HUNTING THE AFRICAN RHINO
AN ANTHOLOGY

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William Cotton Oswell (27 April 1818 to 1 May 1893) was an English explorer in Africa and other areas. He was born in Leytonstone, Essex, and attended Rugby School. In 1837 he secured a position with the East India Company in Madras through his uncle, John Cotton, a director of the company. He spent ten years there, learning Tamil and other languages and studying surgery and medicine.

He was sent to South Africa for health reasons, and there he explored the Kalahari Desert in Bechuanaland (now Botswana) and located Lake Ngami. He participated in expeditions to the Zambezi River with David Livingstone. (One of Livingstone’s children, born in Botswana in 1851, was named William Oswell Livingstone.) He returned to England in 1853, and served as a medical officer during the Crimean War. In 1855 and 1856 he traveled in North and South America. In 1860, he married his wife, Agnes, settled in Groombridge, Kent, and had five children.

The species Rhinoceros oswellii was named for him. (This name is no longer used in modern taxonomy.) Livingstone described Oswell as having had lucky escapes, having been tossed by a rhinoceros on two occasions.

AFRICA, SECOND EXPEDITION
1846 to 1847, AGE 28–29.

The experience gained in the preceding season made the laying in of fresh supplies an easy task. When it was accomplished, he bought half-a-
dozen horses to fill up gaps, and halting at Graham’s Town, applied for and was granted a gunpowder permit.

“Permission is hereby granted to William Cotton Oswell, Esquire, to purchase and convey across the Land Boundaries of the Colony for his own private use, One Hundred and Fifteen Pounds of Gunpowder. This Gentleman will proceed on his journey with two wagons and six Musquets.

“By Command of His Honour, The Lieut.-Governor”

It was on the banks of the Mokolwé, an important tributary of the Limpopo discovered by Oswell and Vardon, that the former first met with and killed the quebaaba:

“This beast resembles the white rhinoceros (Rh. simus), except in the formation of the horn, which is longer, much straighter, and curved, though but slightly, in exactly the contrary direction. The two specimens that we brought from the interior are abraded at the points on the lower sides, probably from coming in contact with the ground whilst the animal is feeding. When running at speed or when alarmed, it carries the head very low, as do likewise the other species, and the horn, then standing nearly straight out from the nose with a trifling curve downward, may occasionally strike or rub against the inequalities of the ground.

“From the circumstance of the quebaaba being found in the same neighbourhood, and from its general resemblance to the white rhinoceros, we at first supposed the peculiarity of the horn to be merely a malformation, but we later changed our minds for several reasons. We saw a total of five and shot two; the Bechuana who inhabit the country in which the specimens were obtained know the animal under a distinct name. They describe it as frequently to be met with, though by no means so common as the other kinds. This animal is also unknown to the south of the Tropic though the common white rhinoceros is there found in abundance. All these reasons caused us to change our opinion and to consider it as certainly a distinct species.” (Later he reverted to his original view.)

During this expedition Oswell had two terrible experiences with rhinoceros. That neither proved fatal is little less than miraculous. He had one pre-eminently good horse, the very pick of all he ever had in Africa—some hundred and eight—fast and most sweet-tempered, and so fearless that it would without whip, spur, or any urging carry him right up to a lion and stand perfectly motionless within a few feet of the brute whilst its master fired.
Returning to camp one evening on Stael, he fired both barrels at a white rhinoceros. Instead of dropping or bolting, it began to walk toward the smoke. He turned his horse only to find a thick bush was against its chest. Before he could free it, the rhinoceros drove its horn in under the flank, throwing horse and rider into the air with such terrific force that the point of the horn pierced the saddle. As they fell, the stirrup iron scalped his head for four inches in length and breadth. He scrambled to his knees, and saw the horn actually within the bend of his leg. With the energy of self-preservation he sprang to his feet, but tottering a step or two he tripped and came to the ground. The rhinoceros passed within a foot without hurting him.

As he rose for the second time, his after-rider came up with another gun. Half pulling him from his horse, Oswell mounted it and galloped after and caught the rhinoceros. Wringing the blood from his eyes and keeping back the piece of scalp with his left hand, he held the gun to his shoulder with his right and shot the brute dead. Resting for a few moments under a bush he remounted, and rode back to Stael.

“That very morning as I left the wagons I had talked to him affectionately, as a man can talk to a good horse, telling him how when the hunting was over I would make him fat and happy; and I had played with him and he with me. It was with a very sore heart that I put a ball through his head, took the saddle from his back, and started wagonward, walking half the distance, ten miles, and making my after-rider do likewise.”

It would be impossible to conceive anything more characteristic of the man than these last few words. Shaken in body by his terrible fall, in mind by the loss of his favourite horse, severely wounded and bleeding, he yet, as a matter of course, shares the ten-mile tramp home equally with his black servant. When they reached the wagons and explained what had happened, the natives to a man burst into tears.

On the return journey to the Cape he met with the most serious accident of his life. Stalking two rhinoceroses of the keitloa variety (black rhinos), he was lying flat and waiting for a side chance. They came within twenty yards of him, but head on, in which position they cannot be killed except at very close quarters, for the horns completely guard the brain, which is small and lies very low in the head. Constant success and impunity in shooting these beasts induced a somewhat rash confidence, and he lay still until he saw that if the nearer of the two forged her own length once more ahead, her foot would be on him. He would have shot her up the nostril, but a charging rhinoceros
always makes straight for the smoke of the gun, and he knew that if number one fell, number two, who was within four or five yards of her, would be over him before the smoke cleared.

Hoping that his sudden appearance from the ground would startle her and so give him a chance of escape, he sprang up and dashed alongside of her to get her in the rear, his hand being on her as he passed. She immediately gave chase. He was a very fast runner, but in thirty yards she was at his heels. A quick turn saved him for the moment, and the race was over in the next. As the horned snout came lapping round his thigh he rested the gun on the long head, and, still running, fired both barrels. But with the smoke he was sailing through the air, and it was not until three hours later that he recovered consciousness. He then discovered a deep gash in his thigh, eight inches long, down to the bone in all its length. The limb stiffened, and, unable to get into the wagon, he made his bed for nearly four weeks under a bush, the rip healing rapidly, covered with a rag kept constantly wet.

As soon as he was sufficiently recovered, he hurried down to the Cape where an official announcement awaited him: In the event of his failing to return to India by a certain date, then two months past, his appointment would be cancelled. He accordingly secured a passage in the next ship.