

SAFARI

by

Betty Cousins

We left Nairobi, traveling south in our huge safari truck, completely open to the elements, no doors. We continued into Tanganyika, passing small villages where children waved and held out their hands for candy. We became excited when we saw a few animals but were told they were nothing compared to what we would find around our campsite in the open plains called the veldt.

Usually on our outings the chief guide drove. I sat in the passenger seat with my camera; our native scout and gun bearers sat in back with other members of our group. A trap door in the roof allowed our scout to poke his head out for a better view of surrounding terrain. He'd spot animals before we drove too close to scare them away and ruin good photo opportunities. Every day we looked for animals to photograph, returning in late afternoon for a bath and delightful dinner of buffalo steaks and veggies prepared by our camp boys. They did everything for us, including our laundry. Often when we returned, it appeared spread out on bushes to dry, even our lingerie.

One warm afternoon we traveled over some rough ground. After drenching winter rains, elephants had passed through, leaving deep hoof prints in soggy dirt. Holes were a good twelve inches deep. When our truck hit one, the engine died, but our

driver ground it back on. He drove for another few feet, hit another hole, and killed the motor again. His many attempts to start up did not succeed. Suddenly he became very quiet. I glanced over at him, but he was staring past me with the strangest look on his face; I turned to look. No more than fifty yards away a rhinoceros lunged to its feet. Once upright, that huge animal charged straight at me and my open door. Everybody seemed frozen except me. I scooted over and practically sat on our driver's lap. That animal kept heading toward me. I figured I would end up on his horn, all bloody and full of holes. Fortune played a role in my escape from severe trauma. Normally noise was not allowed when hunting or trying for photos; however, our scout had the sense to bang on our tinny truck. This scared the rhino just enough that he veered off and ploughed into the fender in front of me. His horn stuck. He struggled until finally he freed himself and then tore off into the tall brush.

All were ready for cocktail hour when we returned to camp.

Conversation became pretty lively after several libations. Our guide assured us a charge was not unusual when the rhino sensed danger. He added that normally we would not be sitting ducks and not to worry about any future dangerous incidents. Mmmm, I mused: We are in the land of wild animals. I hope he fixes that truck.

Days passed. Our guide's term was up and he left with the safari truck as soon as a new crew arrived. Now our transportation was a small pickup with room only for two in the front seat so we sat in the truck bed.

The last week of our safari found us hunting both rhino and lion. We needed more exciting pictures. Late in the week we encountered a rhino in a marshy area. Our driver turned the truck around to our left for us to snap pictures. One of our native boys

hissed and pointed. There to our right was another rhino. Our truck moved slowly ahead with rhinos to right and left of us. Our excitement peaked. Dead ahead two lionesses poked their heads up over tall grass to stare at us. Fortune shined upon us again: the rhinos moved off into the brush. Our driver had stopped so we could get good pictures, but the lionesses decided those camera flashes indicated danger and closed in to investigate us.

Their tails shot straight up in the air and lashed back and forth as they charged us; they had cubs to protect. The driver beat a hasty retreat but those lions ran closer, so close I could see their shining wild eyes. Our truck had not picked up enough speed to out distance them. Within minutes they would be on us. I banged on the tailgate, hissed, and yelled bloody thunder. It worked. The lionesses stopped and glared at our retreating vehicle. As we looked back, both stood majestically erect, apparently saying, "and now keep out."

Never again will I doubt lions have big yellow eyes.