

JUNGLE GIANTS

By

NEWELL BENT, Jr.



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CHAPTER IX

Rhinoceros

ON returning home from my crater excursion I found the District Officer's tent erected, and so slept there that night. Later, when the low grunts of several lions awoke me as they passed by in the darkness, I was thankful for even that flimsy canvas protection. In reality, I should have been glad that the lions had already hunted well, for, incited by pangs of hunger, one of them could have struck out with his well-sharpened claws and torn the tent to shreds in an instant. The natives here told me that they always see plenty of lion tracks in the morning, but never view the beasts during the day. This is because there are European planters on the southern slopes of Ngorongoro who come hunting for him here, and Simba has become wary. On the northern rim it is another story, for that marks the beginning of the great Serengeti Plains Game Reserve, where multitudes of lion may be seen in broad daylight. These are the famous "tame lion," which have been pampered and fed so well, by big game photographers, that you can approach by car to within a few yards without antagonizing them. It is here, also, that Martin Johnson encountered a stupendous herd of zebra and wildebeeste migrating. The herd stretched across a ten-mile front, and, behind, the swarming bodies disappeared into the distance, where the eye could not judge their limits. Johnson spent several days counting this herd, and his conservative estimate was ten million head!

In the crater of Ngorongoro, I probably saw no more than one hundred thousand head of mixed game, yet even that number was an astounding sight.

At dawn, realizing that it would be some time before the porters thawed out, I got one askari on his feet, and set forth in search of buffalo. Every night heavy mists collect on Ngorongoro, but by eight o'clock these are thinning, and by ten have usually completely disappeared. When we started, light was just beginning to break through the gloom, but the fog drifted eerily back and forth, and we might well have found ourselves face to face with our quarry before we knew it. After considerable searching, we came to a muddy water hole, and, judging by the hoof marks about it, decided that buffalo had been there within the last quarter of an hour.

After nosing about for a couple of hours without viewing any game larger than a bushbuck, I decided that the buffalo had retired into the deepest part of the forest, and so turned back toward camp. On the way I took the opportunity to remind the askari that the Provincial Commissioner would be visiting Ngorongoro the next day with the English schoolboys, and that if he didn't have the porters on their way quickly, when we arrived at camp, I would see that the Commissioner heard of his drunkenness and general insolence. This greatly alarmed the rascally fellow, who fell in behind me doglike, probably to be in a good position for making as many foul grimaces in my direction as he pleased. To his immense relief, we met my Wanyanwezi cook who had aroused the porters singlehanded, and was leading them down the road in masterful fashion. So I paid the askari off, and felt relieved to be rid of him. He was lazy, fat, and knew too much. African natives, I learned, are a direct refutation of ancient theory, for only the lean and hungry ones are liable to be trustworthy.

Going along the rim, I paused for a last look into the crater. The black lines of wildebeeste still trailed across the plain, and groups of the less easily distinguishable zebra

were grazing here and there. Even though I had taken many photographs at Ngorongoro, I knew it was a spectacle of which I would never need pictorial reminder.

Close to the foot of the mountain I stopped for lunch in an acacia grove. While eating, I noticed a neat little house on a ridge directly opposite me, and decided to call and find out who lived there. A charming young German woman was at home, with whom I managed to hold a stilted conversation by means of my poor German and worse Swahili. She was a gracious person, and invited me to return for tea and meet her husband, who would then be back from his work in the fields. His name was Karl Rhode, and a more hospitable man never lived. His house was efficiently planned with true Teutonic meticulousness, yet at the same time, it was immensely comfortable. I not only had tea there but remained for dinner. Rhode seemed interested in my photographic efforts, and told me I would find rhino in the neighborhood. Only a few days before two of the brutes had been charging around his barnyard annoying the cattle. In spite of occasional disturbances such as this, he seemed to have a real affection for them, and asked me when I was photographing to avoid getting into a position where I should have to shoot in self-defense. He arranged to have a native who knew the country report at my camp at an early hour.

Before dawn we were off. The black boy carried my gun, while I took charge of the two cameras. A half mile beyond Herr Rhode's house we came to a swampy stream bed and followed it down to where it connected with an extensive marsh. Sitting on a hill above this place, we watched carefully for some fifteen minutes, but were unable to detect any game moving in the long grasses below.

Disappointed here, I decided to try upstream, and after half an hour's walk we began to see fresh spoor, mostly of

the rhino, but with some signs of buffalo and elephant. We left the bottom and climbed the left bank following some tracks. However, it soon became evident that we had chosen the wrong side of the stream, for tremendous snorts and considerable crashing came suddenly from the wooded slopes opposite. I went quickly down to the swampy ground again, which I crossed, but not without being painfully assaulted once more by that stinging mint-like plant encountered two days before. As we ascended the right bank the snorts became louder. The boy whispered "Tembo," but kneeling down and peering through the brush I discovered two rhino facing each other. They had been trying their strength in a little friendly butting match, and each time they came in contact they made the loud snorts which had first made their presence known to me.

Although we had stalked them as silently as two "second-story" men, our approach must have been suspected, for they stopped hostilities though they continued to stand in the same position. I crawled closer on all fours and worked the camera at twenty feet. One of the rhino decided he had had enough sparring for the day, and went off down a dim trail. The other remained, so I climbed a sturdy tree and by whistling shrilly tried to make him charge in my direction. It unfortunately had the opposite effect and he bolted away. Calling the boy from some hiding-place he had discovered, I followed the path the rhino had taken. Walking quietly, we came to a place where a mass of thick vines grew, tangled across the game trail. We ducked our heads low to pass under these and on the other side, rising simultaneously from our cramped position, we found ourselves confronted at ten paces by the infuriated rhino. The gun boy let out a frightened gasp and disappeared into the underbrush, taking the gun with him. The huge creature charged, first in his direction then in mine, and, finding neither of us, careered off in a blind fury like a locomotive

gone berserk. Minutes later I could still hear him ripping through the brush on a distant hillside.¹

I had retreated back up the trail, but now returned to the recent scene of action. Some ill-turned bird notes came from a nearby tree, out of whose dense foliage I soon flushed my goggle-eyed gun boy. We turned our attention to the other rhino, which had gone off before the rumpus started, but he also must have been alarmed, for we could find no trace of him other than where he had blundered through a stream, muddying the water. We then turned up-stream once more, and around ten o'clock roused a buffalo which was napping in the path. There was a staccato clatter of sharp hoofs, and he was gone. At the time we were peering into the underbrush at the side, never expecting anything in the path, so he quickly disappeared allowing us only a momentary glimpse of his dark hide. Having the greatest respect for these fellows, especially in such close quarters as this, I carried the gun myself for a while, to be ready if he should take it into his head to turn back on us. This time he must have considered flight wiser than fight, for we saw no more of him.

Going on uphill for half an hour, we found ourselves in the densest sort of jungle which forbade a clear view ahead. A sudden crashing within a stone's throw brought us to a standstill. Elephant spoor all about showed us plainly what we were dealing with. The boy, I found upon looking behind me, had already bolted, taking the rifle to a place of safe-keeping along with his worthless self. I climbed a small tree, but could see nothing in the way of game. However, the violent shaking of the foliage a short distance off showed that the elephant had chosen to retreat rather than come my way. For this I was thankful, ensconced as I was in a

¹ It is on record that a line of convicts chained by the neck was charged by a rhinoceros. The beast struck a prisoner in the center of the line and the force of his rush broke the necks of the others.

frail refuge and only my cameras to shoot with. The underbrush was so thick that I reluctantly decided it was hardly justifiable for me to stalk, in such precarious surroundings, the first wild elephant I had ever encountered. A guarded cough showed where the negro had hidden himself in the forest. When I located him, it was directly apparent that the pursuit of big game held for the moment no place in his thoughts. He stood with a dreamy look in his eyes, gazing up at a great hollow tree which gave forth a buzzing sound. With a half smile on his ample mouth, which driveled gently in anticipation, he contemplated the feast of honey that should be his. When I spoke to him sharply, he murmured the Swahili word for food, and followed me in a beatific daze, bending twigs here and there so that he might know the way back to his new-found treasure.

Returning to camp I had lunch and an hour's rest before starting out again. The pop-eyed gun boy was with me, and together we followed up Herr Rhode's irrigation ditch several miles to a fine big swamp with a number of water holes. This seemed a tempting spot for game in the late afternoon. The boy climbed a tree to get a distant view over the swamp, and I seated myself at the crossing of two game trails, being prepared to withdraw down one of these should anything be approaching along the other. Soon a terrific noise in the underbrush broke out close at hand. Looking up at the boy in the tree I saw him making clawing motions which I interpreted as "lion!" I swarmed up the tree in breathless fashion so as to be out of Simba's path, and in a good position to take a picture of him. It soon became apparent that my "lion" was merely some baboons below, who, angry at our intrusion, were shaking the bushes. Being reassured, I returned to earth, swinging down with the aid of the vines in true "Tarzan" fashion, an effort I found a bit exhausting since I was carrying my Ciné cam-

era in my teeth and couldn't open my mouth to take a breath.

Nothing came to the water holes, and at six o'clock I started back toward camp. It was getting dark now, and the undergrowth looked very black. The native insisted on trying to lead me down to the damp, gloomy valleys full of all manner of unpleasant flora which tore the clothing and stung the body, to say nothing of the game that head for such places at this hour of the day. I exhausted both myself and the negro driving him back to the ridges, where the paths were open and some rays of light still favored us. We finally took a middle path which brought us back to the irrigation ditch, but before we reached its guiding waters I cursed the black oaf at every stride, for though he was supposed to know the country well he had forgotten the path by which we had come. Also I cursed him because I clumsily got a stick in my eye, because he kept barging through thorns and groaning horribly when his hide was torn, because I fell on my face striking my camera against a tree, and finally because when I reached the ditch (not realizing we were near it) I sat violently down in it. Thus we passed two convivial hours together. When we regained the house, Herr Rhode (in spite of the revolting appearance which was quite naturally mine) asked me to dinner. I went to the camp, washed, changed my clothes, and returned to a delicious meal. Bed that night felt good after a hard day for mind and body.

The black boy, instructed to meet me at six the next morning, neglected to do so. I couldn't really blame him, for he had not brought home any honey, and when some immense beast wasn't hounding him, I was. Of course he had lugged the Mannlicher before, and now I must carry that as well as my camera. On the other hand, it would be hard to say, upon the advent of a snorting rhino, exactly to which point of the compass he would have carried it. Going

alone with so much equipment I had to travel more slowly, but it was some satisfaction to have everything I needed within reach.

I had been walking hardly fifteen minutes toward the side of the nearest ridge, when crunching noises in a swamp below me betrayed the whereabouts of some large game. Where I stood on the ridge the vegetation was thick but low, and afforded fair visibility. Between me and the sounds below was more of that dense tropical forest which had caused me so much grief the day before. There were, however, plenty of broad game trails traversing it. Creeping stealthily down through one of these forbidding corridors, I arrived at the swamp's edge. Thirty yards away a rhinoceros was enjoying his breakfast. As he masticated the luscious green leaves growing on the shrubs in this damp bottom, his huge grinding molars caused the sounds I had heard when still a hundred yards away on the hillside above. As I watched his gastronomic exertions abashed, another rhino, until then unnoticed by me, rose from his bed in the grass. Being somewhat closer than the first, he had either heard or scented me, and both, now, realizing that an intruder was near, swung about in my direction. I recognized them as the same two I had seen the previous day. This little valley was their especial domain, and intruders were not welcome. Situated as I was at the edge of the forest, the rhino with their poor eyesight were unable to distinguish me, but they came forward slowly feeling the wind. I knew it was only a matter of moments before they would detect me, and although it is not so difficult to avoid one of them when they charge, it is another story when two of the great blunderers take after you together. Turning back, I hastened into the dim protective twilight of the jungle. They must have seen me when I moved, for they came along more rapidly to investigate. As I ran up the path they broke into the underbrush behind me. Here I was really at

a disadvantage, for the path which I followed wound tortuously, forcing me to travel further than the rhinos, who with their immense bulk and strength could strike directly through the tangled growths. Because of this, I soon found one on each side, and almost flanking me. It was a ticklish position. Until then I had found carrying two cameras and a gun somewhat laborious, but now being thoroughly scared, I no longer noticed their weight. With a burst of speed, hitherto unsuspected by me, I arrived at the top of the ridge once more, outran the brute on my right, and doubled back around him where the wind was favorable and the pace of living conditions more moderate.

They came to a stop near-by, where I could glimpse them through the brush as they puffed and snorted, trying the wind for scent. Being unable to smell anything suspicious, they settled down to eating once more. After a little they decided to move on, and then came the most exciting moment of the day. Not knowing they were headed in my direction, both rhino came straight at me along a little path in which I was standing. I was nearly petrified with indecision, but I had my camera going, and the machinery was clicking merrily with a reassuring note. When the rhino were ten yards off they saw me clearly. One turned sideways and stood with his head behind a bush, his little tail pointing straight up in alarm, while the other, squaring off in the path with lowered horn, dared me to make the first move. I knew any action on my part would draw a charge, so I stood there in clammy suspense until both animals suddenly and unaccountably shot off to the right, taking refuge in a dense thicket. After that not a sound came to me, and in spite of climbing a tree to locate them, they made their escape with so little noise that it was impossible for me to tell where they went, or even when they departed.