

RHINO HAVING A DUST BATH—FIRST ONE SIDE THEN THE OTHER, THE HORN PREVENTING A TURN

KEEPING PACE WITH A RHINO

An Intelligent Family Party

By COLONEL MARCUSWELL MAXWELL

This is the last article of that very well-known sportsman and naturalist, Colonel Marcuswell Maxwell, who was killed in an aeroplane accident in Kenya this year, perhaps the most distinguished of all the African Big Game photographers. The "Field" is very glad to have the opportunity of publishing it, not only for its own intrinsic merit, but as a tribute to the author.

WELL up in the hot semi-desert country towards Kenya's northern border lies a pan which does not differ in any respect from the many others in that country. This pan is merely a broad expanse of level sun-cracked mud which, when heavy rain falls, turns into a liquid sea of the consistency of thick black soup. On most sides it is surrounded by level grass country, while it is so cut up by clumps of large yellow thorn-trees and thick bush that to the eye small pan seems to follow small pan indefinitely. But what really distinguishes this pan from others

is its inhabitants, for, in addition to other large game, here live some of the most sporting rhino that I have met, and certainly the most interesting. Almost every one of these animals, including ladies with large calves at foot, are always prepared to chase and give any motor car they meet a good run instead of, as in most places, seeking cover in the surrounding thick bush.

Rhinos are generally considered to be cantankerous and very stupid animals, without any reasoning power to speak of, but after watching for some considerable time the rhinos who inhabit this pan, I have come to the conclusion that such a statement is far from true of them. Cantankerous they may be at times, especially when drought has forced natives from miles around to raid in on their treasured feeding grounds and resting-places, but stupid is an epithet I cannot apply to them at all, and in support of this would instance the following occasions.

When out with my camera one morning I came across a family consisting of a female with an excellent horn, a large tofo, and a lazy but very big bull. Such an excellent group did this family make that I did my best to get within photographic range, but as the ground was very brittle the female heard me almost at once. Determined to find out what I was, she went round the bush in a large circle, hoping to wind me. Whenever, however, I managed to avoid this, she took her family to the top of the nearby hill which was almost bare (the vegetation consisting of one large tree and two bushes), about 20yds. or 30yds. away from us. As soon as I realised she was going to lie under this tree I started to approach, using the two bushes as cover, only to find that as I got near she had wisely put the bull under the farthest and her calf under the other, a manoeuvre which completely defeated me.

This lady also taught me not to put much faith in what I think is a fallacy, namely, that a rhino's sight is hopelessly bad, for as I moved away rather carelessly she saw me and came all out, although I must have been at least 70yds. away from her when she first spotted me. True, a rhino's sight is poor, and one can get very close if one walks very slowly up in a dead straight line and has some sort of small bush to cover one's approach, but any



SUNLIGHT AND SHADOW IN ONE OF THE KENYA GAME RESERVES

quick movement, especially sideways, even though made a considerable distance away, seems to be easily seen by them, and once a rhino has spotted you he does not readily lose sight of you again.

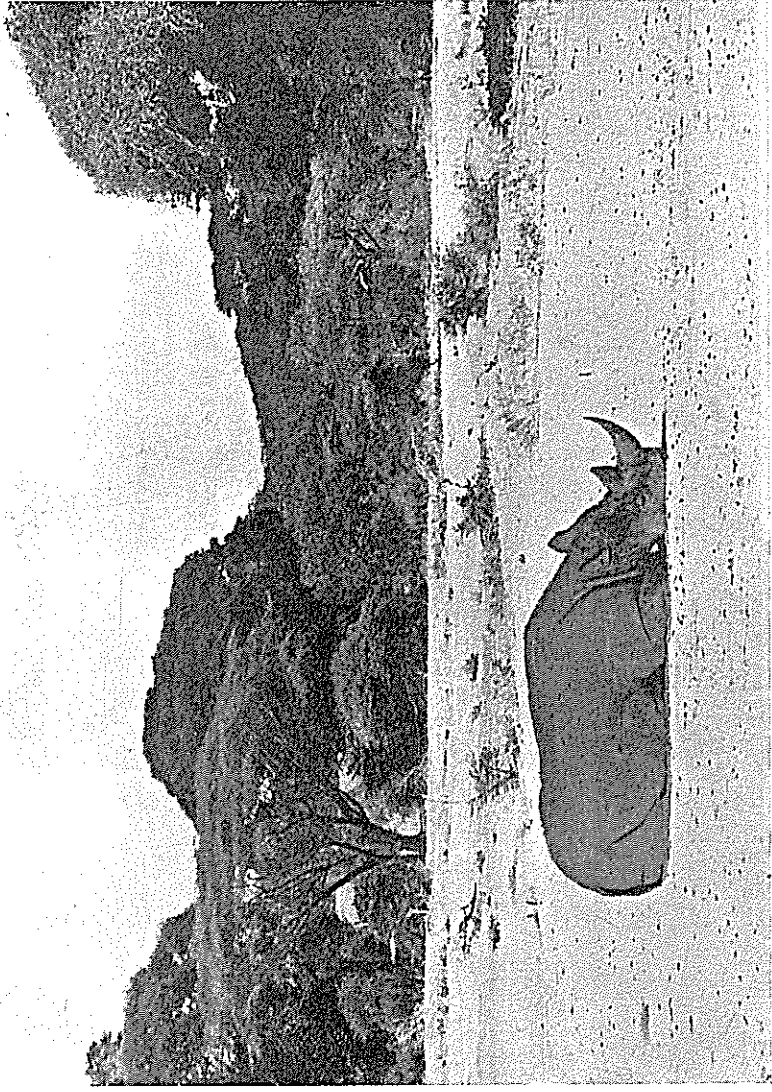
However, to return to my rhino of the pan. Amongst them were two specially noteworthy animals—a fine bull and his amazing consort. My first meeting with this pair was most interesting. I happened to be looking across the reed grass which fringes this pan when I saw what I took to be a thin pole which projected 3ft. or 4ft. above the grass and was moving about. Thinking that the mirage, which is capable of playing any trick on one in this part of the world, was making me see this manifest absurdity, I took my glasses out, only to see that the pole was definitely moving about and approaching me. Slowly it came closer, until a large female rhino stepped out of the reeds on to the pan. She had the most amazing horn I have seen on any animal, being in length almost, if not quite, 4ft., and in shape dead straight as a sword blade, and almost as slim. This horn did not slope back as usual, but canted well forward so that as she bent her head down to feed it was almost horizontal with the ground. Although I was able to obtain a small amount of cine film of this animal, neither then nor afterwards was I able to get close enough to obtain a still photograph.

Behind her followed her consort—a beautiful old bull, big beyond the average, and unusually sleek, and with a good horn. I met him many times afterwards, and got to know him well, and he proved to be a thorough sportsman, if one can so describe a rhino; but he will definitely brook no rhino near him, and undoubtedly regards himself as the overlord of this pan. However, there is nothing mean about him, and apparently he scorns to charge anything much smaller than himself, though he is always ready to tackle on sight any intruder however big; luckily for him, he appears to have come to an understanding with the few elephants which live amongst these thorn-tree clumps. On several occasions I was able to get quite close to him on foot, as he lay up in the midday heat amongst thick bush or under some dense tree, although on each occasion I shrewdly suspect that he knew I was there, for he always showed great skill in choosing his resting-place so that very little if any cover was available to his would-be stalker during the approach. But let one try to get near him in a car, and there is quite a different tale to tell.

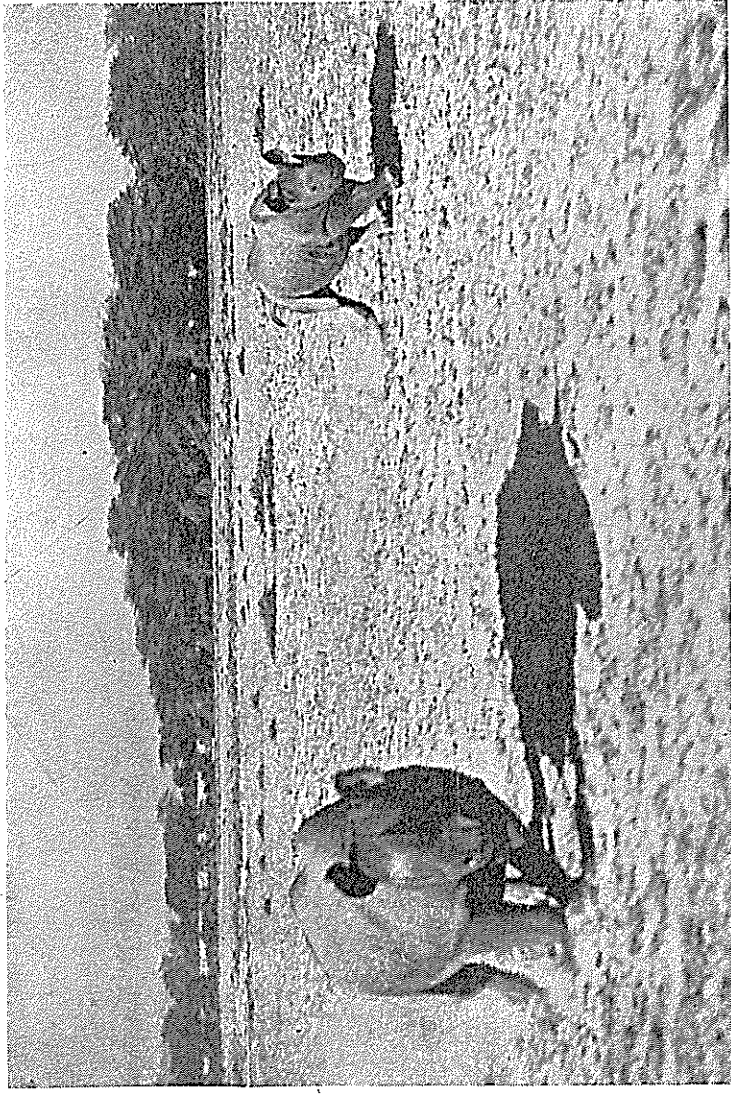
On quite a number of occasions I tried to get up to camera range this way, and, drive as carefully and quietly as I would on his blind side and with all due regard to wind, yet on each occasion he spotted me when I was still a long way off, and then, without hesitation, he charged full out, a charge which did not stop until the car was in full flight and disappearing from his horizon in dust. Only then would he resume his peaceful slumber. Many a good run has he given me over the pan when I have met him either returning in the early morning from a good night's browsing or when the setting sun has lured him from his day-time haunts. On each of these occasions this old bull showed what appeared to me to be such an amazing turn of speed that I finally decided to measure his pace when a good chance occurred; so one fine morning, when I met him out on a small level plain, as he charged I kept the car only just in front of him, and noted the speedometer. This showed that for about a quarter of a mile or more he kept me going at 28 miles an hour, a speed which, though fair, was, however, rather disappointing to me, for some time previously I had tried out a female rhino, and she had kept me going at 35 m.p.h. over some considerable distance, although admittedly down a slight incline.

It was perhaps just as well that his speed was no higher since my engine chose this time to cut out, due to what afterwards proved to be a faulty switch; a contretemps which produced definitely an unpleasant feeling up one's spine, with a couple of tons of rhino coming at full gallop not 20ft. behind. Luckily the engine picked up again almost at once. Later, with a companion driving, I was able to photograph him, always an exhilarating and amusing performance.

This old bull, prepared as he always is to tackle any newcomer who proves worth his mettle, yet had to acknowledge his Waterloo when he came on my mongrel dog Tinker. Tinker is well experienced on safari, and has a great contempt for most animals. Indeed, he scorns to stir or growl at tent, and is always prepared for a chase after any elephant he meets, while nothing gives him greater pleasure than to bait a buffalo; but he cannot abide rhino at all, and this perhaps was lucky for my safari, for on the two occasions when my old bull friend happened to blunder into camp during the night it was Tinker who woke us up; like a flash he was off to see this rhino out of the camp in full retreat.



RHINO ASLEEP IN THE PAN



CHARGING RHINO—MOTHER AND CHILD



THE ANXIOUS SENTINEL