

# A FUGITIVE IN SOUTH-WEST AFRICA

1908 to 1920

By  
WILHELM MATTENKLODT

Edited and translated by  
OAKLEY WILLIAMS



THORNTON BUTTERWORTH LTD.  
15 BEDFORD STREET, LONDON, W.C.2

1931

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to the right. Then I cut the "calf" off from its dam and, after racing for several hundred yards neck and neck alongside of it, grabbed it by the neck from the saddle. The giraffe tried to shake off the grip of my arm with a jerk, but stumbled and fell asprawl. By the time she had regained her feet I was out of the saddle and had grabbed her by the neck anew. The giraffe tried to bolt with me at a gallop, and for half an hour a regular wrestling match ensued, which the giraffe would have won if, in response to my shouts, two Bushmen had not come to my assistance. We got a trace round her, hitched her to the nearest tree, and I exhausted all my wiles to induce the animal to accompany us back to camp. It was all no use. Even when entirely freed from every bond, the giraffe could not be induced to budge an inch; she stuck like a stake driven into the sand. So I gave up the futile business, left her where she stood, and rode back to camp, after taking the precaution of having previously sent my people on ahead of me. They would have been only too delighted to settle the giraffe's hash, because how you can let off a bit of game you have at your mercy, even if you are not short of meat, was a thing passing their understanding.

Not so far from the Luiyana I brought my first rhinoceros down, a bull with a fairish horn. We crossed its recent spoor as we drove through the thorn-bush masking the river. While Becker drove on I followed the spoor with Kandunda. After quite a short stalk we heard a grunting noise in front of us, and saw the rhino about thirty yards away, evidently disturbed from its siesta, sitting up and snuffing. I hit it behind the shoulder, whereupon it jibbed to one side, as if struck by lightning. The next moment, however, I saw a black monster charging down on me in full tilt

through the grey scrub. It got its second bullet from my big calibre 10.5mm. express full in the chest at a distance of twenty paces. The third shot in its head brought it down. Becker had just outspanned the waggon on the bank of the Luiyana when I rejoined him in camp and brought the strip of muzzle hide with the double horn in with me as a trophy. That evening and the following day we dined on roast rhino and enjoyed it. The meat tastes very like elephant meat, with the same characteristic flavour of bush and scrub roots. That evening we reached the village of Mukoya, the great rain maker; it was reported to be on an island in the river, but was quite hidden by dense reeds.

Mukoya was the chief who had given orders to stop me and the Boers hunting in his country in 1911. Nor had the Bushmen anything very much to say in his favour, and we were therefore prepared for a none too cordial reception. That evening I had a message shouted across the river to the effect that I wanted a boat the next day to pay Mukoya a visit. It arrived at sunrise. Two paddle men who, to judge by their ornate anklets above their calves, must have been members of the chieftain's family, got out. When I took my seat on board I was "armed to the teeth," a panoply which normally is not etiquette in paying visits on chieftains. I took an Ovambo who spoke the Herero and Mambukushu tongues with me to interpret and to carry my gifts to the chieftain. The boat followed a fairway hardly more than three feet wide, winding in and out among the dense reeds until, after about half an hour of it, we reached the promontory of a biggish island in more open water and disembarked. On its highest point stood a big village with a regular tangle of huts behind screens of matting.

When I reached the palaver place I found several hundred niggers squatting, crowded into a semicircle, on the ground. The chief was sitting on a mat spread on the ground in their midst, wearing a leopard's skin over his shoulders and back and holding the tuft of a giraffe's tail on an ivory mount in his hand. I recognised hostility and treachery in his eyes at the first glance; they were apparent, too, in the manner of his greeting. He did not rise when I approached, but stretched out his hand without looking at me and with palpable reluctance. The next moment I was sorry I had taken it. I stepped back, grounded my rifle and stood with my hands folded on its muzzle. No seat was offered to me, with the obvious intention that I, a white man, should squat on the ground like a nigger at the court of this Central African autocrat. The chief accepted my present with a curt nod, gave it the most cursory glance, and ordered it to be set down behind him. I had never met a reception of this kind before at the hands of any negro potentate. I was fully aware of the peril of my position and in my heart of hearts wished myself well out of it. So far the chief had been carving and fiddling about with the ivory handle of his fly whisk; he now summoned one of his subjects. The latter crawled up on his knees without raising his eyes from the ground, received, clapping his hands, the knife from Mukoya's hand and crawled back, with more hand-clapping, as obsequiously as he had advanced.

In the interim I stood there quietly observant of everything that was going on. Mukoya at length came to the conclusion, it appeared, that I was not an ordinary white man, because he had a native stool with a seat of interlaced leather thongs brought out. I sat

down, laid my rifle across my knees and addressed the chief direct.

"I have heard that there have been good rains on the Luiyana. You, above all others, Mukoya, have had a rich harvest of maize and mahango. I have therefore come to buy mealies from you and your people."

The chieftain scanned me with a furtive glance and answered: "The people who told you that told you lies."

"No, I heard it on all sides."

"I have no foodstuffs to sell. You have come hither to no purpose."

After a moment's consideration, I said: "If you have no food, or refuse to sell me any, I have nothing more to say and will go. Order your people to row me back."

He looked at me lowering: "Give me some cartridges."

"I have not got any cartridges."

"You have got a whole belt full of them."

"I want them for my own use, and apart from that I never give cartridges to black men. There has been enough talk. I now wish to go."

I moved away and was already outside the palaver circle when he shouted "Wait!" I stood still. A man ran off and came back at once with a small, stumpy rhinoceros horn and handed it to me, in the chieftain's name, as his gift. I looked at the mean present contemptuously, without touching it, and said to the Mambukushu, loud enough for everyone to hear: "Tell your chief I do not want his gift."

Therewith I walked down the hill to the boat. I had one foot in it when a loud shout came from above and the whole black assemblage came trooping down

the hill. In front of them walked half a dozen women with big plaited baskets on their heads, which they set down before me. They contained maize and millet mealies. Mukoya sent me word that they were his gift to me. But I again refused to accept it. Thereupon the chieftain condescended to make an excuse to the effect that he did not know white folk's ways and was ignorant of the treatment they looked for. No white man had ever visited his kraal before. He was giving me the grain and mealies in token of the goodwill he bore me. I could only, I replied, appreciate his goodwill if he were to bid his people trade with me. If he were to promise that, I would accept his gift. He gave his promise, and even paid a visit to our camp that same afternoon, where we regaled him with a mug of coffee and bread and honey. But even here his look did not lose its expression of furtive treachery. The foodstuffs offered were considerably below the quantity on which we had counted.

The more ample, on the other hand, were the returns for the chase, since Becker, too, had brought down a heavy rhino. But to make up for it I had a pitch-black day of bad luck. With Kandunda I took up the spoor of two rhinos, a bull and a cow. We crawled for hours through any number of thorn-thickets, and when, following the trail, we had worked our way into another of these tangles we suddenly heard a sound not ten paces away, as of some one coughing; the next moment there was the noise of crashing, smashing and trampling, though we were not able to see anything. Kandunda, who was the first to appreciate that the noise was moving away, fell into a run and I ran after him. When we had succeeded in picking our way out of the thick thorn we came on more open bush country

and soon struck the trail again, and after following it for about a mile we suddenly caught sight of the two rhinos some hundred and fifty yards away. The bull had turned in our direction and was eyeing us. Instead of stalking I elected to chance a bulls-eye at the head towering over the scrub and the long grass from where I was standing. I was jubilant, because the bull crashed as if struck by lightning. But he was on his feet again no less quickly, and, followed by the cow, came charging down on us like a runaway railway engine. I ran some thirty paces to one side and hardly dared trust my eyes. The bull was a greyish white, the colour of wood ash, and of huge size, for the black cow, following him, looked like a dwarf in comparison. The bull was quite unmistakably a white rhinoceros, one of the last survivors of a breed almost extinct in South Africa, and its hide and skeleton would have been the pride of any natural history museum. He came racing up at a monstrous unwieldy gallop, and with every stride tossed his long horn into the air. At that minute I cursed the safety catch on my rifle which I did not know how to manage, because I had been accustomed to the slow pull of a service rifle all my life. When the white monster with its satellite snorted past me at a range of some thirty paces I fingered the trigger before taking aim and the bullet ploughed up the ground in front of me. I just had time to get in a second shot and fired; into the air this time, for I had unwittingly slipped the catch and again had fingered the trigger prematurely. The rhinos vanished into the bush. A lot of good rushing after them and a long pursuit did! The white rhinoceros escaped scatheless and is perhaps still ranging its thorny paradise in the Luiyana to this day.

After bartering the flesh of the two rhinos we