



A CHARGING (?) RHINOCEROS

WHEN IS A CHARGE? *By CAPTAIN PAUL CURTIS*

THE article by "M. T. S." in the issue of May 27th, under the title "Risks with Dangerous Game," prompts these observations on the subject. I quite agree with the writer that "practically no beast is dangerous until one has made it so." And I will go even further than that and declare that far too often big game is considered dangerous in a mistaken belief that it is charging when actually that is the furthest thing from its intention.

I once drew a storm of protest about my head by making the statement in an American sporting magazine that all of the so-called dangerous game in the country could be driven from the Rockies into the Pacific Ocean with a carriage whip—but I have modified my opinion since. The point is that the wish is father to the thought that big game is dangerous. Just as when we were children we liked to believe in Santa Claus, so we persist in fostering the idea. What hunter of big game in his inner self does not fancy the opinion that he is a man of prowess?

However, one can be quite honestly mistaken in believing that a panicky rush to escape is a deliberate charge. For as the late Colonel Roosevelt once pointed out to me, there are four general directions in which a wounded or missed beast may go when a shot is fired—directly away, or directly towards the shooter, or to the left or right, which means that there is a 1 to 3 chance that the beast may run in the general direction of the shooter.

One may believe that the chances of it running towards the shooter when only trying to escape are very remote, until the excuse for it is known. For instance, let us say that an unsuspecting animal is quietly feeding and is first apprised of the proximity of the stalker by the roar of his rifle. Quite often the animal does not know from what direction the noise came, and may easily run slap at it. It is all the more likely if the animal is struck, and shock is added to the element of surprise, and it is particularly true of mountain stalking, where the noise of the rifle is re-echoed and hurled back and forth from mountain to mountain until it sounds more like a bombardment than a single shot.

Another contributory factor is that most mountain game is seen and stalked above the timber line, and generally the stalker approaches it from below. Naturally, when frightened, the game makes for the timber, and that brings it downhill towards the stalker. It is for this reason that old hunters always say one should never approach a grizzly from below, as it is more apt to charge, and is coming so fast that it is difficult to stop. Personally, I believe that in these instances the charge so called is nothing but an effort to reach cover in the shortest possible time, though, of course, if you are right in the bear's way you may get into trouble. I recall such an instance many years ago in Wyoming when we were hunting a grizzly, and it came down

a hill and almost ran over my guide; in fact, it was so close that it slapped at him with a roar as it passed, ripping a boot off the guide's leg and bowling him over, but the bear did not stop to continue the fight. Nine times out of ten the victim of such an affair would go home and say he was charged, but we know better.

A perfect example of a mistaken charge was given to me several years ago. While some 200 miles north of the Transcontinental Railway, in Canada, I ran into another hunting party. I had, at the time, secured my quota of game, but the other sportsman had been less fortunate, and was afraid that he was going home without his bear. However, I had seen three of them on a slide where they were feeding a day's ride back, and offered to return and show his guide the place, as I had nothing better to do.

Sure enough, when we arrived at the place the bears were still there, and we began the stalk. We crept up to within about 200 yds., or less, of them, behind some stunted mountain junipers which were little more than waist-high.

There were three bears, apparently an old female and two yearlings. The old bear was busily engaged in digging out a marmot for her supper, and had made such an excavation that only her stern was visible, as she made the earth and rocks fly. After waiting vainly for her to back out and turn the guide told the sportsman to shoot at her, and apparently he only grazed her flank, for she came out of the hole with a roar of rage and struck the nearest yearling a tremendous blow that sent it reeling down the slope. No doubt the old lady thought it had bitten her—at any rate, she started for the timber and came straight at the spot where we were sitting. The sportsman continued to fire as fast as he could operate the bolt of his Mauser, and missed four times. By then the bear was getting too close for comfort, and I raised my rifle to finish it off as he frantically began reloading; but the guide coolly told me to hold my fire, and standing up he hurled his sombrero with a piercing yell at the approaching bear. The beast stopped as if it had four-wheel brakes, and turning aside disappeared in the cover.

We were all certainly justified in believing that we were being charged, and the guide took a chance in letting it get so close; but the result warranted his suspicion that the bear had not seen us, and I always admired his sportsmanship in refusing to kill it for the patron who had been given such an excellent chance and made a mess of it.

However, one must not make the mistake of thinking that because one animal refuses to charge they are all alike; their personality differs just as ours does. I, personally, know two men who were mauled by grizzly, and also knew two others who were killed outright. In every instance it was due to getting too close to the bear unawares. One is an Indian, who has lost the use of both of

his arms, which he thrust in a grizzly's jaws to save his life. The poor fellow had a very old rifle of low power, and he crept up to about 20 yds. of his bear before opening fire. That was his mistake. The other is a forest ranger, who was at death's door for months as a result of an unprovoked attack. He came upon a grizzly unexpectedly while it was feeding on the carcass of a moose, and it rose and rushed him before he had time to fire. Another case of being too close, which so often prompts a charge. If there had not been a light fall of snow on the ground the bear would have heard his footsteps and most likely have made off before he was in sight.

Of the two who were less fortunate, one was killed on Kodeak Island, Alaska, and found dead in thick scrub with the bear dead beside him; the other was an unarmed forester, killed near Jasper, Alberta. So I cannot quite agree with "M. T. S.," that the grizzly owes a certain amount of its reputation to its name. I used to think, as he does, but four such cases within the limited scope of one man's acquaintances are too many to warrant it. I have also learned that a great deal depends upon environment. In some sections of the continent, the grizzly are largely vegetarian until the salmon run, when they subsist on fish.

These bears seldom charge. But on the eastern slope of the Rockies where there are no salmon, where it is colder and berries are scarcer, the bear are almost entirely meat-eaters, and they are much more dangerous. There was one section of south-western Alberta where, shortly after the War, the grizzly had, as a mass, become man-eaters, and would actually stalk the hunter—but there was a reason for it.

The country spoken of was the hunting ground of the Stoney Indians, a tribe of which about 70 per cent. were wiped out by the great influenza epidemic of 1918-19. The Stoneys lived in dugouts—a great hole dug in the ground, logged over and covered with sod. In the centre of the roof was an opening which served as entrance and chimney, and the sole source of light and ventilation. These abodes afforded a perfect situation for the influenza to do its worst work. When some of a community died the others got frightened, and, deserting the sick with the dead, they rode away to the next village—so it spread like a prairie fire.

Bears like their meat high, and their noses soon led them to these charnel-houses. It was then but a step from feeding on the dead to killing such of the living who were too weak to defend themselves. They lost their fear of man and acquired a supreme contempt for the puny things. So much so that when a man I knew disregarded advice and went into the country a year or two later to hunt bear he had to get out in a hurry. He found to his surprise and embarrassment, that the bear he was hunting were stalking him. There was no chance to rest for they were after him all night, so he saddled up and got out as soon as he could. For some years in that locality practically every shot fired at a bear that did not drop it in its tracks provoked a charge.

However, this is an unusual case. I realise that the big game of Africa and Asia presents many species more apt to charge than the grizzly, particularly amongst the cat tribe. Nevertheless, I feel sure that, even there, many an attempt to escape in the wrong direction is mistaken for a charge, and were it not for the fact that jungle shooting makes it necessary to get to close quarters, there would be fewer determined charges.

With rare exceptions harassed game will not come on intent on mischief for over 100 yds., usually it is not over 25 yds. It is when they feel that they are too close either to run or sink that they put up a fight.

To cite an instance: I always scoffed at the suggestion that a moose would fight; but one day when we were following a trail in New Brunswick we suddenly ran into a moose in a small clearing. It was a splendid bull, and not over 15 yds. from us; but as it was in bright sunlight and we were in the deep shadows of the forest, it made no attempt to run off, but came slowly towards us grunting a challenge, probably thinking that we were another bull.

The guide, who was unarmed, went up a tree like a monkey, as I motioned to my companion, who had never killed a moose, to take it. Fortunately, I noticed that his rifle barrel was wobbling owing to excitement as he raised it, and I prepared to back him up. At the report of the Mannlicher, the bull dropped its head and came right at us, and a quick shot from my Springfield, which tore a vertebra completely out of its neck, pulled up the beast at our feet. The guide said we were charged, my companion said so, and I suppose we were; but did the beast see us, did it know what we were, or was that blind rush just the reflex action to the first shot? I will never know. At any rate, it is one of a very few rare cases when a moose has come on.