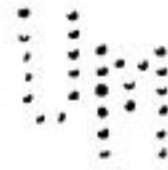


# A HUNTER'S CAMP-FIRES

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## IV

### RHINOCEROS-HUNTING

THERE seems to be a prevalent idea that the African rhinoceros is at the present time a rare and rapidly disappearing mammal. While this is essentially true of the so-called white or square-lipped rhinoceros (*R. simus*), which was formerly abundant but is now almost extinct in South Africa, the black two-horned rhinoceros (*R. bicornis*) still exists in comparatively large numbers in the eastern portion of The Dark Continent. This interesting beast is still more or less plentiful in suitable localities over the most of British East Africa. During a three and a half months' shooting-trip from Nairobi, which is three hundred miles inland from the east coast, my friend and I estimated that we saw something over eighty rhinoceroses apiece. And this was a small number compared with what other sportsmen and travellers have seen in portions of the Protectorate, where these beasts are more abundant. From reports this species of rhinoceros is also common in German East Africa, Somaliland, Abyssinia, the Sudan, and parts of Uganda. Although its range formerly extended to the south as far as Cape Colony, it is much less plentiful in the southern portion of Africa, where its numbers have been greatly reduced by English sportsmen, Boer hunters, and armed natives.

This rhinoceros is a solitary, morose beast, never being seen in larger than family parties of bull, cow, and calf. At the approach of civilization it retires to the wilder and more remote

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sections of the country. We often found the animals quite far from water in the dense thorn-bush, but they were also continually in view on the elevated grassy plains which constitute a large portion of the country. They seem to linger around the bases of the occasional rocky *kopjes* which extended up out of the bush, and freshly burnt country was always covered with intersecting trails of the three-toed circular tracks of this heavy animal. The wart-hog and the rhino are about the only two beasts which inhabit the burnt veldt until the short, green grass commences to sprout out of the blackened ground, and the grazing herds of game again move into the country. Other game seems to pay little attention to these slow-moving beasts, and I have noticed rhinos feeding among and surrounded by grazing zebra, hartebeest, oryx, waterbuck, and gazelle. The huge and substantial slate-colored mass of the rhino shows up in especially striking contrast with the surrounding group of diminutive, dainty, and brilliantly marked Thomson's gazelles.

The eye of the rhino is small, and its sight proportionately poor. I have heard from many sources that a man can approach to within forty yards of one of these beasts in the open without being discovered. I have never been anxious to verify this personally, as I have seen them spot and investigate moving objects many times this distance off. The rhino's ear, and especially its scent, is remarkably acute, and the least whiff of tainted breeze will either send these huge beasts off at a clumsy frightened trot or cause a slow and suspicious investigation.

Regarding the pugnacity of the rhino, every African hunter seems to have a different version; but while a number of white and black men have undoubtedly been killed, and a greater number have been forced to seek safety in flight or in trees; my opinion is that the majority of charging rhinos are beasts thrown into a panic and blindly seeking safety in the wrong direction. Except in rare cases, when once they have passed, rhinos blunder ahead until they are swallowed up in the bush

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or disappear over the distant horizon. There are cases where they show fight, and have been known to return after the first charge and deliberately hunt down the sportsman or native as a pointer would a stray bird. My friend unexpectedly approached too close to a mortally wounded rhino during the trip and was obliged to stop a feeble but determined charge with a heavy rifle. But, then, almost any wounded animal will fight as a last resort when cornered. One of the most exciting and damaging experiences which I had in Africa resulted from laying my rifle down in the grass and attempting to finish with my hunting-knife what I thought was an expiring half-grown male Grant's gazelle.

There was but one case during this trip where a rhinoceros charged the caravan out of pure viciousness. During the whole of one hot day, in the latter part of April, our caravan plodded across a comparatively level, dusty plain to the west of Mount Kenia. Among the herds of game scattered over the veldt were a number of rhinoceros, and during the march we saw fourteen of these huge beasts, the line of porters and donkeys passing quite close to some of them without either alarming or angering them. After passing through a patch of dense bush, the donkey-train, which was bringing up the rear, was halted a short distance out on a grassy plain in order to readjust the packs. While helping the packers at this work, Fuguet happened to look over his shoulder in time to see a bull rhinoceros emerge from the wall of bush through which the caravan had recently passed. As this rhino continued to advance in a threatening manner, my friend, who was unarmed, made a hasty retreat to where his gun-bearer was hurrying toward him with his heavy rifle. As he looked over his shoulder he saw that the rhino was following him at a trot, and porters and donkeys were scattering in every direction. When he grasped the rifle and whirled about, the enraged beast was thundering down upon him' at a full gallop, and the first barrel of the rifle,

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while it staggered the oncoming rhino, did not stop it. However, the second bullet shattered a shoulder and brought the rhino to the ground only a few yards distant, and before it could regain its feet my friend slipped in some cartridges and sent in the finishing shots. On investigation he discovered that this rhino had a deep, festering wound in its side, evidently received in an encounter with a rival bull or from one of the Andorobo spear-traps set in the branches of trees. This painful wound undoubtedly accounted for the pugnacious disposition of this beast. During the trip I saw one other rhino with a similar wound, but avoided its society.

During the heat of the day the rhinoceros dozes, flattened out on its side like a sleeping horse or leaning against a convenient tree-trunk, rock, or ant-hill. A number of times I have almost stumbled over sleeping rhinos in the thick bush, and I have occasionally seen them lying down in the short grass of open plains or on burnt ground among the acacias. Where undisturbed, the rhino feeds in the comparative coolness of the morning and evening, as well as during the night. As for the small, insectivorous birds seen fluttering about the backs of these animals in search of ticks, none of these so-called rhinoceros birds attempted to warn sleeping or feeding rhinos. The same birds seemed to perch on the backs of the native cattle.

In proportion to its size, the vitality of this animal is no greater than that of other African game, which seem to possess more endurance when wounded than big game of the temperate zone. One of the rhinos shot by Fuguet died instantly from a bullet through the heart from a .35 caliber Winchester. It was standing in the shade of an acacia, and at the report of the rifle doubled its short legs under it and sank to the ground without a kick. In walking, the rhino has a clumsy but deliberate gait. When trotting, although the erect head and tail and the high action of the short, straight legs under the massive

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body give the departing rhino a foolish appearance, nevertheless it is covering ground at remarkable speed. When the rhino is approaching at either a walk or trot, it loses considerable of its clumsy appearance and gives the hunter the impression of being a vicious and sinister beast. With these animals there seems to be no regular breeding season, as we noticed all stages of young, from the recently born to almost adult rhinos. Several times I saw mothers, when alarmed and retreating, guide and push the young one with their front horns.

The bull has a shorter but thicker front horn than the cow, but the rear horns of both sexes seemed about the same in circumference and length. Rhinos with the front horn extending straight out from the nose, as well as freaks with as many as five horns, have been killed in this portion of Africa. Although we saw numbers of rhinos, the section of the country which we were hunting in did not seem favorable for the growth of long horns. Notwithstanding the fact that we shot the best specimens we encountered, the front horn did not exceed twenty inches, and the rear horn half of that length, in any of them. In some portions of the country the horns of the cows reach enormous lengths, front horns measuring fifty-four inches having been secured.

The body of the rhino is compact and solid, and the short legs and spongy, three-toed feet seem ridiculously small for the support of such an enormous weight. With its small, pig-like eyes, prehensile nose, polished black horns, thick-folded skin, and great size, the rhino, on its native heath, reminds one of a beast from some former age stubbornly contesting its existence in the altered conditions of the present. Owing to the ease with which it can be approached and shot, its unsociability, and its size, the rhinoceros is slowly but surely disappearing before civilization and modern firearms.

One hot February morning found our column making a forced march through an acacia-covered country between two small

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streams some distance apart, which flowed down the western slope of Mount Kenia. I was picking the route some distance ahead of the foremost porters, whose marching-chant occasionally drifted to me through the trees, when I noticed a slight movement in the jumble of light and shade of a thicket sixty yards to the right. In travelling through the bush it pays to investigate anything unusual, and I immediately stopped and unslung my field-glasses. After scrutinizing this object with the glasses for a few moments, I realized that it was a rhinoceros facing me between the trunks of two trees, in the midst of a patch of thick but leafless dead bushes. Being armed only with a light rifle, I slipped back, stopped the line of singing porters, and secured the double-barrelled .450 Cordite Jeffery. Armed with this, and followed by Fuguet with a similar rifle, I approached the spot where I had last seen the rhino. It had evidently been dozing at the time, as it was now peacefully feeding through the trees away from us. By circling through the acacias I succeeded in intercepting the course of the animal, and waited for it to feed in my direction.

It was very impressive to watch the slow and deliberate approach of the enormous slate colored mass as it moved through the waist-high yellow grass toward the small thorn-tree, through the first fork of which I was resting the barrels of the heavy rifle. Around the bases of many acacias flourished thickets of bushes and brambles, into which the rhino would push its head, and then, raising it again, would stand in the same spot for several minutes with eyes, ears, jaws, and tail all in motion at the same time. Then it would lower its head again, and move slowly forward toward the muzzle of the double-barrelled rifle in the fork of the tree.

When about forty yards distant the great beast slowly swung around broadside, exposing the right shoulder, and at the same time raising its homely head and gazing in the direction of some laughter among the distant camp-followers. As

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the report of the rifle rolled away among the acacias, the rhino lurched forward, wheeled, and exposed the other shoulder, which brought forth another stunning roar from the second barrel. The wounded beast started away through the trees at a swaying gallop, followed by the roars of two more reports as Fuguet fired from his position, several yards to my left. After galloping furiously for about one hundred and fifty yards, the rhino pitched over on its side and was dead by the time we reached it. Both my bullets had reached the vitals, and the two fired by Fuguet had raked the animal, ranging forward through the body. This rhino proved to be an old bull, the front horn measuring nineteen and one-quarter inches in length and eighteen and one-half inches in circumference at the base. The rear horn was eight and one-half inches in length and seventeen and one-half inches in circumference. In the tenderer portions of the rhino, between the thick folds of skin where it was impossible for the animal to reach them or rub them off, were brilliantly colored ticks larger than a silver half-dollar.

When they received the news that the rhino was down, the porters came up to the scene and soon covered the carcass in a good-natured swarm at the work of cutting up and skinning. The head of the rhino was finally detached, the choicest parts of the coarse, fibrous meat were saved, and great strips of hide were cut away to make *kibokos*. The skinning out of the head had to be done in camp, as it is a long and tedious labor, owing to the fact that the skin, with the horns attached, fits very close to the skull, and it is necessary laboriously to cut away the connecting cartilage piece by piece. Then the skin has to be dried in the shade, as the heat of the equatorial sun is liable to cook and ruin it. On account of its thickness, it is necessary to have men continually paring down the skin during this process of drying. Our very excellent Swahili cook, after much pounding with the pole of an axe, would serve at the table the



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tenderloin of the rhino in the form of Hamburger steak. Each of the porters loaded as much of the meat as he could carry, in addition to his sixty-pound pack, and when in camp would eat what he could, and dry the remainder if no more edible game was killed in the mean time. If a few maggots collected in the meat in the process of drying, this fact did not affect the appetite of the unprejudiced Swahili. The slabs of thick skin cut from the back of the dead rhino would later be cut into thin strips by the men and stretched in camp, to be afterward whittled into rawhide walking-sticks and whips, or *kibokos*. The *kiboko*, which is the instrument of punishment on *safari*, derives its name from the fact that it is the Swahili word for hippopotamus, which also has an inch-thick hide like the rhinoceros.

Several months later, and several hundred miles north of this country, I started one morning at daylight to explore some bush-covered hills to the south of the stream on which we were camped. The hot sun had already dried the high grass when we reached a long, yellow plain winding through dense, green thorn-bush. When part way across this the gun-bearer whistled softly. Turning to the right and following the direction of his gaze, I saw two familiar bulky masses, three hundred yards distant, feeding parallel to our course. By the aid of the glasses, I judged that these two rhinos were a bull and cow, both with fair sets of horns, and feeding across the plain, one behind the other, forty yards apart. These beasts inhabited a red-clay country, and instead of the natural slate-gray color of rhinos in portions of the country, were quite red, owing to a coating of dried red mud, in which they had been wallowing to rid themselves of ticks. As we were not far from camp, and this seemed a favorable place to kill a rhino, I took the heavy rifle from Myzzio, and, sheltered by a patch of thorn-bushes, approached the feeding animals. My followers immediately climbed into the upper branches of some tall, dead

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trees in the centre of the plain, with the exception of the gun-bearer, who followed me with the second rifle. The last glimpse I had of these rhinos they were feeding peacefully away from us, but now, on peering through the scanty foliage of the bushes, I was disagreeably surprised to discover both huge beasts side by side and head on, regarding me with much interest, forty yards distant.

Fearing a sudden combined charge in the open, I hurriedly knelt down and fired both barrels into the larger of the two rhinos, which happened to be the cow. At the first report this animal swayed forward slightly, and then, at the second barrel, sank into a sitting position, and commenced painfully dragging itself across the plain toward the edge of the thick bush. I discovered later that the heavy bullet had missed the shoulder, but had travelled diagonally through the quartering beast, smashing the opposite hip-bone into fragments. I was prevented from finishing off the wounded animal by the actions of the second rhino, which, with head and tail erect in the air, continually circled its wounded mate at a clumsy gallop. Occasionally it would head straight for me, and when I was about to shoot in self-defence it would stop abruptly in a cloud of dust, gaze at me for a few moments, and then dash madly across the plain. Eventually the wounded rhino reached the edge of the thick bush. The bull, after beating around the thicket for a quarter of an hour, trotted out across the plain until it was swallowed up in the bush of the opposite side.

Entering the thicket on the blood-spattered track of the game, I had no trouble in locating the wounded beast by its continual and piercing squealing. Many times I had heard the familiar snort of the alarmed rhino, but other than that this was the first sound I had heard, and it was the squeal of the pig magnified many times. Through a maze of thorn-branches I could indistinctly see the outline of the rhino sitting on its haunches in the midst of a dense thicket; and not knowing at

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the time how badly it was wounded, I approached the spot with much caution. When I was only a few yards distant the beast gave a piercing scream and lurched through the bushes in my direction.

I hurriedly brought the heavy rifle to my shoulder and fired. Unfortunately, in my haste I fired both barrels simultaneously, and the answering roar of those one hundred and seventy grains of cordite remained in my ears for the remainder of the day. I did not lose my grip on the rifle, but stumbled into a small tree, momentarily stunned by the terrific recoil and deafening report of the outraged rifle. Neither bullet struck the rhino, which sank down among the bushes, squealing and moaning with rage and pain. My head and shoulder had received such a jar from the heavy recoil that I had no further ambition to fire the large rifle that day, and was content with sending several steel bullets from the smaller weapon into the head of the struggling beast to end its sufferings. The horns of this cow rhinoceros measured as follows: Front horn—length, eighteen inches; circumference, seventeen and one-quarter inches; rear horn—length, fifteen and one-half inches; circumference, sixteen and one-quarter inches. It was late in the afternoon when we reached the tents with the head and such portions of the meat as the blacks could carry.