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AN AMATEUR IN AFRICA

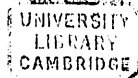
By C. LESTOCK REID, F.R.C.S., F.R.C.I.



THE AUTHOR.

[Frontispiece.]

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from a rifle of similar calibre would have practically blown him to bits.

Yet if one hits a hippo in the right place! I was once sitting by the banks of a river resting and meditating on—I've forgotten, possibly the vanity of human aspirations, more probably the prospects of lunch—when an old gentleman bobbed up about ten yards in front of me, regarding me with the interested curiosity of his kind. I had been out after buck and had only a .318 loaded with soft-nosed, not at all the weapon or the ammunition for a pachyderm; but let fly at him, partly from force of habit, partly with the hunter's everlasting optimism. The bullet must have gone straight up his nostril to his brain, which is the best shot for a hippo and what I was trying for anyway. He sank like a stone, poor luckless victim of an ill-judged curiosity, and in the usual manner did not come to the surface again till many hours later.

Meanwhile the news had gone abroad in the extraordinary fashion in which news does travel in Africa and every native for miles round came rushing in to join the feast; for they simply love hippo meat—the higher the better—and will go to any amount of time and trouble to get their favourite dish ashore. Owing to the weight and unwieldiness of the "dish" a good deal of both are involved, but very willing hands make light work of the labour and then begins a scene gory as the memory of an abattoir and crude beyond the dreams of a Rabelais. They literally cut and eat their way right inside the carcass, sometimes until they vanish from sight, and from that point of vantage throw out juicy tit-bits to their friends outside who have not been lucky enough to get, so to speak, a front row of the stalls;—shouting, laughing, singing, smeared with blood and other abominations, they emerge at intervals, one presumes to get a breath of fresh air, then plunge with renewed appetite into that reeking restaurant; until very little is left save the bones, and the feasters fall into the heavy stertorous sleep of utter repletion.

It is a scene very typical of Africa, her crudeness, her cheerful savagery, her shameless and unbridled appetites; and a very fitting end to that vast antediluvian pig.

III

The third of the great pachyderms is the rhinoceros or, familiarly, the rhino. But in this case the familiarity implies no contempt, for the rhino can be a very unpleasant customer indeed. Not so much through malice; the rhino, in spite of his ultra-repulsive appearance, is not really aggressive and some authorities even call him timid, though I doubt this. But through sheer blundering stupidity.

He is certainly one of the biggest fools in the animal kingdom and nearly blind into the bargain; so, when he hears or smells (both senses being very acute) something suspicious he rushes off madly in the direction in which he happens to be facing; and, if your camp or your porters happen to be in that direction too, there is apt to be considerable trouble. You go home to relate proudly with much wealth of vivid and probably untrue detail how you were charged by a rhino, whereas the poor old gentleman was only trying to run away. And, of course, if you happen to be killed in that rush, it does not really much matter whether it was flight or fury.

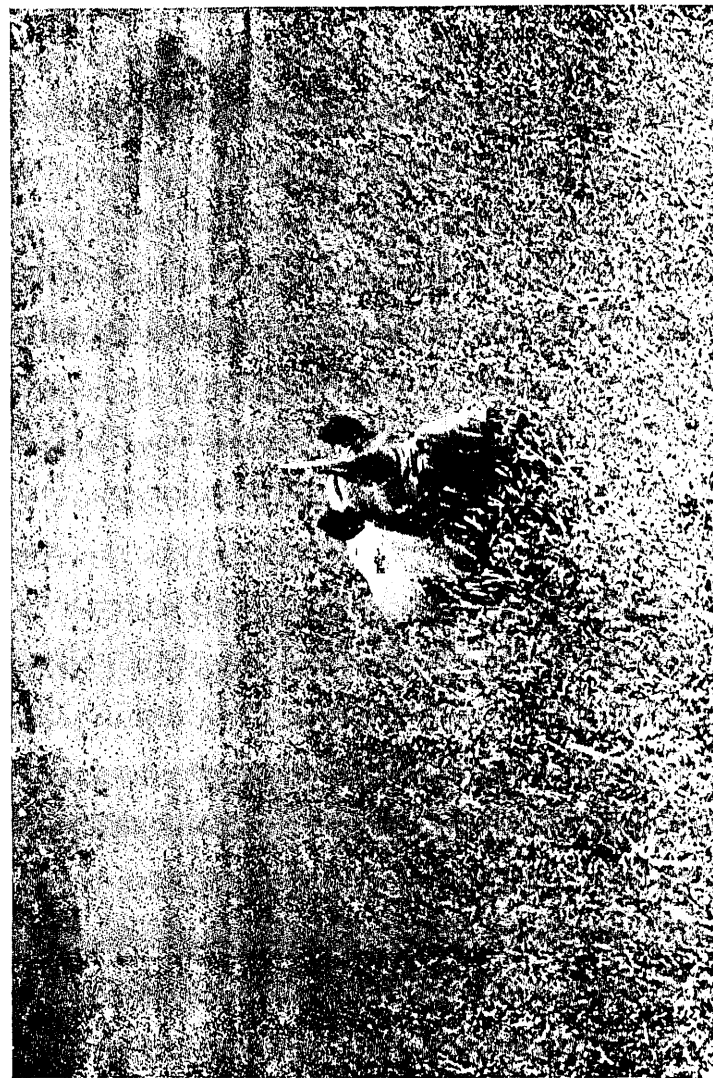
The African, who has a very healthy respect for the rhino, always assumes it is the latter and takes steps accordingly. I remember once wandering peacefully along at the head of a long line of porters on a track that led through thickish bush when pandemonium broke loose behind me. I turned round just in time to see a rhino burst across the path. Every porter without a moment's delay threw down his load and fled screaming, some upwards into trees, some laterally into the Bush, some downwards, or attempted downwards, trying to go to ground like frightened rabbits. My gun-bearer, an alert youth, thrust a rifle into my hand, but long before I had time to use it the intruder had

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vanished, crashing away into the thick undergrowth. It took a long time to collect porters and baggage, the latter none the better for being hurled to the ground and, having collected them, I pointed out forcibly and at some length that the brute was not charging, merely crossing the road in a hurry; they listened with apprehensive politeness, but I am quite sure they did not believe me.

In this (and similar) cases a rhino was an unmitigated nuisance, but on one occasion he really did me a good turn. I was marching through that almost unknown rolling down-country that lies between Mbulu and Ngorongoro, following a kind of low saddle-back that led to the foot of the latter mountain. Suddenly in the plain below us a rhino appeared, moving parallel with the safari, now stopping to feed, now getting a whiff of human smell and trotting anxiously forward. At the end of a long march with no certain prospect of a decent camping ground I had neither the time nor the inclination to go after him, but kept an eye lifting in his direction until we plunged unexpectedly into thick forest; unexpectedly, because my guide, who had once taken a German hunter over the same ground, had promised a camping-ground outside the forest. The fool overshot the mark; and in the difficult task of turning a large safari round in that dense jungle I was undoubtedly helped by the probable though unseen proximity of that rhino.

But that was not the end of his helpfulness. We found a good place and pitched camp, and when night fell the usual watch-fires were lighted round it. But that night, for some obscure reason, the porters would not keep them going; they said they were tired, the wood was green, one excuse after another, until the so-called fires dwindled to mere smouldering heaps that would not have frightened a mouse. I was just meditating disentangling myself from mosquito net and sleeping-bag to try physical persuasion when, suddenly, out of the darkness, came a very loud, very inquisitive, very angry snort. Followed an



"THE DIRECTION IN WHICH HE HAPPENS TO BE FACING."

instant's dead silence ; then babel, as every porter in the place rushed to bring wood or fan the expiring embers, and no more trouble with the watch-fires that night—thanks to the snorter, who was, I like to think, our friend of the afternoon, and who in any case was most certainly a rhino.

A wounded rhino or a rhino cow at calving time can be savage enough, but its charge is nothing like so dangerous as that of the elephant. It can go pretty fast straight ahead, but it cannot turn quickly ; the hunter can nearly always save himself by jumping to one side and getting a shot in long before the unwieldy monster has "reversed." It is as well, however, to avoid the mistake of a man I knew and his gun-bearer who, in their anxiety to dodge the rhino, forgot to dodge each other and collided. The rhino arrived at the same instant and white man, black man and rifle went sky high, to fall with many bruises but, by some miracle, nothing worse several yards away ; but he never would tell me what he said to the gun-bearer.

All these remarks and stories are about the common black rhinoceros of Africa. Like the elephant he has Asiatic cousins, dissimilar in many details (for instance, they are one-horned not two-horned), and, like the elephant again, subdivisions within the continent itself. The latter, the white rhinoceros, is another species rather than a subdivision, differing from his black brother (familiar and odious phrase) not only in colour, a dirty grey, and size, being the biggest of all rhinos, but also in having a square instead of a pointed upper lip ; and, further, in the fact that he is very nearly extinct. An isolated colony in the Lado Enclave are the only survivors and, incidentally, no living specimen has ever been brought to Europe. Otherwise the white rhino is much the same as the black variety, with the same acute sense of smell and hearing, the same semi-blindness, the same muddle-headedness and inability to turn quickly ; and none of these last three can be said of the buffalo.

Scientifically speaking, the buffalo is not one of the

pachyderms at all ; but his hide is quite thick enough for the ordinary man to include him as such, and in size and strength he comes pretty close to them. In courage, ferocity and cunning he far surpasses them all, while as for speed and ability to turn quickly—if “handiness” were the basis of classification a buffalo would belong to the same species as a polo pony.

It will be gathered from this brief description that the buffalo is a pretty tough proposition ; and rightly, for he is, I am convinced, without any exception whatever, the most dangerous of all big-game in the world. When you are hunting him he is often hunting you, and it is quite an open question which is hunting the best ; he will hide behind a bush—not difficult, for his size consists of bulk rather than height—and spring out on you like a nightmare player in a perilous game of peep-bo ; he will fetch a wide circle and come on you from behind ; he will “tree” you for hours on end ; he is up to all manner of tricks when alive, and, like Kipling’s Fuzzy Wuzzy,

“ ‘E’s generally shammin’ when ‘e’s dead.’ ”

In the ultimate resort, when your last cartridge is expended or jammed, you can, it is said, save yourself from a buffalo by lying flat ; he cannot then get at you with those enormous, inward-curving horns of his, and, like a horse, he will not willingly tread on a human body. Every hunter knows that in theory ; the doubtful problem as to whether the buffalo knows it in practice I have, thank Heaven, never had reason to solve by experiment.

But I do know a famous native hunter in the Congo who always goes out after them stark naked with his spare cartridges tied on his head. He adopts this somewhat exiguous costume, so he informed me, because once in his well-dressed youth he went out hunting with a shirt on.

And a buffalo got its horn through the shirt . . .

“ And you see, Bwana, I couldn’t afford to go on losing shirts at that rate.”

Another authenticated instance is the story of a German hunter, Paul Grenz, one of the first people to try filming big-game. Grenz was travelling down the Lualaba in a motor-boat and early one morning wounded a buffalo bull which for some reason he did not dispatch. He sailed along the river for an hour and then, together with his camera man, landed for a picnic breakfast. In the middle of breakfast the buffalo arrived, having followed them unseen on the bank, and went straight for Grenz.

Grenz threw himself flat (though not before his jaw was smashed to atoms) and, being a man of enormous strength, caught and held the sweeping horns, shouting to his cameraman to take a photo of this unique incident. But the latter, feeling no doubt that it was up to him to save his employer’s life, left the camera which he thoroughly understood and picked up a rifle of which he knew very little. A plucky effort which cost him his life, for the buffalo turned on him immediately, but it gave Grenz time to get his rifle with which he eventually won this strange battle.

Incidentally, with his jaw tied up in a handkerchief, he then walked thirty miles to the camp of a Belgian I know well and after a night’s rest and some liquid food, all he could take, borrowed a bicycle and rode eighty miles along bush paths to Elizabethville and hospital. An epic of heroic endurance difficult to beat even in the annals of African hunting.

But to return to the buffalo. As against these two instances I must record that when I was in Arusha some years back news arrived, closely followed by the victim, that a buffalo, coming up behind an old native who was peacefully bending over his patch of cultivation, knocked him down and trampled on him and went on trampling on him until some white man came along with a rifle ; an opportune arrival which was yet not opportune enough to save that unfortunate gardener from injuries which cost him his life.

Of course, that buffalo may have been the exception which proves the rule; but it is not a rule that I have any burning desire to put to the test. I nearly had to once. Very early one morning a friend and myself marched out of our camp on the great plain between Lake George and the Ruwenzori Mountains, following up news of elephant¹ received the previous night. Suddenly there was a cry of "Mboga, Mboga, (buffalo)" and the little party—not so little either, for various Africans had joined in unasked—halted abruptly. That was, I think, one of the most impressive views I have ever had of buffalo, though neither side had any hostile intentions. We had another engagement, so apparently had the buffalo, for, though we must have numbered close on ten people, they took not the faintest notice of us, but sauntered across the track some fifty yards ahead without even bothering to accelerate their lordly progress. That was what made it so impressive. Here were we, fitting (I hope) representatives of the dominant white race, fortified with heavy rifles and reinforced by various members of the less dominant but still higher-than-the-beasts black race; and the great contemptuous brutes did not even deign to look round, where any other animal would have cleared off at some speed.

It had to be seen to; so I observed these four gentlemen—they were all bulls—for some days and found that regularly just after dawn they used to make for one of the thickly-wooded valleys running far back into the foothills of Ruwenzori, in whose shady depths they were wont to spend the day, emerging only to feed at night. I had then—and retain to this day with additions—a very healthy respect for buffalo and calculated that, if I took up a position on the slope of the steep hill which commanded the valley, I should be fairly safe in the quite likely event of not hitting him in a vital spot first time.

It proved a miscalculation.

I wounded the biggest, very slightly I fancy, and—he

¹ See "A Morning with an Elephant."

could not charge up-hill? Could he not? He came up the slope like an express train.

Now a buffalo, among other peculiarities, has this, that he charges head down and the head itself is practically invulnerable while the outward sweep of the great horns guards the body; my only chance therefore was to fire from a low level upwards, so, looking I hope a great deal more heroic than I felt, I sat down and let him have the second barrel. Misfire. This was decidedly unpleasant. It began to look perilously like the lying-flat business: but—could one lie flat on a steep slope?

I reloaded quicker than I have ever done anything in my life and fired both barrels almost simultaneously. One of them—I don't know which—broke his near fore and he came down with a crash, struggled vainly to rise, regarding me with a malevolent stare. I was not feeling very friendly myself and returned the stare; then, circling very gingerly round to one flank, finished him off. But his muzzle was within five yards of where I had been seated; and it was quite a long time before I felt any real zest for buffalo shooting again.

It came back again, for, if sport depends for its excellence or otherwise on the ability of the hunted to hit back either directly or indirectly, as I think it does, buffalo shooting is the best sport in the world with the possible exception of pig-sticking. But I never had such a close call again; though there was an interesting moment in the Congo when, out with a shot-gun and thoughts of the larder, I strolled round the corner of a thicket in one direction to meet a buffalo strolling round in the other. Intense surprise was mutual, but the buffalo recovered first and to my immense relief walked away: so did I, straight back to camp to exceed the whisky ration.

With most other animals there would have been nothing to worry about because they would not have dreamt of attacking unprovoked: but you can never be sure what a buffalo is going to do next. He may, and quite probably

will, walk or even run away; on the other hand, he may show fight at once, which no other animal will do except a rogue elephant or a man-eating lion. At one time, for instance, the track which leads from the north end of Lake Natron to Ssongo above the western shores became simply impassable owing to the savagery of the local buffalo. There is, in fact, only one practical certainty about a buffalo; when he is wounded he will fight every time and all the time, and fight with such dour courage, such almost uncanny cunning, that many an experienced hunter has been killed in this most dangerous of all games, in one case, to my knowledge, so quickly and suddenly that though a first-rate shot he did not have time to bring the rifle he was himself carrying to his shoulder. Some who read these pages may have been chased by a bull or have seen the wild steers of the Rodco; and, if they will multiply the size of these animals by three, their ferocity by about ten, they will get some idea of the strength and capabilities of an African buffalo; including as to capabilities, at any rate, the pigmy buffalo of the Congo forests and the little red buffalo, the "bush-cow," of West Africa.

To my mind he is one of the most splendid things in creation. A match, it is said, even for an elephant and more than a match for a lion, who never attacks him unless unusually hungry or with great numerical advantage on his side, he still roams, fearless and unchallenged, over great tracts of Africa. But the tracts are diminishing in extent, the buffalo himself is diminishing in numbers. What the Rinderpest has left, the onward march of civilisation is taking, and I suppose the day will come when a few skeletons in museums, a few vast heads on the walls of the grandson of some dead hunter, will be all that remains of the African buffalo.

But I doubt if the world will be a better place for that; and Africa, at any rate, will be considerably less interesting.

VII VIEWS

MEN go to Africa for many reasons. They go for adventure; not so easily found now as, say, fifty years ago when half the continent was still hidden behind the veil of the Unknown. They seek for wealth, no more a will o' the wisp here than in other continents. They pursue power, on the principle presumably that it is better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven. They go, at any rate to the extremities, for health. They go for pleasure, sport, change, a hundred things. But few, if any, go purely and primarily for the greatest attraction of Africa, the views.

There are moments when looking over one of her transcendent spectacles, over miles of colour piled on colour, mixed, blended, merged, assembled into unimagined harmonies, gazing up at incredible mist-draped mountains or down into the depths of faery waterfalls, one longs and longs, with a savage aching longing that is almost agony, for the power to paint as no man ever painted. *Vanitas vanitatum*. No prayer-inspired spirit creeps into fingers more used to gun than brush; and the traveller, after that moment of exquisite pain (let it be counted to him for righteousness), goes home in prosaic contentment and either describes verbally (not having "the tongue of men and angels") or produces a banal pen-picture of those celestial landscapes, illustrated—oh consummate bathos—with photographs.

This is exactly what I propose to do myself, so I must not complain—whatever my readers may do. Not crediting myself with the pen of a Virgil, not hoping for the magic touch of a Shakespeare, but simply because for anyone possessing in the slightest degree that disease known