last ration of food, which, however, could not be cooked owing to lack of water. We started at dawn next morning, hoping to reach the lake early, breakfast there, and then hasten on to Njemps.

But the descent was a longer and more difficult task than we had expected. The porters and sheep scrambled down easily enough, but a good deal of ledge-digging and bush-cutting had to be done to render it practicable for the donkeys. It was therefore nearly eleven o'clock before we reached the shore. Then, to our horror, we found that the water was salt and sulphurous. The first man who reached the lake returned to us making hideous grimaces and groaning, "Dowa, dowa, hapana maji" (It's medicine, medicine, not water). And very effective medicine it proved to be; its emetic properties acting on the man's empty stomach brought on such a violent attack

of retching that it was necessary to give him some cocaine. The sight of the water drove the donkeys almost mad, and they made most desperate efforts to reach it; we dared not let them drink, for it would probably have killed them. Bitterly disappointed we resumed our march along the eastern shore of the lake. In our thirsty condition we soon began to feel the heat. The whole place seemed to have been planned as a sun-trap. The black precipice and the bare lava at its foot became hotter and hotter as the day drew on, till the glow from them became almost intolerable. The cliff, moreover, screened us from the refreshing breeze that generally softened the midday heat. Hence the air was stagnant, and there was nothing to carry away the moisture that rose from the surface of the lake, or the putrid odour of the vegetation that lay rotting in the submerged meadows along its margin. Here and there we had to cross stretches of sand, raising a cloud of salt-covered dust which added to the pangs of our burning thirst. Occasionally we had to wade for short distances through the lake, to avoid dense thickets of bush or rocky headlands, or to cross meadows now submerged owing to the high level of the water. During these we had to tie sacks over the donkeys' heads to prevent them from drinking; as we could not take the same trouble with the sheep, they drank what they wanted, and two out of the three died.

I dragged in the lake for shells, but could get none, nor any trace of aquatic animal life. It was more barren than Elmetaita, for the water of that lake, though bitter and salt, was clear and pure, and yielded a few insect larvæ and amphipods; but the putrid sulphurous water of Lake Losuguta seems fatal to life. Some trees that stood a few yards from the shore were dead, though, as their leaves were still attached to them, their submergence must have been recent. The grass was yellow, and whatever the water touched it seemed to kill. The only exceptions were a green alga and some pink flamingoes, and in the absence of competition these thrived exceedingly. The alga grew in such dense masses that it often coloured the water green; while the number of the flamingoes was such that when, towards sunset, they rose from the lake and flew northward, one of the kite-shaped flocks must have measured 400 yards in breadth and a mile in length. But these

alone seemed able to touch the waters of the lake and live, and we saw neither birds nor insects on the shore. The day's zoological collection was represented only by a water-scorpion (a *Nepa*) which we found in some half-dried mud, and a small snake (*Rhagerrihis tritoniata*, Gth.) An effort to add a rhinoceros nearly resulted in a disaster. We saw a pair, and as we were desperately hard-up for food, I told Fundi to follow me, and started off to stalk them. They bolted into the bush at the foot of the cliff, and it seemed impossible for them to escape. I soon found one of them, but could not get a safe shot at it, as it stood facing us, and its head was over its chest. A small stream bed, 4 feet deep and about 6 feet wide, ran towards the animal. We crawled along this till I was level with the rhinoceros. I was taking a steady aim at its brain when I heard a shriek from Fundi of "Kwea, bwana" (Climb, master). The other rhinoceros was also in the bed of the stream, and, having scented us, was charging down upon us. We both sprang up into the thorn scrub, while the rhinoceros passed beneath me and stopped, as if it intended to turn. I jerked my rifle to my shoulder and fired at the animal's neck. The effect was startling to both of us. The mouth of the barrel had scraped against the side of the gully, and become half choked with sand; the recoil was so heavy that it threw me back into the thornbush, while the bullet, instead of cutting through the backbone, tore its way through the muscles of the neck. With a grunt of pain the rhinoceros rushed on along the gully, while I rolled into it. Fundi picked up his rifle and ran to help me, shouting to the others that I was hurt. He thought the rhinoceros had caught me, and was much relieved to find that it was only the gun that had knocked me over. My right shoulder, however, was so bruised and battered that for some weeks afterwards I had to shoot from the left. Later on the same day a rhinoceros threatened to charge the caravan, but after a minute's reflection it walked slowly southward. I suggested to Fundi that we should go and stalk it. "Bus faro leo, bwana" (Enough rhinoceros for to-day, master), he replied. I agreed with him, and so we made no attempt to intercept its retreat.

About five in the afternoon we passed round a headland to a wooded gully cut into the face of the cliff, in which we hoped

to find water. It was our last chance that day. But, to our intense disappointment, it contained nothing but sand. Never before did I realise so fully the sad truth of the line in the missionary hymn—

“Where Afric’s sunny fountains roll down their golden sand.”

All the fountains we passed that day rolled down nothing but sand. To add to our annoyance, we could see rain pouring down on the other side of the lake. It had rained every day but two since we had left Mombasa, and we therefore hoped that it would yet do so ; but, as I feared, the hot cliff beside us kept the rain-cloud away. By this time the porters were too exhausted to go farther. Several of them had already fallen far behind, and some of these had to be almost carried on. We were too tired to pitch the tents, so our camp that night was a very dismal one. After dark it became cooler, and the pangs of thirst became more tolerable ; but later on it became intensely cold, and several of us were seized by an attack of fever. The men clamoured for medicine, but as there was no water they could not have any, and we spent a miserably feverish, restless night.

Dawn came suddenly ; a dim tinge of grayish pink tinted the western sky, and almost before I was certain what it was, the sunlight caught the summits of the Kamasian hills. We prepared to march at once ; every man who had the strength to do so picked up his load ; I nodded the order to start, and without a word being spoken we resumed our march. The scrub here came down to the water’s edge, and we had to chop a way through it. Fundi and I, with an Askari, led the van to cut the path ; but every jerk sent such a pang through my shoulder, that I had to let the others do the work. Progress was very slow ; the slightest extra exertion produced an awful feeling of sickness and weakness. We could stagger along on the level fairly well, but if we had to climb a few feet to cross a ridge, the men would fall exhausted upon it. Rests became longer and more numerous ; at ten o’clock we found the heat of the sun unbearable, and it seemed as if the whole caravan were on the point of complete collapse. A little way ahead there was a gap in the jungle, so I let the men drop their loads and hasten on to this. I intended to put up the fly of

has been supplied by Gedge, who followed Jackson a few months later. Several times a day his caravan had to diverge from its path, to avoid the stench from a rotting carcass—in fact he saw fifteen in one day; but he did not see a single living buffalo.<sup>1</sup> Cattle disease had swept through the country, and destroyed them all.

The gnu and the giraffe have suffered almost as badly; I only saw one of the former and one herd of the latter, both on the Kapte plains; but in the valley of the Thika-thika I found giraffe bones nearly every day, and once saw the remains of six skeletons on a single march. Giraffe and gnu are both subject to the same disease as the buffalo, and thus in British East Africa they have almost shared its fate.

Another mammal that is now almost extinct is the Square-mouthed or Burchell's Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros simus*), which differs from the ordinary *Rhinoceros bicornis* in having the mouth square and adapted for browsing, instead of prehensile and fitted to feed on leaves and shrubs. This species is only certainly known south of the Zambesi, and even there it is almost extinct. In marching across Laikipia I came one evening upon three rhinoceros together, browsing on the steppes. I was attracted by their light gray colour, and stalked them. As I approached, I found they differed from the ordinary rhinoceros, not only in colour, but in the bluntness of the head and in the shape of the horn. I had only a Martini rifle with me, and had by this time come to the conclusion that, in open ground, it was advisable not to attack more than one rhinoceros at a time. But I was so interested in these three, that I resolved to risk the attempt to secure one. I got within about sixty yards, when the birds resting on the backs of the animals saw me; their fluttering and cries disturbed the rhinoceros, which fled. I sprang up and sent a bullet into the hindmost, but the animal went on. It was late in the afternoon, and I was far from camp, so that I could not continue the chase. I reported this as soon as I returned to England, and before having read von Höhnel's statement<sup>2</sup> that Count Teleki had killed a white rhinoceros a little to the north-east of Lake Baringo; nor did I then know that a horn (now in

<sup>1</sup> *Big Game Shooting*, Badminton Library, vol. i. (1894), p. 217.

<sup>2</sup> *Zum Rudolf-See*, p. 542.

the British Museum), similar to those of the rhinoceros I saw in Laikipia, had been brought by a native caravan from this district, and described by Dr. Selater as a new species, under the name of *R. holmwoodi*. Reports of a similar animal have been received from Loango, and it is probable that these rhinoceros all belong to a type once widely distributed over Africa, but now dying out. The square-mouthed rhinoceros is the nearest living ally of the extinct Tichorine or Woolly Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros antiquitatis*), which lived in England when this was in a steppe condition at the close of the Glacial period. It is interesting, therefore, to find the existing representatives of this

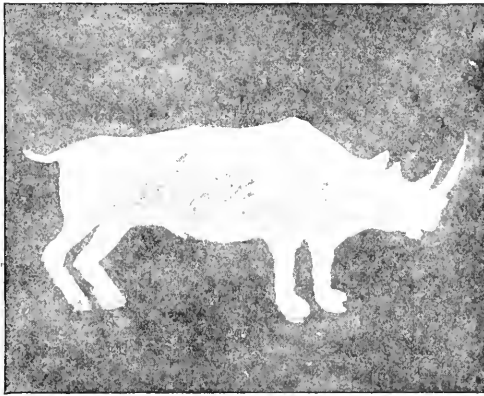


FIG. 17.—A Bushman Rock-Painting of Burchell's Rhinoceros.

species persisting in the southern region of Africa, and on the high plateaux near the glaciers of Mount Kenya.

The square-mouthed rhinoceros is often called the "White Rhinoceros," as it is identified with that so described by the Dutch hunters at the Cape. The two specimens recently shot by Mr. Coryndon and sent to England, as also that obtained by Mr. A. Eyre in 1895, and now in the Museum at Cape Town, are as dark as the common species. In a discussion at the Zoological Society Dr. Günther made the very plausible suggestion that the White Rhinoceros of the Dutch may not be quite the same as the *Rhinoceros simus*, for the old Dutch farmers were not in the habit of calling black animals white. The colour of *Rhinoceros simus* probably varies within the same limits as does the common species. It is therefore

possible that the old "white rhinoceros" is a different and extinct species, belonging to the square-mouthed group.

Though disease unquestionably aids in the work of extermination, it can scarcely cause the destruction of whole faunas, for one malady only seems to attack a few species. We must look to some other cause to account for the vast accumulations of bones belonging to animals of different species and of different habits, from which most of the remains of fossil mammalia have been derived. These huge piles of bones have always been a puzzle to geologists, for, as Sir Henry Howorth remarks—"Nor would any causes we know to be operating now account for the caches or heaps of incongruous beasts found in precisely the same fresh condition, and yet piled together in confused masses. This mixture of animals of different habits and habitats—of carnivores, and pachyderms and herbivores—is most puzzling, especially when the remains show so often a common freshness and an unworn and ungnawed appearance. Death certainly has no favourites, and is singularly neutral in its methods; but it does not, in its normal moods at all events, collect great mylodons and thickly-hided megatheres, nimble opossums and safely-cuirassed glyptodons, cavies and mastodons, and kill them together and bury them together."<sup>1</sup>

This singular association of bones is one of the arguments on which Sir Henry Howorth bases his theory of the destruction of the great extinct mammalia by a deluge. On the march across Laikipia, however, a different explanation of the phenomenon impressed itself forcibly, and even painfully, on my mind. The plateau had been described to me as one of the richest game-fields in Africa, and I trusted to it to supplement our scanty food supply.

Here and there around a water-hole we found acres of ground white with the bones of rhinoceros and zebra, gazelle and antelope, jackal and hyena, and among them we once observed the remains of a lion. All the bones of the skeletons were there, and they were fresh and ungnawed. The explanation is simple. The year before there had been a drought, which had cleared both game and people from the district. Those which did not migrate crowded round the dwindling pools, and fought for the last drop of water. These accumu-

<sup>1</sup> H. H. Howorth, *The Mammoth and the Flood* (1887), pp. 345-346.



lations of bones were therefore due to a drought, and not to a deluge.

My remark in reference to the encounter with the three gray-coloured rhinoceros—that I had learnt to leave these animals alone when there were more than one—may suggest that I regard the rhinoceros as a dangerous beast. Such, however, is not the case. I had been told on the coast many stories about the savageness of this animal, and the fury with which it charges caravans. But Jackson, the most reliable authority on East African big game, gives it a different character, and my own limited experience entirely confirms his. The rhinoceros is really so short-sighted and stupid that with a powerful smashing rifle it is the easiest of game to kill, and it will always run away if it has time to think the matter over. It is only dangerous in dense bush, for it then smells an opponent without seeing him, and dashes wildly about in a fit of fright and fury. I especially remember a valley to the south of Lake Losuguta, where, as we cut our way through the thorn jungle, we roused ten rhinoceros in one day. Some of them dashed away at once, but others charged the caravan, broke through the line, and disappeared into the bush on the other side, while a hail of Snider bullets shivered into dust upon their skins. Some of the brutes were uncertain of our exact position and rushed about, crashing wildly through the scrub, and snorting with rage. At these onsets some of the men would fling down their loads in terror, and rush for the nearest acacia bush to climb it; others would stand with rifles ready, though knowing that at any moment the rhinoceros might charge any one of us, and that as we could not see him till he was within a couple of yards, it would then be too late to dodge or stop it. This affected the men in very different ways; some of the pluckiest men in the caravan were the most alarmed, and some of the most stupid were then the steadiest. The former recognised most clearly their absolute helplessness, while their livelier imaginations gave them a more vivid picture of how they would look when the rhinoceros had finished with them.

That in such positions the rhinoceros is really dangerous was shown by the experiences of Mr. Astor Chanler's caravan, which at this very same time was trying to work northward

to Basso Narok, about 100 miles to the east of us. Several of his porters were killed by rhinoceros, and Lieut. von Höhnel was so seriously wounded that he had to be carried back to the coast.

In open country and in thin scrub the rhinoceros is comparatively harmless, but even there he may be mischievous, as I found in my first attempt to hunt this animal. On the day of our entry on to the Kapte plains, we saw a rhinoceros feeding about a mile from the path. Telling the boy to follow with a Snider, I started to stalk it. We found that it was a cow with a young one. I succeeded in reaching a fairly good position, and was just preparing to fire, when some birds sitting upon the back of the animal detected me; they sprang into the air, flapping their wings and uttering a shrill hiss. This alarmed the rhinoceros, and it suddenly turned and faced me. In this position it was impossible to fire with any effect. So I crawled a few yards to the right in the hope of getting a side shot. The rhinoceros, however, moved too, and fidgeted about between us and its young one. The latter gave a short cry, and as the cow turned to look at it, I fired at its backbone. The report of the rifle and the animal's grunt of pain roused the bull, which was sleeping in a hollow close by. It trotted slowly into a position between us and its mate, and stood there until the female and the young one had fled to a safe distance up the hill. I waited to see what would happen, and kept ready for a side shot at the shoulder when the animal turned to follow its family, as I anticipated it would do. Instead of this, to my surprise, it suddenly charged furiously at us. Its head was held forward and was jerking up and down as it ran, so that I could not get a satisfactory shot. If I had aimed for the brain, the bullet would probably have been deflected by the horns. All I could do was to fire at the left cheek, which made the rhinoceros swerve to the right and then stop. I turned to get the Snider from my boy and give him the Martini to reload, when, to my consternation, I found that he had bolted with the second rifle and all the cartridges, except one, which I had in my hand. My spectacles were misty with perspiration, so I took them off and cleaned them. Just as I was replacing them the animal, without the slightest warning, charged again,

and there was nothing for it but to run. I thought I could easily escape, for the rhinoceros looked such a slow and ungainly beast. I soon found, however, that he could go more quickly than I could, and double like a hare, so I dodged behind a white-ant-hill into some long grass. My pursuer fortunately missed me, caught the scent of my boy, and followed him. He soon lost the scent, and then sweeping round to the north galloped wildly away after its mate.

The only animal in the extermination of which man is playing the leading part is the elephant. The date of its extinction, however, is far distant, for in some districts it is still so numerous as to be a serious plague to the inhabitants. On the borders of the Kikuyu country elephants occur in such abundance and do such serious damage to the plantations, that an elephant-hunter would be welcomed as warmly as if he were a mediæval knight-errant come to do battle with the dragon. Lions also are numerous, and do terrible damage to the herds. Their tracks occur everywhere; and though I only saw them thrice, I heard them very frequently.

Lions as a rule appear to be timid, and three of them withdrew from the body of a hippopotamus, on which they were feeding, rather than allow me to put a bullet into one of them. But on another occasion I had an unpleasant experience of their audacity when hungry; for, as described on p. 150, they charged the camp at night, and killed two donkeys. The power of lions, however, has been much exaggerated. Those in Algeria have been reported to leap into cattle kraals, seize buffaloes bigger than themselves, and then, with their prey in their mouths, leap over ten-foot palings, and run away at full speed for miles. Neither of the lions I saw could have performed such a feat. Yet their slouching style of movement gives them an aspect of immense muscular strength; and the catalogue of accidents in lion-shooting shows that its dangers are not to be lightly estimated. It has been denied that lions can kill animals as large as the rhinoceros or hippopotamus; but that they can do so we found on the Thika-thika. Three lions had surprised a hippopotamus in some long grass about thirty yards from the river; there had been a desperate fight, in which the grass had been trampled down for yards around, but the

hippopotamus had finally succumbed to loss of blood; its skin was terribly scratched by claws and teeth, and the lower part of the neck had been torn away. The hippopotamus was about two-thirds grown, and its skull (which I brought back to London) measured 19 inches in length.

Most of the larger mammals in British East Africa do not seem to adopt any especially protective colouring, but trust for safety to their speed, and to a good outlook against their foes. Many of the antelope when feeding have some of the herd posted as sentries, to watch for the approach of danger. These outposts may often be seen standing on an ant-hill; they do their duty so efficiently that it is generally difficult to stalk the herd. In some cases, however, a coloration, which at first sight would appear to render the animals extremely conspicuous, is found to be really protective. Thus the monkey *Colobus occidentalis* is covered with a long silky fur arranged in alternate stripes of black and white, so handsome that the skin is much prized by the Masai for making head ornaments. The contrast of black and white is so marked, that at first sight it would seem to preclude concealment, but its value is at once evident when the animal is seen at home. This monkey lives in the high forests of Abyssinia, Kenya, Kilima Njaro, and Settima, where the trees have black trunks and branches, draped with long gray masses of beardmoss or lichen. As the monkeys hang from the branches they so closely resemble the lichen, that I found it impossible to recognise them when but a short distance away.

The ornamentation of the zebra was also a puzzle to me till I saw them at home. The ordinary explanation of striped animals, such as the tiger, is that the stripes resemble bands of light seen through tall grasses and jungle. But this is not applicable to the zebra, which lives in open plains. Watch the zebra on these, however, and the value of the coloration is apparent. At a distance of from 250 to 300 yards the stripes of the East African species (*Equus boehmi*) cease to be visible, and the animal appears of a dull gray colour, like that with which warships are painted to render them inconspicuous. In dull cloudy weather, and especially at dawn and sunset, which are the most dangerous times for game, the zebra is practically