

The Raid of the Rhinoceroses

by
Count Stanislaus Schembeck

An out-of-the-way adventure which befell a party of big game hunters in East Africa. On their way to the river a herd of rhinoceroses found their route blocked by the author's camp, whereupon they attacked it. Count Schembeck describes what happened when the infuriated monsters charged down upon his party.

MY love of big game shooting has led me to all parts of the world in search of it, amongst other places to the country around the Waso Nyiro River, in East Africa, where rhinoceroses abound. After a long march through a more than desolate country, inhabited by superstitious natives who tell blood-curdling stories about witches, vampires, and such-like pleasant folk, we camped one evening on a slope near some trees.

Two friends of mine who had accompanied me on my race round the Dark Continent—Monsieur de Rubempré and Bevis O'Sullivan, both of them splendid sportsmen—shared one small fire with me, while our carriers and other attendants made mery a little distance away.

I was sleeping the sleep of the just after a meal off a delicious rhinoceros tongue when I was suddenly awakened by a hideous yell. Sitting up, I saw De Rubempré and O'Sullivan come dashing along in very scanty attire, running as if they were competing for a championship. As they passed me they shouted something—what, I could not gather. Astounded, I gazed round in a dazed, half-



"I SAW DE RUBEPRÉ AND O'SULLIVAN COME DASHING ALONG."

sleepy fashion, and presently saw my flying friends take refuge behind the sycamore trees which shaded the camp. Looking in the opposite direction, I was horrified to see a huge rhinoceros moving briskly about at the other end of the camp. Needless to say, I hurriedly got out of bed. I was too sleepy and dazed to think of weapons, and was about to join my friends among the trees when the rhinoceros, with an odd little jump, disappeared in the bushes, leaving one of our fires stamped out and some of the packs knocked as flat as pancakes.

The excitement gradually subsided after the departure of the huge animal, and once more slumber fell upon the camp. But it was apparently decreed that our peace was to be disturbed continually during that night, for I had just gone to sleep again and was dreaming of shooting rhinoceroses with one shot each, like pheasants, when I heard my name pronounced in a ghostly whisper. Opening my eyes, I saw De Rubempré bending over me.

"What's the matter?" I asked, sleepily.

"Look, man!" he murmured, excitedly: "the rhinoceros is returning with his whole family!"

I discovered, however, that in the deceptive light it was impossible to aim with any certainty. Moreover, I reflected that if once the great brutes became infuriated and charged down on the camp, the Zulu saying, "You shall be stamped flat," would not only be figuratively, but literally, exemplified.

I don't think I have ever been so uneasy as at that moment, for I felt helpless before this mighty avalanche of flesh and bone, which the least accident might send rolling irresistibly towards us. De Rubempré saw the danger, too; and although he has proved his bravery over and over again, he paled, and anxiously looked at the trees. O'Sullivan only, with his infectious Irish gaiety, did not for a minute think of the danger.

Presently we detected a movement amongst the herd; the huge brutes seemed to be lining up in some sort of order.

"Looks as if they were going to reproduce the charge of Balaclava!" observed the irrepressible O'Sullivan, and I was inclined to agree with him.

For half an hour the rhinoceroses came no nearer, although they moved round and round



"THE PONDEROUS ANIMALS WERE CHARGING DOWN TOWARDS THE CAMP."

"Oh, bother the rhinoceros!" I said, turning over lazily; but the Frenchman shook me until I sat up—with very bad grace. Not far off, clearly visible in the bright moonlight, I beheld a whole herd of rhinoceroses, apparently examining the camp. Their looks did not please me, and, rising to my feet, I snatched up my gun.

us in clumsy circles. The scene was strikingly weird—those hulking grey bodies fitting through the darkness all about us.

Suddenly there was a shriek of "*Faru!*" from our natives, and with one accord they made for the trees. The ponderous animals were charging down towards the camp!

"Here come the gallant six hundred!" observed O'Sullivan, and hurriedly swung himself into a tree. The Frenchman and I also clambered up and got our heavy guns ready.

O'Sullivan was literally bubbling over with gaiety, in spite of the seriousness of the situation.

"Hooroo!" he yelled, as the great brutes came tearing through the brushwood, leaving a clear space behind them. "Here come the road-makers!"

"And here goes the grave-maker," said De Rubempré, coolly taking aim, with his rifle resting on a branch. On came the monsters at a lumbering gallop. A shot rang out and down went a heavy mass, raising a thick cloud of grey dust and shaking the ground.

"Bravo! Good shot!" shouted O'Sullivan. "Your turn, Schembeck."

I had been aiming already, and when he spoke I pressed the trigger, but as I fired the brute I was aiming at stumbled over a fallen trunk and came down on its knees, so that my bullet only buried itself in the broad back.

"Bad luck!" cried Bevis. "My turn now. Here's for the leader!"

The Irishman's bullet brought down a giant animal, which lay on the ground struggling, kicking, and making an awful uproar. The scene was now a veritable pandemonium. Stamping rhinoceroses, screaming natives in trees, Bevis shouting out mad jokes, and the rapid reports of the rifles combined to produce a bewildering uproar. Clouds had by this time hidden the moon, and we could hardly see to shoot. The intruding animals were now in among the camp-fires, and in the twinkling of an eye the flames to the last ember were trodden out. Dimly we could see our beds being stamped under foot and scattered, and the packs hurled this way and that. Then for a few minutes we fired a little more surely, for the moon showed itself again, and five dead animals soon lay stiff on the ground, while not a few others were badly wounded.

Having vented their rage on inanimate things, the great brutes began to think of the men.

One of the natives, paralyzed with fear, had been unable to climb a tree, and was now staring at the rhinoceroses over the top of a thick prickly bush. Our attention was drawn to the man for the first time by one of the animals stopping short and sniffing round. It did not see the man, but scented him, and with a bellow of fury it went for the bush like a hurricane.

We yelled out to the native to save himself, and, roused from his stupor, he sprang to his feet and raced away, with the animal after him. I slipped a little farther down the tree and called to him, whereupon he swerved rapidly from his course and came towards me, while the leviathan stopped short, ploughing up the ground with its heavy feet. Finally it turned, for all the world like a clumsy mastiff puppy, and resumed the chase.

The screaming native ran towards my tree, and I held out my hand and dragged him up, telling him to climb up higher. He did not



"I HELD OUT MY HAND."

need to be fold twice, and went up as high as he could. Luckily for him, as the sequel will show, it was not a tall tree.

The great animal, with ponderous tread, came on after him. Arrived at the foot of the tree, it stood still, apparently astonished at the native's disappearance, and then aimed a vicious blow at the tree-trunk with its sharp horn. I did not intend to let it demolish my perch so easily, so I slipped down to the bottom branch and, leaning forward, held my rifle point-blank at its ear and pressed the trigger. Such a shot is fatal, and I had the satisfaction of seeing it waver, take a few steps, and then fall with a crash, its whole weight resting against the tree, which bent like a cane. I clutched wildly at the branch to prevent myself falling, and nearly dropped my rifle, while a crashing, rending noise, followed by a shriek from above, told that someone had been dislodged by the shock. Branch after branch was snapped by the falling of some heavy body, until finally it hit the stronger boughs and bounced off to the ground. I realized then that the native in his terror had climbed too high up, where the branches could hardly bear him, and the sudden jerk had hurled him down.

For a minute I thought another rhinoceros would come and crush him before he could get up again, but to my astonishment he rose to his feet and limped away at a good rate into the bushes. Evidently he did not intend to trust to tree-tops again.

For a short while longer the rhinoceroses wandered about the camp, and then their interest shifted to our waggon, which they surrounded with the evident intention of upsetting it. They had not sufficient sense, however, to realize that if they pushed on both sides at once it would not go down, so they did not succeed in overturning it. All this time we fired at intervals into the mass of animals, meanwhile speculating among ourselves as to why such a large number of rhinoceroses had banded themselves together.

Presently, to our great relief, they tired of their sport and moved on farther into the wilderness. De Rubempré and O'Sullivan

followed them for some distance to see what they would do next, while I ordered, coaxed, or bullied the frightened natives into descending from their lofty roosting-places, where they much resembled a flock of crows.

One by one they came down and gathered round me, shivering with cold and terror, and casting apprehensive glances in the direction whence the marauding animals had disappeared.

After a time, however, I induced them to relight the fires, and then a few went to fetch the waggon-oxen. These by a lucky chance had been picketed at a distance in charge of five men, because of the more plentiful pasture there. The damage to our camp was not so great as it might have been, although the low tents under which we had been sleeping, our beds, and all the cooking utensils left outside the waggons, besides a few packs thrown down by the carriers, had been so trampled out of shape that it took a certain amount of divination and a vivid imagination to guess what they were.

When De Rubempré and O'Sullivan came in they reported that they had followed the herd for some distance. The animals seemed to form a fairly regular phalanx, following a given road.

They had gone down to the river, drunk and bathed, and then crossed by a ford and disappeared at a rapid pace on the other side.

Having hauled the waggons to a fresh camping place—for the old one was trampled into mud by the huge feet—we lit great fires and got to sleep at last, with our bones aching from the nocturnal gymnastics we had been compelled to indulge in.

Next morning we discovered a sort of path leading through the country which we had not hitherto noticed because of the spring growth covering the roughly-made way, trampled out by the feet of many wild animals during countless ages. It was apparently an animal trail leading to the river. That was as much of the secret of the huge beasts as we could fathom. We had camped across their pathway, barring their way to the water, and they naturally resented our conduct.

And so ended our adventure.



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From a Photo.