

OUT IN THE BLUE

BY

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WITH A PREFACE BY

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WITH 77 ILLUSTRATIONS
AND A MAP



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CHAPTER XX

SEMLIKI VALLEY AND WHITE NILE

NOT until that afternoon towards the end of November, when the sun gilded the foothills of Ruwenzori, and the Semliki plains stretched out, drowning in distance, could I believe in this last trip. Not till I scrambled down the escarpment into that fond immensity of breathing earth and trees and stone, the voices of the little doves melting into the silence that fell around me, could I realise that I had been permitted to come back to it. In fact it was not until night returned, and the old, throbbing song of crickets, and the tent was once more pitched against the stars, that I understood how overwhelming had been the kindness shewn me, how it was alone by that strong help and kindness, and that everyone had wished it, that this had been made possible.

The Ituri forest had been ruled out. There were sufficiently good reasons against it, chiefest of them that it was not on British territory.

The white rhino was quite a big enough task. I had gone on doggedly maintaining that I could manage it, yet now that I was to go ahead, all difficulties swept aside for me but the natural ones, the enterprise grew suddenly daunting. Because it was no longer the collection alone, and success or failure my own affair ; I had been backed up, helped on every side, up to a point believed in ; so that it was now doubly and trebly vital to succeed.

There was no hazard about it, no beast alive is

more docile than a white rhino, no shooting poorer sport. The difficulty would be to find a good specimen, and much more, to remove the whole skin. The bulk of it was great, and the skin thicker than elephant's. Months ago we had heard what an undertaking it was likely to be, how the horn alone cost a day's labour to remove. As with the elephant skin, it would be a race against time, and the climate, moreover, would not be an ally, the heat on the banks of the Nile that damp heat like the Lorian in the rainy season.

The boys, however, were keen, that was the chief thing; and in the meantime there was nearly a fortnight in which to secure a good waterbuck in the Semliki valley.

Just where the best heads were to be found, how to hunt the banks of a little stream called the Dura, Capt. S., who knew every acre of this district, had already told me, and had even furnished me with a rough map; so that if I failed to lay low that big waterbuck, it was not for want of knowing where to look for him. On the other hand, a worse time of year could not have been chosen; the grass, still too green to burn, was a jungle that in some places reached higher than one's head, so that one might have walked within 5 yards of the record and been none the wiser.

It was like hunting in the dark, fighting a way through those rank walls, and every now and then climbing a tree for a look out; and twice, at least, we should have literally stumbled upon buffalo, had not the tick birds flown up and warned us.

This special licence which had been granted me, allowed two waterbuck. Two chances for a good head, and at the end of three days, one of these chances had been thrown away.

It was after a long march, and we had reached a waterhole and pitched camp. The boys had seen a bull, we spooed but never came up with him, when, before dark, we saw him making back for the waterhole. Posting myself, I saw him come leisurely towards me, picking his way across the open. His horns made me tremble for excitement, and the bullet sped all too true, for I had to beat 32 inches, and when I laid the steel tape over them, it would give not a fraction over 28.

With one chance left, I was determined to hunt the banks of the Dura systematically until the time was up, and then take the best that offered. But it was disheartening work, for the boys especially, for when after hours of tramping we would at last find a herd, looking it over in vain for something good, I invariably turned away.

Not only that, but the Dura was salt, and we had not been encamped there twenty-four hours before everyone had the symptoms of dysentery. It became obvious that it was only a matter of falling ill enough, and we might not get the second waterbuck at all; so when one morning, still three days before the ship was to call for us, I had seen and passed by at least eight fairly good heads, and we came upon a single beast which the boys declared was the best we had yet found, I decided to risk all on him.

He gave us a great hunt, always crashing off among the trees as we were coming up, so that I, too, began to prize him. The chance came as he paused between two bushes, and the sun catching his horns in a wide arc above his head, put to flight my last doubt, and I fired. But the steel tape marked inexorably $30\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

Regrets unavailing, I postponed them, and pre-



SEMLIKI VALLEY, LOOKING TOWARDS RUWENZORI



WATERHOLE IN THE SEMLIKI VALLEY

tended to be pleased, for the boys were delighted, and they had worked for him with unflagging patience for what had seemed more like weeks than days. He was a fine specimen, and we took the skin.

Comparing the measurements of both these bulls with the bull of Kinyonza, I found there was a considerable difference. The Kinyonza bull was nearly 6 inches higher at the shoulder. The kob, on the contrary, seem to be larger in the Semliki than in the Congo. As they appeared to have more white round the eyes and ears, I collected a pair, the ram measuring 3 inches more at the shoulder than the largest Congo specimen we had collected.

The best time of the day was that hour before sunset, and taking the shot-gun on the chance of a guinea-fowl, I would wander out alone. Moving quietly among the bushes, I once came upon a waterbuck within a few yards. We halted, gazing at one another, he burnished in sunlight; and presently he bent his head to nibble the grass, as though reassured I was no enemy.

Between the Semliki and Rhino Camp, the *Baker* broke her voyage for a week at Butiaba, a station built at the end of a desolate tongue of sand.

Beyond watching the birds along the shores of Lake Albert, and trying water-colour sketches, there was nothing in the world to do there, and since it could provide neither porters nor food supplies, there was no hope of escaping from it.

As a matter of fact, I was very lucky to have got so far, for I had foolishly allotted November thirty-one days in my diary, and only by fluke happened to notice an almanac on the back of a writing-block. That was at three o'clock in the afternoon, it was a day later than I had reckoned, and between camp and the lake shore was a day's

march. We made Ntoroko sometime after sunset, and the *Baker* arrived in at sunrise. It was a near thing, and had we missed her, there had been no white rhino either, for it would have meant the loss of a fortnight, and the licence expired at the end of the year—a heavy price to pay for learning that November has but thirty days.

The week at Butiaba eventually came to an end, and after a trip of about eighteen hours, the *Baker* steamed round a bend of the Nile, and drew in alongside under the trees at Rhino Camp.

The wilds by now seemed more than ever desirable, and I was eager to trek to the nearest water-hole as soon as everything was put ashore. But inland there was no water, so there was nothing but to pitch the tent in the rest camp by the river. It was Capt. W. who told me this, and he had come down to meet me, being under orders to remain at Rhino Camp until the white rhino had been disposed of beyond the remotest possibility of being dangerous.

Had I been alone, I should have striven after B.'s example and worked for a good trophy, if necessary, until New Year's Eve. But although one might tramp day after day perfectly happily, when it was for one's own great object, it was inconceivable that someone else, with no interest in it whatever, should be compelled to tramp also, and had I been alone, the rhino would doubtless be roaming through the bush to this day.

As it was, we had only three days' hunting, and I was more than grateful for help, for fear dogged me that I might not stay the course. To have overcome what had appeared the greatest difficulties, and to fail at the eleventh hour merely because I felt physically unfit, was a kind of defeat that could never be outlived.

The grass was as high as in the Semliki, and a couple of hunts convincing us of the unlikelihood of chancing upon rhino in such cover, we fired it. Fortunately it was dry enough to catch and spread, and there were soon bush fires great enough to throw up a light into the night sky. After this, the country was a blackened prairie, and the ashes rose underfoot in choking clouds, but one could at least see.

Setting off by starlight—(and how unforgettable that smell of ashes under the dew)—by the time the east warmed, we came to the place where we had last seen rhino spoor. The boys went out to reconnoitre, but the sun had climbed into the heavens, and the dew and freshness had gone long before any word came back. Another day wasted, I thought, but after all, it was not likely that a white rhino was to be had without working pretty hard for him. Besides, we had seen two or three bulls already, and decided that they were not good enough. But presently the askaris came to report a rhino feeding close by.

The wind was shifty, for it was that time of day when it is still undecided which way to blow, and tries alternately from every quarter. Three times we retraced our way, and when we reached the spot, the only indications of rhino were his retreating footsteps through the ashes.

It was past midday when we saw three rhino standing in the shade of some bushes, a cow and calf, and the bull a little way behind them. Then began again the business of deciding upon the length of his horn. As he lifted his head, the horn in profile, black in the shadow against the glare beyond, looked immense, at another angle indifferent, yet again, a good sweeping curve to make your heart

beat. I held up the 30-inch stick which H.E. told me would serve as a rough guide, but even then I could not make up my mind. Capt. W. was doubtful; the boys swore it was huge, but then they always do, and they had never before seen white rhino. Finally exchanging the rifle for the camera, I crept up. The rhino saw me and bolted, I dashing after him to get a photograph, till round a bush I almost fell over the cow and calf, and they all galloped off in a cloud of ashes.

We had not continued far, when we came upon another bull, and this time everyone was unanimous that he carried a fine horn.

A patch of long grass necessitated a standing shot, and as we edged up, and he began to look round uneasily, a hundred reasons for not shooting flashed across my mind. As I was still hesitating, Muthoka whispered that the rhino was about to move off, and it was now or never. To let him go, meant more endless tramping, and we might not find anything as good; but I suppose it was being half-hearted over it, and not willing the shot, for levelling on that unmissable target, I missed it clean.

He spun round and lumbered away, and seeing that in another moment he would be gone for good and all, I pulled myself together, and put a bullet into his stern.

He made a stand, and I, stalking close up, sat down and took long and steady aim for the middle of his chest. But as he galloped by in that last mad rush, his horn appeared to be about a foot long, and I had not the heart even to go and look at him.

However, since he was dead, the next thing was to get off his hide. It was interesting, too, to see a white rhino, for his curious square mouth without

the prehensile tip, his large ears fringed with stiff black hair, was all unlike the common black rhino, and he seemed, also, to be lighter in colour. After the excitement of the hunt, the measuring had always been the tedious part, and in this instance, tunnels had to be burrowed under him for the circumferences.

We hauled him over on to his back, and he was such an unwieldy mass, that ten boys a side were only just able to steady him. Climbing on top of him, I made the cuts; Muthoka had put a razor edge to the knife, and it needed that, for the skin, even on the belly, was almost an inch thick.

By the time the skinners arrived, we had made good headway, but the horn proved an arduous business, and the sun went down upon us still hacking and hewing. By good fortune there was a gang of road workers eager for the meat; they made a frame, and thirty of them shouldered the skin and brought it back to camp.

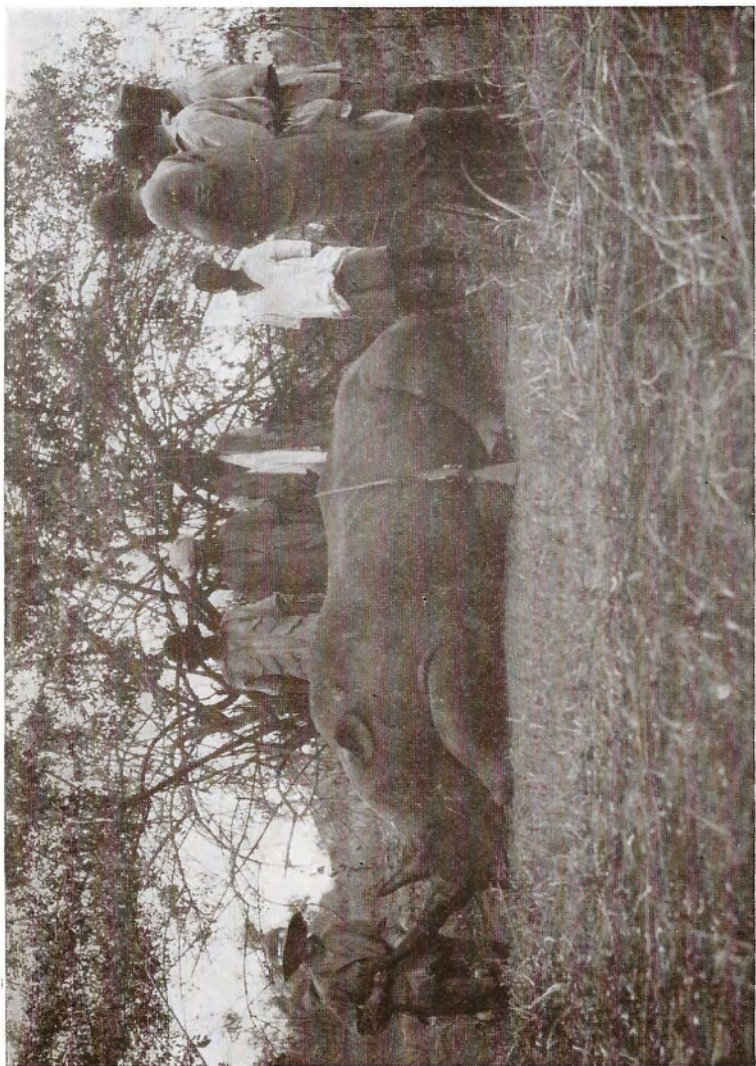
When we hit off the road, it was again under the stars, but these homecomings, even if one has been only moderately successful, are fine enough, and fatigue does not enter into them. And a few inches one way or the other in the length of the horn does not lessen the difficulties of removing the skin. There had been a gnawing anxiety of doubt over that, whether, with only four experienced skinners, it could be achieved.

The whole skin had to be pared down, and a dozen local natives were induced to help, so that we were twenty to work on it; and we worked next day without intermission from six to six. It was hard, straightforward labour, and for weeks past, the actual getting to work on that white rhino had been the summit of all desire.

The following day, H.E. and Lady A. were to pass by Rhino Camp on their way to the Sudan, so Capt. W. sent out his askaris to cut stacks of papyrus, and we amused ourselves all the morning decorating the rest camp. Over the seats of honour we drew a shield with a large and snow-white rhino rampant, bearing the motto to the effect that 'white is might,' and above the landing-stage, hung a blanket on which, cut out in calico, was a rhino, and CAMP. This rhino could be seen with the naked eye at a considerable distance, and precluded all possibility of the *Baker* steaming past Rhino Camp unawares.

The other rhino was spread out on a platform under the trees, and as the time drew near, I went to give the horn a final polish. I had scrubbed off the mud with soap and water, and a fresh coating of vaseline brought out the amber lights in the horn, in fact one might have been almost tempted to admire it, that is, if it had been 3 inches longer. Confessing these 28 inches was going to be a bad moment, for H.E. had said that nothing under 30 inches was to be contemplated, and anyone might reasonably regret having taken so much trouble if I could not do better than that. So when, after all, H.E. did not look disappointed as I had expected, but said it was a pretty horn, and exceptionally thick at the base, I had not thought of these compensations, and fled to Ward's *Records* at the first opportunity.

After that, there were just ten days left of Rhino Camp. Throughout the trip, even in the early days, I used to dream that it was over, but always I awoke again to that V of sky beyond the green roof, an awakening so joyous, that every succeeding dawn brought back the same impulse to run out to



WHITE RHINO



RHINO CAMP AT SUNRISE



RHINO CAMP FLAG

meet the sunrise, and hail it. Now the dream would be the reality, and each day brought it nearer. Little did I guess how much I owed to the white rhino, for he had stood like a strong hill between me and the end. Even then, he helped to stave it off, for the skin threatened to 'slip,' and needed constant attention, and it was such an anxious time of thinning and pasting and overhauling, that there was no time for thought.

During those last days, I began to understand the attraction of the Nile. Sooner or later, all the boys seemed to gravitate back to its banks, there to sit by the hour together, gazing out upon its waters in a deep absorption.

It flowed by so placidly, neither hurrying nor tarrying, and the little Nile cabbages floated down, eddying in the current, and slipping by and out of sight. Thus might you muse upon it for a few brief hours, or for a thousand years; and it might stand almost for a symbol of time itself, running down through the ages; here still in its beginning, its banks wild and untrodden, its people primitive as the first man; anon flowing through the desert till it flows at last under bridges, and past great civilisations, old and new. About it, and about those natives who sat watching it, there was the same strong patience that would finally conquer all. It is this very patience that is at first so exasperating about Africa and Africans, a kind of apathy and indifference that is callous, and a fatalism that enrages one. Yet there, perhaps, lay the solution. Africa is too mighty for anything so brittle as impatience, and one's strength lies not in pitting oneself against it, but in ranging oneself upon the same side.

Of all those months of hunting, what might most have struck you, was the stoicism of the beasts;

how they would fight to the last inch always, no amount of pain subduing their spirit, nothing till death itself. The boys were stoic, too, and though they may have had a hundred failings, loss of patience was not one of them.

The day came for them to start on their journey back to Nairobi, and when we were packing up the rhino hide, they each came up in turn and said that they would like to be on the next safari. That, of course, was music to hear, and I set to work to grease the skinners' knives and pack them carefully away into the tool chest, to be returned to the African Mercantile, not to be disposed of, but to be *stored*.

It was near midnight when the *Baker* once more came alongside, and I was grateful to the darkness, not being at all certain what it would feel like to be saying good-bye. I was even more grateful to old Mwanguno, who started a heated altercation over a cooking-pot, to which he apparently claimed sole rights, in spite of anything that Abde might have to tell me. A dispute like that was like old times, and the farewells were momentarily all forgotten.

And, after all, the 'blue' did not end with Rhino Camp. The Nimule-Rejaf trek at this season, so far from being a highroad of tourists, was as deserted as any of it, and I met never a white man. Except one, a missionary, who overtook me on a bicycle on New Year's Day, and sympathised over my having to walk. It was impossible to explain, but not for all the bicycles in the world would I have forgone a step of that last march. It was splendid hard marching, too, for the *Baker* was late, and the boat at Rejaf was not, so there were only six days in which to cover those 96 miles.

It was the Sudan now, and desert heat, so that I

trekked during the small hours. There may not be much game, but it is nevertheless a fine road, stone-strewn and lonely, and each dawn the sun rose above it in fiery splendour, and the wind went blowing deep-voiced among the rocks.

The last trek of all was the best, for while the stars yet shone overhead, across the waste came that old, inspiring music of a lion's roar. Again and again it shook the stillness, and rolled away echoing beneath the sky. After that, dawn came grey-veiled and silent, till presently a little wind stole past, whirling the dead leaves over the ground, and the desert was filled with the soft, shy colours of early morning.

At Rejaf there was much to do, import permits on the rifles to obtain, money to be changed, Customs to go through, heaven-sent occupation, for it left less time in which to dwell upon the rest—on selling up the tent and equipment—though I must confess to you that at the last moment I unpacked the saw, and cut through the tent pole below the ferrule, for it was that same piece of wood we had cut in Meru forest.

Jim and the cook, who had accompanied me to the end of the safari, had also to be discharged, and presently the steamer hove in sight. Since it had been a race, and I had arrived first, there was a faint hope that something might still prevent her from coming. But even though each turn of her paddles, and the very current itself would conspire against me, it was all for the best, for, much as I yearned for that trek over again, I was not good for another march.

She did not weigh anchor till after nightfall, and there was yet time to climb the Rejaf hill. Up there, the kites went circling, and the granite

smouldered in the dusk. Below, the Nile lay athwart, spanning the horizons. Earth arched round the sky, darkling bush with here a hill and there a light ribbon of road—leading whither? Somewhere towards the sunset, or out to the dawn, like all African roads. Happy they who wander in them.

THE END

THE NILE WHERE IT FLOWS OUT OF LAKE ALBERT

