

African Nature Notes
and
Reminiscences

BY

FREDERICK COURTENEY SELOUS, F.Z.S.

GOLD MEDALLIST OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

WITH A "FOREWORD" BY
PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT

AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY
E. CALDWELL

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CHAPTER X

NOTES ON THE BLACK OR PREHENSILE-LIPPED RHINOCEROS

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IN a previous chapter I have spoken of the diffi-

culty of understanding the true character of the African black or prehensile-lipped rhinoceros; but perhaps I ought to have said "my own" difficulty, for never having had my life seriously endangered by any one of the many animals of this species which I met with at a time when they were still fairly numerous in the interior of South Africa, I have always found it very difficult to credit the vast majority of these stupidly inquisitive but dull-sighted brutes with the vindictiveness and ferocity of disposition that has often been attributed to the whole race. I am, it must be understood, now speaking only of the black rhinoceros in Africa to the south of the Zambesi. In other parts of the continent I have had no experience of these animals.

In Southern Africa the black as well as the white rhinoceros has been almost absolutely exterminated during the last sixty years. During that period, thousands upon thousands of these animals have been killed, at a cost to human life so trifling, that I submit it is impossible to contend that, speaking generally, the hunting and shooting of black rhinoceroses was an exceptionally dangerous undertaking.

When a young man I was personally acquainted with several of the most noted of the old Boer hunters — Petrus Jacobs, Jan Viljoen, Martinus Swart, Michael Engelbreght, and others — who were amongst the first white men to penetrate to the wondrous hunting-grounds beyond the Limpopo; but I never heard of any Boer hunter having been killed by a black rhinoceros.

Amongst the early English hunters, who were probably more reckless and less experienced than the Boers, a few accidents certainly happened, but, considering the number of rhinoceroses they killed, they must have been favoured with extraordinarily

good luck to have got off as cheaply as they did, if anything like a large proportion of these animals had habitually attacked them without provocation, as soon as they saw or scented them, or even made a point of charging immediately they were interfered with.

During his wonderful hunting expedition to the interior of South Africa in 1836-37, Captain (afterwards Sir Cornwallis) Harris met with an extraordinary number of rhinoceroses of both the black and the white species. He shot great numbers of both, but never seems himself to have been in any serious danger from a black rhinoceros, though one of his Hottentot servants was knocked over by one of these animals, and his companion, Mr. Richardson, seems to have had a very narrow escape from another.

Speaking of this incident, Harris says: "My companion the next morning achieved a 'gentle passage of arms' with the very duplicate of this gentleman;¹ but *his* antagonist could not be prevailed upon to surrender to superior weapons, until it had considerably disfigured with the point of its horn the stock of the rifle employed in its reduction. Aroused from a siesta in a thick bush by the smarting of a gunshot wound, the exasperated beast pursued its human assailant so closely, that Richardson was fain in self-defence to discharge the second barrel down its open throat!"

In a further paragraph Harris wrote: "As we advanced, the species (the black rhinoceros) became daily more and more abundant, and I shall hardly gain credence when I assert that in the valley of the Limpopo specimens were so numerous that on arriving in the afternoon at our new ground it was no uncommon thing to perceive a dozen horned snouts protruded at once from bushes in the

¹ Another rhinoceros shot by Captain Harris.

immediate vicinity. No sooner were the teams unyoked than the whole party, in the regular routine of business, having assumed their weapons, proceeded to dislodge the enemy, and right stoutly often was the field contested. But where is the quadruped that can stand before the grooved rifle? it will take the conceit out of the most contumacious, and like a sedative, will calm his ruffled temper in a minute. Every individual came in for a share of cold lead and quicksilver; and the stubborn brute that would not quietly withdraw, satisfied with the mercurial dose he had received, was ultimately badgered to death as a matter of course. Daily almost two or three were thus annihilated within view of the camp."

Personally, I find it impossible to believe, nor does it seem to be implied, that any great danger attended this oft-repeated and senseless slaughter of animals, which were undoubtedly attracted to the waggons by nothing more reprehensible than inquisitiveness; just as, when crossing the high downs between the Zambesi and Kafukwe rivers with a train of pack-donkeys in 1888, I was upon several occasions accompanied by herds of wildebeests, which ran alongside of my caravan for considerable distances, their sense of danger entirely overcome by the stronger passion of curiosity.

It is very evident from Harris's description of the white rhinoceros that he considered this species to be almost equally as dangerous as the black. He states that he found it "subject to the same paroxysms of reckless and unprovoked fury," and "often fully as troublesome as its sable relative."

The black rhinoceros is often spoken of as a beast of so savage and morose a temper that it will not only attack any animal which may approach it, but in default of anything better, will vent its senseless rage on bushes or other inanimate objects.

But is there any authority for such a charge? Harris says: "Nineteen times out of twenty shall you see the crusty old fellow standing listlessly in the society of gnoos, quaggas, and hartebeests"; and I myself have often seen black rhinoceroses drinking peaceably in close proximity to buffaloes and other animals.

Mr. William Cotton Oswell, who between the years 1844 and 1853 made five hunting expeditions into the interior of South Africa, met with and shot great numbers of rhinoceroses of both the black and the white species. In one season alone, he and his companion Mr. Vardon shot no less than eighty-nine of these animals. Oswell, who was a man of a very bold and fearless disposition, was badly injured by a black rhinoceros on one occasion, and on another had his horse gored to death by a wounded animal of the white species.

It is worthy of remark, I think, that Harris took the correct view that all the prehensile-lipped rhinoceroses he encountered belonged to one and the same species, although showing individually very great divergencies in the relative length of the two horns. In a footnote to his description of the black rhinoceros he says: "In no two specimens of this animal which came under my observation were the horns built exactly upon the same model. Disease or accident had not unfrequently rendered the anterior horn the *shorter* of the two."

Oswell, however, as well as many other travellers and hunters, adopted the native view that those prehensile-lipped rhinoceroses in which the posterior horn was equal or nearly equal in length to the anterior belonged to a distinct species, and in view of the fact that all naturalists and sportsmen are now agreed that all prehensile-lipped rhinoceroses throughout Africa belong to one and the same species, the differences in their horns being merely

individual variations of no specific value, it is interesting to note the divergence of opinion between well-known writers as to the comparative aggressiveness of the two supposed species.

Oswell speaks of the borili—the prehensile-lipped rhinoceros in which the second horn was short—as being “as a rule the only really troublesome member of his family,” whilst Andersson and Chapman considered the keitloa—the variety in which both horns were of equal or nearly equal length—as the more dangerous variety.

Gordon Cumming speaks of both varieties of the black rhinoceros as “extremely fierce and dangerous,” and says “they rush headlong and unprovoked at any object which attracts their attention.” Although, however, this great hunter must have seen and shot large numbers of these animals, I cannot gather from his writings that he ever treated them with the respect which the character he gives them ought to have inspired, or ever seemed to think there was much danger to be apprehended in attacking them. Having approached the first black rhinoceros he ever saw very closely, it heard him and advanced towards where he was hiding. Gordon Cumming then, “knowing well that a frontal shot would not prove deadly,” sprang to his feet and ran for cover, upon which the rhinoceros charged and chased him round a bush. The animal then stood eyeing the hunter, but “*getting a whiff of his wind, at once became alarmed and ran off.*” This last remark is interesting to me because it has so often been stated that black rhinoceroses charge as a rule immediately they scent a human being, whereas my own experience agrees in this particular with that of Gordon Cumming. With the exception of this adventure, a careful perusal of Gordon Cumming’s writings does not reveal the fact that he was ever again in any

great danger from a black rhinoceros. He was once chased when on horseback by one which he had wounded, but from the account he gives of this incident he could hardly have expected anything else. He writes: "Becoming at last annoyed at the length of the chase . . . I determined to bring matters to a crisis; so, spurring my horse, I dashed ahead and rode right in his path. Upon this the hideous monster instantly charged me in the most resolute manner, blowing loudly through his nostrils."

C. J. Andersson, who travelled in Western South Africa in the early 'fifties of the last century, was also a mighty hunter. He states that he killed "many scores" of rhinoceroses—as many as sixty in one season alone. He gives the black rhinoceros a very bad character, saying that animals of this species are not only of "a very sullen and morose disposition," but that they are also "subject to sudden paroxysms of unprovoked fury, rushing and charging with inconceivable fierceness animals, stones, bushes—in short, any object that comes in their way."

Except, however, upon one occasion, when Andersson was badly injured one night and nearly lost his life as the result of closely approaching and throwing a stone at a black rhinoceros which he had previously wounded, he does not seem to have met with any further adventures or suffered any inconvenience from the unprovoked fury of any other individual of the species.

About the same time that Andersson was travelling and hunting in Damaraland and Ovampoland, Baldwin was leading an almost precisely similar life first in Zululand and Amatongaland, and later on in the countries lying to the north and north-west of the Transvaal as far as the Zambesi river and Lake N'gami. Baldwin must have encountered a considerable number of rhinoceroses of both the black and the white species, and records the shooting of a

good many of these animals in the most matter-of-fact way. From cover to cover of the very interesting book he wrote describing his hunting adventures, *African Hunting from Natal to the Zambesi*, he never speaks of the black rhinoceros as being a savage and ferocious animal, given to sudden paroxysms of fury, nor does he ever appear to have thought it a more dangerous animal to attack than one of the white species. Indeed, on several occasions he simply records the fact that he shot a rhinoceros, without saying to which species it belonged. One rhinoceros came at him after having been wounded, but was stopped by a shot in the forehead. As this animal—a cow with a very small calf—is spoken of as having a very long horn, it was probably a white rhinoceros, which would have charged with its nose close to the ground, and would therefore have been much easier to kill with a shot in the forehead than one of the black species, whose head would necessarily have been held somewhat higher owing to the shortness of its neck.

My own personal experience of the black rhinoceros in Southern Africa compels me to believe that, although a small proportion of animals of this species may have been excessively ill-tempered, and were always ready to charge anything and everything they saw moving, and even to hunt a human being by scent, that was never the character of the great majority of these animals. At any rate, the rage of the black rhinoceros in the countries to the south of the Zambesi has been singularly impotent and ineffective. In the thirty-five years which elapsed between the date of Harris's travels through Bechwanaland and the north-western portions of what is now the Transvaal Colony and my own first visit to South Africa in 1871, thousands of black rhinoceroses must have been killed; a very large proportion of them by

white—principally Boer—hunters, for up to the latter date the natives only possessed a very few firearms. Yet how many hunters were killed or injured during the killing-off of this enormous number of creatures, which have been so often described as not only excessively savage and dangerous when interfered with, but also subject to sudden paroxysms of unprovoked fury? I think I have read all recent books on South African hunting, but I cannot recall any mention of a white man or a black man having been killed by a black rhinoceros in any one of them, though both Oswell and Andersson were badly injured and came very near losing their lives in encounters with individuals of this species. I do not say that between 1836 and 1871 no human being was killed by a black rhinoceros in South Africa. All I wish to convey is that such incidents must have been exceedingly rare, for I cannot remember either to have read any account of such a catastrophe or to have heard any of the old Boer hunters mention such a case.

Between 1872 and 1890, the period during which both black and white rhinoceroses were practically exterminated in all the countries between the Limpopo and the Zambesi rivers, I can, however, positively assert that no white hunter was killed or even injured by a black rhinoceros in any part of the immense territories comprised in the present Southern Rhodesia and the Bechwanaland Protectorate, for no such accident could have happened without my having heard of it; nor did I ever hear of a native hunter having been killed by one of these animals during that time, although one of the old traders—George Kirton¹—told me that in 1868 a black rhinoceros had charged through his string of porters, and driven its horn through both

¹ An elder brother of Argent Kirton, who was killed with Allan Wilson in the Matabele War of 1893.

thighs of one of them, throwing him up in the air. Fortunately no bones were broken and the injured man quickly recovered from his wounds. Another instance of the same kind happened in the experience of my old hunting companion, George Wood. One day, as he and two companions—David Napier and, I think, James Gifford—were riding along on elephant spoor in Mashunaland, a black rhinoceros suddenly charged through them, overturning Napier's horse and throwing it and its rider to the ground. Napier was not hurt, but I forget whether or no the horse was killed. These two incidents serve to show that in the parts of Africa in which my own experience was gained, certain black rhinoceroses were undoubtedly dangerous and aggressive; but such animals were, I am convinced, exceptional. I do not think that rhinoceroses were ever so plentiful on the northern watershed between the Limpopo and Zambesi rivers as Harris found them in the valley of the former river in 1837, but nevertheless in the early 'seventies, throughout all the uninhabited portions of the territory now known as Southern Rhodesia, rhinoceroses of both the black and the white species were very plentiful. The countries through which I hunted in 1872 and 1873 were practically virgin ground, as the Matabele were then only just beginning to acquire firearms in any quantity. As I have recorded in my book *A Hunter's Wanderings*,¹ when hunting elephants during those two years I encountered almost daily one or more prehensile-lipped rhinoceroses, often seeing five, six, or even eight in one day, and in addition to these, I met with many of the square-mouthed or white species as well. As I was hunting elephants for a living and could not therefore afford to run the risk of disturbing these valuable animals by firing indiscriminately

¹ First published in 1881.

at any other kind of game, unless I really wanted meat, I seldom killed rhinoceroses. But had these animals been valuable, and had I been hunting them for a living instead of elephants, I think that by watching at their drinking-places, and following up fresh tracks, as well as shooting all those I came across casually, I might easily have killed a hundred of each species during those two years. During each of the years 1874, 1877, 1878, 1879, 1880, 1882, 1883, 1885, and 1887, I came across black rhinoceroses, but never in any one of those years in anything like the numbers I had met with these animals in 1872 and 1873.

In the country to the north-east of Matabeleland, between the Sebakwe and the Hanyani rivers, both black and white rhinoceroses were still fairly numerous in 1878, during which year I one day saw five of the latter all together, and it was only after 1880 that the numbers of both species commenced to be seriously reduced in this part of South Africa. About that time rhinoceros horns—of all sorts and sizes—attained a considerable commercial value, probably through some freak of fashion in knife-handles or combs or what not in Europe. But whatever was the cause of it, this sudden rise in the value of small rhinoceros horns sounded the death-knell of these creatures in the interior of South Africa. By the year 1880, ivory had become very scarce in that portion of the continent, and the traders in Matabeleland then for the first time began to employ native hunters to shoot rhinoceroses for the sake of their horns—no matter of what length—and their hides, which latter were made into waggon whips and sjamboks. One trader alone told me that he had supplied four hundred Matabele hunters with guns and ammunition, and between 1880 and 1884 his large store always contained great piles of rhinoceros horns—of all sorts and sizes, often the

spoils of over a hundred of these animals at one time, although they were constantly being sold to other traders and carried south to Kimberley on their way to Europe. I do not know for a fact that all these rhinoceros horns were sent to Europe. They may have been shipped to China or India.

Although many hundreds of native hunters—poorly armed with smooth-bore muskets for the most part—must have taken part in the practical extermination of both the black and the white rhinoceros, throughout all the uninhabited tracts of country lying between the high plateau of Matabeleland and the Zambesi river, as far as I know no single man was either killed or injured in the process, although they must have killed between them at least a thousand black rhinoceroses alone during the five years before 1886. After that there were very few rhinoceroses left to shoot to the west of the Umfuli river, beyond which the Matabele hunters seldom ventured.

Black rhinoceroses always appeared to me to be very dull of sight, but quick of hearing and excessively keen scented, and I have never known an instance of one not immediately running off on getting my wind. I have often seen them, too, take alarm and run off when warned by the tick-birds that so often accompanied them, although they had neither seen nor smelt me. These tick-birds, which may often be seen accompanying buffaloes and other animals as well as rhinoceroses, always flutter about and give well-understood warning cries on the approach of a human being. On the other hand, I have seen many black rhinoceroses, when suddenly disturbed by the noise made by my Kafirs and myself, as we walked past them, come trotting up towards us snorting loudly. Such animals had not got our wind or they would have run off—at least I think so. Whenever rhinoceroses came trotting

towards us snorting, my Kafirs used to run to the nearest trees and call to me to do the same; but I never did so, and I was never charged by one. These animals, after first trotting quickly towards me, would stand looking intently at what must have been to them the unaccustomed sight of a figure with a shirt and a hat on it, then snort again and trot up nearer; but with one exception they always turned round and trotted off sooner or later, carrying their heads and tails high in the air. Sometimes I had to shout and throw sticks and stones at them before they wheeled round and made off.

It sometimes happened that a rhinoceros which I had disturbed came trotting towards me, at a time when I wanted meat, and I then took advantage of the opportunity, and kneeling down, fired a four-ounce ball into its chest from my muzzle-loading elephant gun. In such cases they would usually come rushing straight forwards at a gallop, puffing and snorting furiously, and on several occasions have passed within a few yards of where I was standing. However, I never thought that these wounded animals were charging, but believed them to be rushing blindly forwards after having received a mortal wound. I have, however, often heard such blind rushes described as terrific charges.

The one occasion on which I had to fire at an advancing black rhinoceros because I could not make it turn was on April 25, 1878. At that time I was making my way from the Zambesi river to Matabeland, through an uninhabited piece of country which had never previously been traversed by a white man. I was very weak and ill from fever and privation, and on meeting with a black rhinoceros early in the morning, was anxious to kill it for the sake of the meat. When the animal, however, an old bull, first came trotting towards me, I did not fire at it, as I thought I could

make more certain of killing it with a shot through the lungs as it turned to run off. But it would not turn, but kept advancing steadily towards me without taking any notice of my shouts, until it was so near that I determined to try and kill it with a shot in the front of the head. I was at that time armed with a single-barrelled ten-bore rifle, which was carefully sighted and shot very accurately, and when the rhinoceros was within fifteen yards of where I stood, and still slowly but steadily advancing, I put a bullet past its horns and into its forehead. It fell to the shot and rolled on its side, but almost immediately raised its head and brought it down again on the ground with a thump. I saw that it was only stunned, just as the one had been which I had lost some five years previously, after having hit it in almost exactly the same place with a four-ounce bullet; so I ran close up to it and killed it with a bullet behind the shoulder, just as it swung itself up into a sitting position. What this rhinoceros would have done if I had not fired I do not know. I think it very likely, however, that had I turned and run for a tree, it might have rushed after me and struck at me with its horn. Some of the others, too, which had trotted up towards me in previous years might have done the same thing, if they had suddenly seen me running close in front of them. I have twice had the same experience as that described by Gordon Cumming when he galloped in front of a black rhinoceros which he had wounded, that is to say, I have been smartly chased by two of these animals. The first was a cow with a nearly full-grown calf. These two animals went off at a swift trot as soon as they scented me, breaking into a gallop when I pressed them. I then tried to pass them, so as to get a broadside shot; but directly my horse drew level with her, the cow charged in the most determined manner, snorting