

PONDORO— LAST OF THE IVORY HUNTERS

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The Author

Rhino

THE rhino—we never give him his full name out here—is the only animal in Africa likely to make an unprovoked attack: always excepting the occasional rogue hippo that delights in upsetting canoes. Even at that, nine out of every ten rhino charges are blind rushes with more bluff than evil intent. The rhino is afflicted with poor eyesight and an inquisitive disposition, and these two attributes don't mix well. On the great open plains of British East Africa the rhino stampedes, startled, from one part of the long straggling safari which is characteristic of those parts and blunders into another part. Thinking he is being surrounded he converts his stampede into a blind charge on the assumption that attack—or bluff—is his best defence. He is not difficult to dodge in the open, since he usually just continues at full speed in the direction in which he is facing. But if you fire a shot and fail to kill or drop him he will often circle around, pick up your wind, and come again. However, he's not hard to turn. Almost any bullet on the end of his nose will suffice.

In thick bush the situation is rather different. If the thorn is of the hawk's-bill or wait-a-bit variety it may be a physical impossibility to get out of his way, especially since you may not be able to see him until his head breaks through the bush right beside you, perhaps a mere three feet away. You must just stand your ground and shoot the brute. That's all right if you are hunting rhino, but you will curse him if you are following elephant spoor. If the elephant hear the shot they will go for their lives. Many a time have I sworn at rhino under these conditions when hunting in certain districts. But when I took to hunting the beasts in a different area on the other side of the river, which no other hunter had ever worked (the local natives

told me) and in which the rhino were very numerous, I spent about three months a year there for four consecutive years and never had a rhino do more than make faces at me. Yet I shot about two hundred of them. The point is that I lost no wounded—all those I shot I killed, the others I didn't molest. Do you have the picture? On the south side of the river there had been considerable hunting for many years, and the rhino there had been wounded and chivvied around until they became bad-tempered; but my rhino had never been interfered with. The local natives were eternally wandering around looking for wild honey and trees to fell and hollow out into dugout canoes; yet in spite of all the inquiries I made I did not hear of a single one of them ever being attacked by a rhino. As I have remarked before, clean killing doesn't worry the game; it's incessant wounding and battering that clears game out of a district, or in the case of rhino and similar animals, makes them dangerous to man.

During the course of my great poaching raid along the Tana River my three companions and I encountered a great many rhino, but we were charged on remarkably few occasions. There were times when we passed close by a rhino that was probably sleeping on the other side of a thick bush; when he got our wind he not unnaturally made a blind rush straight for us. But many that were surprised in that same manner did not attack: there would be a snort and a crash in the bush and we would hear the sounds getting farther and farther away as the beast put as much distance as possible between us and him in the shortest possible space of time. (And a rhino will go through stuff that even a stampeding elephant wouldn't face at full speed—from twenty to twenty-five miles an hour—as though it were wet paper.) So you see, the ordinary rhino scarcely deserves his evil reputation.

The small rhino in the far north of the north-west frontier province have a very bad name for pugnaciousness. I have not had sufficient experience with them to express an opinion; but Blaney Percival, for many years game warden of Kenya and a keen observer who kept copious notes, has stated that he found them very much more dangerous and aggressive than rhino in other parts of the territory. However, he appeared to overlook the small point that these rhino are not infrequently poached by

raiders from what was then Italian Somaliland and that such poachers nearly all used poisoned arrows. As in the case of the Wakamba, these folks don't make their own poison but have to buy or trade it from the Wanderobo. The result is that the poison isn't always as fresh as it ought to be. When fresh it kills in a very short space of time—the animal runs, stops, sways, and falls—but if it is not fresh it probably won't kill. Instead, the wound will fester. Percival knew that such poaching took place but possibly he didn't realize to what extent, and therefore how great an effect there would be on the game.

An idea of the numbers of rhino in those parts may be gained when I tell you that throughout our better than half-a-year safari there was scarcely a day when we didn't encounter some except when we were cutting across from the Lorian to the Tana and, of course, when we were actually in the Lorian, which is mostly swamp. My companions made no attempt to keep count of the rhino they encountered, other than those they actually shot and those that charged them. Even then, if they failed to kill the rhino that charged, they would sometimes forget about him when, later, they were charged again. (I would like it to be clearly understood that I use the word "charge" here for lack of a better term—I don't wish to give a false impression because I am not writing for the lovers of thrills at the expense of the true facts.) It would usually be the last attack that would remain in their minds and that they would describe when we met for a day's rest. But judging from my own experience and that of Hamisi, and as well as I could get it from the two Pathans, we each encountered from seven to twenty-seven rhino a day; and, of course, there were many others thereabouts which we didn't encounter. This means that the rhino of those parts can be reckoned in the thousands. The conditions are so tough that they are practically never hunted except by poachers. In many parts along the Tana I don't suppose they had ever been hunted before our raid; and I'm quite sure they haven't been hunted since.

Some of the blank stretches we struck were doubtless due to distance from favoured watering places. In his day habits the rhino seems a surly misanthrope who wants no company but his own; but just see him at night around a watering place! It appears that a rhino must have his "sundowner", and must

have it as soon as possible after sundown. He wakes up during the late afternoon or early evening, depending on how far he has to go, and almost at once starts making his way towards the water, feeding as he goes. If he has dawdled and finds the sun dropping he will break into a trot and keep that up until he reaches his destination. Here, especially on moonlit nights, he seems to go completely crazy when he meets with others of his species. The animals squeal and snort and gambol around, boosting each other like young pigs. Their agility is amazing. It's an incredible sight. Sheer lightness of heart would seem the only explanation.

Pack animals—especially males—don't like the smell of rhino. A rhino passing close upwind will usually stampede them. Which reminds me that horses can't abide the smell of giraffe, and mules don't like them either. But to return to rhino: the animals are most regular in their habits, feeding and watering in familiar places and even returning to the same spots to dung. They will be found under the same trees and bushes at the same hours each day, and use the same paths to and from watering. This last is a detail you would do well to remember. Never pitch camp on or close to a rhino path. I've never done so myself but know others who did and sorely regretted it.

There is little sport attached to shooting rhino on the open plains. Provided the wind is right, all you have to do is walk to within easy range and fire. But in bush country it is real sport. Sporing from the water is seldom difficult, owing to the rhino's constant use of the same path, and if you arrive at his feeding grounds and lying-up places when the sun is well up you will usually find him flat out to it. If it is a hot district he'll be panting and foaming at the mouth. The rhino is about the only animal I know that relaxes as completely as a hog. When he's asleep he's dead to the world. Still, he's a denizen of the wild and it doesn't take much to awaken him. I remember once during the Tana raid I spotted a rhino asleep from the top of my ladder. I had first seen his tree from about a third of a mile away and had gradually approached, taking a reconnaissance from the top of the ladder from time to time to see that I was closing in from the right direction. Finally I mounted the ladder when I was about ten yards away for a last look around before attempting an approach on foot. But I

couldn't see how I was going to move closer without giving my wind to anything under the tree, as the bush was very dense between me and it and going around to the far side where things appeared to be somewhat more open would put me upwind. As I stood there on the ladder I realized that the black bulk under the tree was my rhino, asleep. Since the straggling top of the thorn between me and him prevented my getting a clear view of him, I beckoned to my gunbearer, an excellent youth called Nasibbin-Risik, an Arab-Swahili cross and a good one. He quietly mounted the opposite side of the ladder so that I could whisper into his ear. Only a word was necessary because I'd had many talks with him around the campfire at night or when resting at midday, had told him what I might be wanting him to do from time to time, and had shown him how to do it. Consequently there was no long conversation now. He nodded, grinned, and descended the ladder. He then stooped, picked up a couple of stones, and gently tapped them together. Nothing happened, so I nodded, and again he tapped the stones, a bit more loudly.

That was all that was necessary. The rhino had heard him and raised his head to sniff the breeze. Had it been a metallic sound, like that of the butt of my rifle clashing against the butt of my revolver, it would have had a very different effect. Any metallic sound is quite foreign to the bush and therefore spells danger to the game, but the click of two stones might be caused by another animal also looking for a patch of shade. So my rhino wasn't particularly worried. When he lifted his head he gave me the shot I wanted, and I slipped my bullet into the base of his skull just where the neck joins it. It killed him instantly. But on the heels of the shot there came a snort and a scrambling rush through the bush on my right. It was a second rhino, of whose existence I had been totally unaware. The bush was very dense and I could see nothing but I yelled to Nasib to get around the ladder and out of the way. Had I been standing at the foot of the ladder I would have been unable to see the rhino's head until it broke through the bush within less than three feet of me. From the top of the ladder things were rather better, though if I failed to bring him down he would inevitably whip the ladder from under me. I don't think he was charging, but the result would have been the same as if he had been.

From my position on top of the ladder all I could do was use the rifle like a revolver, letting it hang down at arm's length and firing at an angle of about fifty degrees from the horizontal. As the rhino's head broke through the bush I drove my bullet down through the top of it. He crashed to his nose and his momentum skidded him forward until his face was right alongside the foot of the ladder. Just for interest, and to give my heroes something definite to talk about, I showed them how it was barely possible to slip a matchbox sideways between the rhino's cheek and the foot of the ladder.

This little incident may serve to emphasize once again the great advantage of using a rifle you can really handle under all conditions. The .465 can be and has been built as light as and even lighter than the .400, but it's a whole lot more powerful and I wonder what would happen if a man tried to shoot it with one hand like a revolver. It stands to reason that at that reduced weight its recoil would be vastly more pronounced than that of the .400. I have many times had occasion to fire rifles in the .450 to .470 group without putting the butt to my shoulder, but holding the weapon in both hands; and the recoil, though severe, was not unmanageable. But that is a very different thing from firing it with one hand only. Still, you aren't likely to be wanting to do so very often.

Whenever I think of rhino I want to philosophize. Every rhino I've ever shot has been poached. Do game departments not realize that by heavily restricting the shooting of any species with a commercial value they are merely encouraging poachers? (Rhino are shot for their horns, Asiatics believing that they make a powerful aphrodisiac.) If a thing is illegal its value naturally goes up. If rhino were in danger of extermination the restrictions would be quite understandable, and I can certainly appreciate the laws of Kenya which prohibit the shooting of game from cars. These "sportsmen", so-called, who used to drive out from Nairobi, the capital, in their cars and shoot the game, almost wiped out the rhino of the Athi plains. Even an incorrigible poacher like myself can look only with scorn and contempt upon that sort of "hunting" and applaud the regulations which put a stop to it. Yet it's amusing that some of those selfsame individuals who to my certain knowledge took part in that slaughter blackguard me and others like me as "wanton

slaughterers"! At least we hunt our quarry on foot under the most difficult conditions and stand up to the charge when it comes. We don't take unfair advantage by remaining in the safety of a wire-enclosed car.

There are also many men in Africa who have photographed and shot lion from the safety of an enclosed car and who would not dream of going after them on foot. These characters, too, are loud in demanding that poachers be laid by the heels and flung into prison for long spells. It's perfectly reasonable, as I say, to restrict the shooting of any particular species that is in danger of being wiped out, like those heavily shot rhino within easy motoring distance of Nairobi; but why restrict the shooting of the great numbers of rhino along the Uaso Nyiro and Tana rivers? It's not as though many of the modern generation in Africa will be wanting to go shoot them, anyway.

I don't and I never shall subscribe to the belief that any government in Africa "owns" the game, the wild animals, and that government and government only has the right to make a profit from it. In the same way I can't recognize the "ownership" of any territory in Africa by a European country. It was acquired by force—with breech-loading rifles—from the original owners, and although it may be given fancy names such as "empire-building" and so on, I prefer plain language. In plain language it was nothing but theft. The fact that the theft took place some time ago doesn't make it legal. And that is one reason why I wander whithersoever I wish and shoot whatsoever I want, without asking permission.

The rhino in thick bush is a truly sporting antagonist, and the hunting of him under these conditions truly a man's game.

Rifles? If I couldn't afford a powerful double rifle for rhino in close cover, I would very much prefer a powerful single-loader to any magazine because it's just as short and compact as a double and has a similar type of safety.

Where to hit him? As with all other game, slam your bullet through the shoulder if you can and the rhino is yours. This shot brings him down with spinal concussion, and if your bullet is any good it will then drive in among the big main arteries located at the top of the heart and kill the animal within little more than a minute. *He will not get to his feet again.* The shoulder is the biggest, steadiest, and most vulnerable target on

any animal: go for it. In very thick bush, of course, you can rarely choose your shot. Under such conditions I think most rhino are killed with head shots. There isn't much to tell you about them.

Another very good shot for rhino is the frontal chest shot, whether you are directly in front of him or on his half-right or half-left. If you are not directly in front you will not, of course, put your bullet into the centre of his chest, but somewhere between the point of his shoulder and the centre of his chest, depending exactly on where you are standing. Don't be afraid to aim well up on these chest shots. Most men aim too low, whether it's elephant, rhino, or buffalo they're shooting. The most vital parts of the heart are the upper regions where the big main arteries are located; the bottom of the heart is not nearly so deadly.

I've already mentioned that a shot almost anywhere at all in the face will usually turn a rhino: many men not too sure of themselves slam their first shot into his nose below the base of the front horn, and then give him their second barrel through the shoulder as he rushes past. In very dense bush where you won't be able to see him until he's within a matter of feet you won't have much time in which to make up your mind where to hit him. I suppose most rhino shot under such conditions receive the bullet in from and slightly above the eye. That should find the brain. If it doesn't, it will either drop him or turn him and a second shot will finish him in either event.

Taken all around, a rhino is not difficult to kill with modern rifles. It's the hunting of him when in thick cover that's so difficult, dangerous, and gloriously exciting. Your satisfaction when you kill clean is considerable and well deserved. Therein lies the attraction. The hunter who consistently hunts dangerous game soon loses interest in the killing of animals that can't hit back.

Rhino are by far the best well-diggers I know. They go at it like a terrier digging for a rat, the sand flying out between their hind legs. Other species will patiently wait for the rhino to finish before approaching for a drink. I've even seen elephant waiting—they are also good diggers, but much slower. I've seen some places where the elephant knew perfectly well they couldn't dig a well deep enough for water to seep into without the sand's

caving in, and so they just drove their trunks down, boring, as it were, rather than well-sinking, until they had to kneel down to reach the water. There was merely a round hole exactly the diameter of the upper reaches of the trunk. Having filled the trunk, they drew it up and squirted the water down their throats in the usual way, and then inserted the trunk into the hole again. And so on until their thirst was quenched. No other animal could have got a drink there.

For that matter neither could we, because it looked a most unlikely place in which to dig, and I shouldn't have attempted it if I hadn't seen the elephant. This, incidentally, gives you an excellent idea of the elephant's ability to scent water. Such water may be three and a half feet below the surface—yet the elephant will go straight to that spot and bore down to it, not trying anywhere else.