



"How the Rhinoceros got his Skin"

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*Notes edited
by Lisa Lewis*

[November 10th 2014]

Publication history

First published in *St Nicholas Magazine*, February 1898, illustrated by Oliver Herford and introduced by: “[Now this is the last tale and it tells how the Rhinoceros got his wrinkly skin.](#)” Collected in *Just So Stories*, 1902, illustrated by the author and followed by the verse “This uninhabited island”:

[This uninhabited island](#)

■ [Is near Cape Gardafui:](#)

[But it's hot - too hot - off Suez](#)

■ [For the likes of you and me.](#)

[Ever to go in a P. & O.](#)

■ [To call on the Cake Parsee.](#)

The story

There was once a Parsee living on an uninhabited island in the Red Sea, with a shiny hat, a knife and a cooking-stove. One day he mixed a fruit cake and put it in the stove to bake. When it was done, a Rhinoceros with a smooth, tightly-fitting skin came along, upset the stove and ate the cake, while the Parsee took refuge up a tree.

On a very hot day five weeks later, the Rhinoceros took off his skin,

which buttoned underneath, and left it on the beach while he bathed. The Parsee filled it full of stale crumbs from previous cakes, so that when the Rhinoceros put it on they tickled. He rolled and rubbed himself against the tree, till his skin went into great wrinkles and the buttons came off. Ever since, rhinoceroses have had wrinkly skins and very bad tempers because of the tickly crumbs inside.

The Parsee packed up his stove and went away.

Background notes

The manuscript of the story is in the volume "*Just So Stories*" at the British Library, where it is headed "Why the Rhinoceros' Skin doesn't fit". There is no evidence for when it was written, but the general heading "Just So Stories" in *St Nicholas Magazine* places it as one of the bedtime stories Kipling told his daughter Josephine [see headnote to ["How the Whale got his Throat"](#)].

The idea of a merchant and a rhinoceros on an "uninhabited island" that is mysteriously connected to an exotic hinterland may have come from E.W. Lane's *Arabian Nights*, a favourite book in Kipling's family, of which there is a set in his study.

In ch. xx, "The Story of es-Sindibad of the Sea ['Sinbad the Sailor' in other versions] and es-Sindibad of the Land", the section "The Second Voyage" has es-Sindibad stranded on an uninhabited island. To escape, he attaches himself to a huge bird (the *rukḥ* or *roc*). It flies him to a place visited by merchants and inhabited by rhinoceroses, from which he returns home with a pocket full of diamonds. Socotra is mentioned in Lane's note 38 to this chapter.

Critical Opinion

Rosalind Meyer, in "But is it Art?", ([Kipling Journal](#) 232, Dec. 1984) wrote:

Those who wield power and influence are not left to enjoy it within the confines of fantasy as does the King in a fairy tale, but are open, just as in the world we know, to challenges from recalcitrant subjects. The Parsee pits his wits against the brute force of the Rhinoceros [p. 13].

The game [of words] is played in many ways. When Kipling wishes, he can even put the meaningless etcetera to meaningful or at least emotive use – [quoted page 17, lines 14-17]. The hyperbole is promoted in the apparently childish phrase “and things”, which at the same time suggests, albeit mischievously and in neat self-parody, the adult mysteries of the culinary arts. “[It was indeed a Superior Comestible \(that’s Magic\)...](#)” [p. 24].

John McGivering has drawn our attention to a [splendid version of this tale](#), in Chaucerian English, by Jed Hartman, which we feel Kipling would have strongly approved of.

[L.L.]