

SPORTING TRIPS OF A SUBALTERN

BY
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LATE 5TH DRAGOON GUARDS

WITH PHOTOS TAKEN IN THE FIELD, AND FROM
THE AUTHOR'S COLLECTION OF HEADS



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CHAPTER XI

RHINO, AND HOW NOT TO SHOOT THEM

WE were now practically on the confines of the barred Ogaden country, and of course began to hear wonderful tales of the number of rhino on beyond. We had, however, promised to limit ourselves to the eighth degree of latitude, so decided to do one march more to some pools, replenish our water-barrels, and then turn our steps northwards once more. On this march I, for the first time, saw rhino tracks; they were old, but impressed me much with the enormous power of the brutes. This one had apparently strolled *through* large thorn trees as we might walk through a bunch of grass. The cover here got very dense, one mass of "wait-a-bit" thorn trees as far as the eye could reach; in the distance, to the south, we got glimpses of a hilly country. Spots told me that in this country beyond there were large sandy water-courses, and that by watching these you could often see rhino coming down to drink, and get a fair shot. No one, he said, had ever

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killed a rhino in the heavy bush. In this manner he tempted me to push on into Ogaden; but I felt very selfish in even coming so far, as Eustace's big 10-bore rifle, which he had brought for rhino had come to a bad end in the encounter with the lion, and he had no weapon to tackle such a beast with, so that although he generously agreed to accompany me, knowing how keen I was on meeting rhino, I did not wish to keep him long, more especially as we soon found that the heavy bush held no other game, excepting a few gerenûk, which, I suppose, live there, as, like the rhino, they browse in preference to grazing.

We arrived at our pools and found them three in number, each about forty yards in diameter and quite shallow, rather like an Indian snipe "jheel." Tracks of rhino, about a week old, all round, were encouraging; but the look of the dense tangle of thorns all round prevented any great enthusiasm. Eustace at once got a beautiful gerenûk buck. We had now, I regret to say, not had a decent wash for a long time. We could never spare enough water to fill our small indiarubber bath, but the sight of the pools raised our hopes. We accordingly reserved the cleanest-looking one for our private use, and, deciding that such an important event as a really good wash was not to be hurried over, decided to have a "European" morning on the morrow, combined with a bath

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apiece. Eustace led off accordingly on June 3, and was still splashing in his tub while I was in bed gloating over the prospect of mine, when Spots' head, wild with excitement, was thrust into the tent with the news that a rhino was within a few miles. Bathing was "off," breakfast was "off," and, cramming a few biscuits into my pocket, I mounted my pony and was off myself. Abdi the son of Adan, our head-man, personally accompanied me, with Spots, my "syce," and a camel-man, who had charge of my water-bottle and a fid of cold oryx that my boy thrust on him for my lunch. I soon found a pony was impossible, and sent him home.

At 8.40 we were on absolutely fresh rhino tracks. I shall never forget that morning. I have seen the Addo bush in South Africa, also many of the thickest West-coast jungles, but for hard work that bit of Somali thorn bush beat them all. We positively had to crawl under the bushes most of the way. Huge thorns seized me by the hat, by the back of the coat, by the putties, and as fast as I was clear of one I was into another. It was like walking through a thickly coppiced wood with a fly-rod, only much more painful. Had it not been for those huge, fresh tracks I should have "chucked" it at once.

Of course the rhino had made a path, otherwise progress would have been impossible; but he had

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only broken the larger stems, the others had swung back after him. Owing to our creeping position, any animal standing fairly high on its legs couldn't make us out well, and I several times saw the limbs and bodies of *gerenük* quite close.

From 8.40 till midday we spooed like this, then suddenly—I am always using this word, but most things do happen suddenly when after big game—suddenly then, there was a terrific crashing just ahead with snorts for all the world like a train starting, and a mighty beast was away without a man of us seeing him. In another moment we were standing on the ground where he had been lying down, bang in the middle of a thorn bush. We had a short consultation, and decided to leave him for a bit to settle down and then to resume tracking. I was carrying my 12-bore rifle, which had hammers. These I had cocked when I heard the rhino, but owing to the danger of its going off by mistake while forcing my way through the bush, and anticipating no further excitement for a bit, I now let them down. Abdi Adan and the camel-man threw themselves on the ground for a blow; Spots strolled on a bit, examining the spoor; I was on my feet about ten yards behind Spots and twenty yards ahead of the other two. A whistle from Abdi Adan. I looked round and saw him wildly excited and pointing at something beyond me. Now it is always difficult to see the

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exact direction a man is pointing when he is behind and pointing at an object beyond you. Besides, his point of view was different, and he was lying down, looking under the bushes, while I was standing; anyway, I could see nothing, so again I looked back for information. Both men had gone! I looked forward to Spots: he had almost disappeared, was busy flattening himself under a bush, and so obviously trying to look as if he wasn't there that I remember for a second I felt amused—only for a second, however, for I at once felt my situation very dangerous. I was the only one of the party on my legs and at all visible. There was evidently a rhino very close, and I hadn't an idea where the danger was coming from.

Here I may remark that I attach no blame whatever to my men. The only beast a Somali really fears is the rhino. Besides this, had they come to me their movement would have precipitated a charge, and they afterwards said they imagined I had seen the animal. To my left was a transparent thorn bush, then about twenty yards fairly clear, then dense thorn again. In a moment—all this took place in an infinitesimally short space of time—a huge rhino came out of the dense bush at a lumbering trot, shaking his head up and down and heading straight for me. My rifle, as I have explained, was not

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cocked. Why hadn't I cocked it all this time? Well, all this time was only a few seconds, and I was so used to my hammerless weapons that cocked with a movement of my thumb; also, I suppose, I had been intent on looking for the rhino. I cocked, turned towards him, and brought my rifle up; but there was no time for more, my movement or the click of the hammers had caused him to locate me exactly, and putting his head down, he was on me with a rush—at least not quite on me, for luckily in a flash I knew the impossibility of stopping a rhino with a frontal shot, and I was so close that an instant's delay to get the sights on him, or even to simply press the trigger, and I was caught, so dropping my weapon and using both arms to clear the bushes, I made two or three springs back; I couldn't run properly in the thorns. I expected every instant to be hurled in the air, and I believe he was almost touching me when I took a mighty header,—like jumping through a screen—into a clump of thorns at right angles to my former path. Further movement was impossible; I was pinned, so lay like a mouse, feeling, I remember, a sense of relief that there was no more to be done; either he had seen my "jink," in which case I should soon be a pulp, or he hadn't and I was saved. Needless to say the latter was the case. I waited some time, and then heard a whistle,

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which I answered. I couldn't move; but soon Abdi Adan and Spots arrived and extricated me, torn to bits.

It appears the rhino on being first roused had not gone far, but had circled round and come in from a flank, so to speak. Abdi Adan had spotted him waiting for us, and subsequent examination proved that he had been invisible from where I had been standing. He had charged straight over where I had been, stopped just beyond the point where I took my dive into the thorn bush, pawed up the ground, and then walked away. My fleeting view of him had left the impression of a very large horn—perhaps this was only natural; anyhow, my relief that he hadn't got me was soon followed by awful grief that I hadn't got him. Abdi Adan and Spots now said that he was clearly a bad rhino, *i.e.* of an evil disposition, and that we should give him up. I, however, thought that as he had gone such a short way after the first rouse, he might be still hanging about, so decided to "refresh" and renew the pursuit. Unfortunately for the former, the cold oryx and water-bottle man had vanished completely, having bolted in the excitement, and was not again found till we got back to camp that night, where we discovered him posing as the sole survivor of the party.

The spoor now led straight through the thorn

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bush, the beast swerving neither to the right nor to the left for any obstacle, but leaving a broad path behind him, from which escape would have been impossible had we again met him face to face. At 2 p.m., being many miles from camp, without food or drink, having had practically none all day, and being obliged to perpetually carry the 12-bore, I decided that it would take us all our time to get back; so we turned, and, disappointed though I was, I fancy none of us were really sorry. The rhino was thoroughly roused, was evidently in no amiable temper, and the odds in this bush were rather on his bagging us than *vice versa*.

Late in the afternoon, on the edge of the heavy cover, we met Eustace, some men, and a spare pony coming out after the report of the cold-oryx man to fetch home our remains. I was never more glad to get on a horse in my life, and the thirst I had when I got in—well, it would have fetched a big price in some places; as it was, I did good justice to our somewhat uncommon beverage, tea and sugar, only with whisky instead of, or as well as, milk—highly recommended.