

CHAPTER XVI

A RACE WITH A "RHINO"

B RITISH EAST AFRICA has reason to feel proud of the finely equipped narrow-gauge railroad that connects Mombasa with Lake Victoria, a distance of five hundred and eighty-four miles. It is a toy railroad, to be sure—so small, in fact, that three days had passed before the Roosevelt African expedition's outfit was transported from Kilindina to Kapiti. But what can one expect of a railroad that was only built to open up a savage country to civilisation and which is operated at a yearly loss of thousands of dollars to the government that maintains it?

The tiny cars are drawn by wood-burning Baldwin—American—locomotives that haul two trains up and down the road every week. On account of the destructive "white ants" that devour everything made of wood, sheet-iron sleepers are used, and the road-bed—ballasted

with broken stone—is kept in repair by native labour under Indian overseers, usually Goanese.

The "division superintendents," as they are called in America, are known in Africa as "permanent-ways inspectors." They are usually Englishmen or Scotchmen. It is the duty of these men to ride over the fifty miles or more of railroad assigned to them and see that it is kept in good repair.

On his trips the inspector uses a hand-car, not the clumsy kind propelled with pump-handles, that is common here, but a light car equipped with a long seat that runs from side to side through its centre. On this seat the inspector sits while two barefoot negroes run *on the rails* behind and push. A third man rides as passenger until it is time for him to relieve one of the other two.

On two occasions the inspector at Naivasha let me accompany him on his trips. We would be rolling along through a cut, and suddenly glide out on the veldt into the very midst of a herd of zebras, hartebeests, or Thomson's gazelles. The surprised creatures would bound away in all directions or race along parallel

with us for half a mile or more. Or perhaps, when we were coasting down a grade, we would round a sharp curve and surprise a hyena or a pair of jackals hunting mice in the tall grass.

Once, after passing through a bit of bush, we ran right up to a secretary-bird that was stalking along beside the track. He raised his wings, flapped them vigorously, and ran along the ground, preparatory to taking flight, but we were under such headway that we overtook him and, as he launched into the air, I brought him down with a charge of number four shot. Now his skin is in one of the big cases in the Smithsonian Institution.

A few months later, when I was travelling in a "down train," I related this experience to an inspector who was a fellow passenger.

"I can understand why a novice might think such a trip interesting," he said. "But we get rather accustomed to adventures. I'll tell you one of mine.

"There had been a heavy rain, and the road south of Naivasha had suffered badly. I put several extra gangs at work to repair the damage and then went north to oversee the construction of a bridge that had been swept away. A

seem inclined to move. Finally, one lay down within twenty feet of the track.

“In the hope that if we retired from their sight the rhinos would saunter off, I ordered the boys to run the car into the bush. There we left it, and I walked back to the skirting and watched the brutes from ambush.

“I must have remained there twenty-five minutes, but the rhinos did not change their position. The delay was exasperating. Why had I not brought my rifle? We should then have had something with which to protect ourselves, and I might have fired a few shots and put them to flight.

“At last I had the boys bring up the car again, and once more we moved forward, although I had no clear plan in mind.

“When we were within a hundred yards of the animals we halted and awaited developments. The rhino that had been lying down rose, and stood looking in our direction; its mate also showed signs of interest.

“We began to push the car ahead. Nearer and nearer we came. The stupid creatures simply stared at us until we were within fifty yards of them. Then one puffed, snorted,

and began a series of comical, awkward bucks; after that it ran about twenty-five yards and stopped. The other stood still and continued to stare at us.

"I ordered one of the boys to walk ahead and try to drive it away from the track. Reluctantly he obeyed, much to the amusement of his comrades. As the boy waved his arms and shouted the rhino wheeled about and rushed off after its companion. I jumped on the car, shouted to the boys to push, and we started rapidly down the track.

"Ahead there was a sharp bend. For most of the way round the track ran through a cut eight feet deep; at the farther end of the cut it dropped down a steep grade. The rhinos were cutting across this bend, and, although the chance of meeting them again at the farther side occurred to me, the possibility seemed remote.

"We were nearly out of the cut when a great dark body suddenly came plunging over the bank on our left. We all shouted, and the rhino tried to turn, but its momentum was too great; the animal lost its balance and came rolling down the bank ahead of us.

"The boy who was riding with me jumped,

and so did I. When we struck the ground and turned to run the two men who had been pushing the car were fully twenty feet ahead of us, for they had taken to their heels the instant the rhino appeared.

“As the huge body of the brute rolled down the bank and onto the track, the car struck it a glancing blow on the side, then left the rails, and ploughed into the bank. The rhino jumped to its feet and, with a toss of its head, attacked the car. Then, seeing us running up the track, it came charging after us.

“The two boys ahead of me ran up the left side to the top of the bank and I quickly followed. The rhino kept on after the third boy, who was dashing along the right-hand side of the track. We shouted to him to climb the bank, and he bounded up with the agility of a cat. Below, in the cut, the animal rushed by us, and it was only ten feet behind the boy when he reached the top of the bank. The bank was low at that point, and the clumsy animal, after slipping and sliding back into the cut several times, succeeded in scrambling up.

“Meanwhile, the boy had run some distance along the top of the bank and thrown himself

flat on the ground. When the rhino reached the top it ambled out on the veldt a few yards, and, since it could not find its enemy, it stopped and looked about.

"While the animal's back was turned the two boys and I jumped down into the cut and made for the upturned car. Hurriedly we lifted it on the track. I told the boys to push it to the top of the down grade and to wait there for me. Then I climbed back to the bank and looked about to see what had become of my third assistant. On the veldt only thirty yards from him, the rhino stood, snorting and puffing, and turning first to one side and then to the other. I watched my opportunity and then waved to the boy several times; but he was so occupied in watching the rhino that at first he did not see me. Finally, however, he jumped up, dashed for the bank, and leaped into the cut.

"He was hardly on his feet when the brute caught sight of him and again charged. The boy bounded down the track toward us. The rhino reached the top of the bank a hundred feet behind him; it plunged down and continued the chase between the rails.

“While the two boys and myself had ample time to escape, I saw at once that the brute would overtake the other man long before he could reach the car, and, as we could not desert him, we were forced to again take to the top of the bank and the pursued boy once more followed our example. The persistent rhino lost considerable time scrambling up after him, and again the two came tearing on toward us, the boy now fifty yards in advance of his pursuer.

“Now was our chance, for the boy would reach the car at least fifty yards ahead of the rhino. We darted back into the cut and slowly started the car down the grade.

“The boy kept to the bank till he was abreast of us; then he jumped down and joined the other two boys in pushing the car. The rhino, charging along the top of the bank, gained on us rapidly. The bank now sloped toward the track, and every step that our pursuer took brought it nearer our level.

“I urged the boys to exert every bit of their strength, and a few seconds later they jumped aboard, for the car had attained such speed that there was danger of their being left behind.