

XVII Elephants and Hot Springs.

I found Indian owned lorries very useful for covering dull stretches of the route, if there happened to be a road, and they always provided an element of excitement. One knew more or less what the appalling roads were doing to one's own car, but lorries were incalculable. The lorry on which I embarked on this occasion looked quite smart. We climbed up into the hills south of Mombasa and stopped at the official residence so that I could report my presence in the area to the District Commissioner. I always found this an anxious moment. The general attitude might be described as permissive, but unenthusiastic. The personal prejudices of the man in charge introduced variations. In some cases the time honoured phrase "a woman's place is the home" seemed to permeate the atmosphere. This A.D.C. was young and matter of fact, which was a relief. He pressed an asikari on me and told me that the district was overrun by elephant. They were not, strictly speaking, Kenya elephant, but herds that had strayed over the border from Tanganyika. They were doing considerable damage to the Africans' crops and a game warden was somewhere around trying to drive them back where they belonged.

We re-embarked on the lorry and were soon bowling down a long, steep, winding hill.

"Just keep a hand on the hand brake, will you?" the Indian driver remarked casually, "The foot brake does not work and I need both hands to keep her on the road."

I was not really surprised when the driving shaft broke, and we had to get out and walk. Motorised transport was ~~much~~ much the most dangerous thing I met in Kenya.

I shared a camp site with a P.W.D. official, and spent a pleasant evening swapping yarns. ~~These~~ Casual encounters in the bush were one of the pleasures of this sort of life. The fact that you have never met each other before and are never likely to meet each other again induces a tendency to speak freely about things that interest you instead of making appropriate social noises. We spoke amongst other things about elephants, and

next day I met them. We set out to climb a hill known as Jombo, a knobbly, thickly wooded eminence of volcanic origin. As we started the ascent we came on steaming dung and freshly chewed shoots. Elephants are messy feeders. We stood on a broad game track and other tracks radiated out in all directions. Abandoning the track, we started to scramble directly up the hillside, but ~~were~~ halted by a resounding crash.

"Tembo", breathed the whole company and stood gaping crashwards. Looking down on the agitation of the trees below us we could catch an occasional glimpse of a broad grey back, or a trunk would come snaking up to grasp a high branch. The wind was blowing directly from us to the elephants. I wondered where the game warden was, and just how you set about driving herds of elephant back where they belong. I fancied they might find the process annoying. It seemed judicious to place a shoulder of the hill between us. From our new position we paused to consider the situation. I asked the asikari what he thought. He saluted smartly, swarmed up a tree, gazed forth upon the land, climbed down again, and said,

"Where the Memsahib leads, there will I follow."

Which was a lot of help.

We climbed up to where there was an exposure of rock, so that I could get a ~~ess~~ specimen, and retired with dignity. In camp that night I said to the asikari that there were hot springs in the neighbourhood. Did he know them? He said that they were well known and "quite near". It would not be necessary to move camp, we could get there and back easily in a day. I chose him and a young and vigorous porter to come with me and told the others they could have a day off, but they had heard that the springs had medicinal value and most of them wanted to come too. We walked and walked. According to my admittedly unreliable pedometer we walked close on thirty miles there and back, which is not really my idea of "quite near."

The springs, when we reached them, were fun. They welled up sluggishly into slimy pools amongst grass all set

about with makoma palms, and ran away to the Ramisi River in rapid streams over which there hung faint wisps of steam. The pools were covered with a kind of fungus growth, green to orange, and the water was hotter than your hand could bear with comfort. Both springs showed an exposure of igneous rock intruded as a dyke into the sandstone. It was restful to linger there, but we had to get back to camp and I set off at a fine pace. This was not due to a spirit of athletic exhibitionism, but merely to a desire for aspirin. I had developed a raging toothache as a result of that dental insult a fifth wisdom tooth with enlarged roots, and I had left the aspirin in my tent. The asikari plodded dutifully beside me and the young porter gambolled along making jeering remarks about the rest of the porters, who were falling further and further to the rear. Since this was supposed to be a rest day I saw no reason to hurry them, and they probably thought this an exhausting form of rest.

Next day we took things easy and I met my one and only witch doctor. He was a renowned practitioner from Tanganyika who had been called in to make rain. When I came across him he was negotiating for the purchase of the black goat and black sheep required for the ceremony, and he was highly indignant with District Commissioners and such like cattle.

They keep saying that rain is "shauri Muungu" (God's business)" he said crossly, "But they don't do anything about it. Now I make rain."

He would, I feel, have been an asset to the Met. Office, for that night it rained in torrents, the tracks were mud, and the vegetation had a delicious conservatory smell. Plant and beast rejoiced, including perhaps the little tortoise we found floundering in the mud. I thought foolishly that I would take ~~it~~ <sup>him</sup> home as an unexacting pet for my Australian friend. For a time the asikari carried him suspended in mid air with ~~its~~ his legs working feebly as if he were swimming. He looked so uncomfortable that I suggested to the asikari that he should put him in the heaversack he was carrying, ~~the-re~~ thereby giving the unfortunate creature a lot of trouble struggling out, to fall, plop, in the mud.

The second time he escaped I let him go. Pets you have acquired yourself have an added charm, but you need the facilities for looking after them.

I met the elephant-chasing Game Warden and his wife. We shared a camp site and they asked me to dinner the first night and I asked them back the second.

"Ali," I said, having issued the invitation, "Have we anything to eat?"

"No," said Ali, "But I can buy a chicken and some eggs. You have no sugar. You never do. But I've got plenty and there are a few prunes left. I'll make you a prune meringue."

And did, in a saucepan over a camp fire. I can't think how.

The Game Warden gave me a vivid account of the time he was appointed White Hunter in charge of the film company that made the Aloysius Horn film. It was most disillusioning. To begin with the story belongs to West Africa and was shot in the east, quite a different sort of country. Then, having acquired a village, they left it to acquire a suitable degree of dilapidation, and filled it with good European skeletons imported from New York. These were decorated with scraps of decaying flesh made from cheese and red paint, and finally, being dissatisfied with the results, they re-shot most of it in California.

The camp site lay at the foot of the hill Mrima, ~~and~~ which I investigated ~~it~~ thoroughly under the guidance of a local Wadigo tribesman. It was strewn with boulders of ironstone, including one impressive specimen with a large crack in it. A porter raised my largest geological hammer to chip off a specimen, but the Wadigo checked him.

"You must not hit that rock," he said, "A very powerful devil lives in the crack, and he would not like it. See, we have made him a little house in case he wishes to come out of the rock for a while."

And there it was, a charming little model hut nestling

in the shade of the boulder. While I was still stooping down to examine it, the porter, whose devils were not those of the Wadigo people, made a sound that was the equivalent of "pooh!" and smote the devil's habitation a lusty blow. A chip flew off the end of the hammer, but the rock, being ironstone, was unaffected.

"You see!" said the Wadigo tribesman.

This was meant to be a frivolous, a farewell safari, to fill me with gay, nostalgic memories, and, so far, it had been a great success, but it ended in the most disagreeable walk I ever took on the coast. This was due to the villagers of Pangwe wishing to do the honours of their district. They said that shells of great splendour and diversity of species could be found in the estuary. A villager would take me out in his canoe to look for them. The asikari could take the porters on and make camp somewhere along the coastal road, and I could pick up a lorry at 6 p.m. at Ramisi. It sounded a pleasant idea to spend my last day boating. I kept Ali and a porter and sent the others on. The shells proved illusory, but it was agreeable floating about in a canoe, and we reached Ramisi in good time and sat down to wait in a neat little house on a sugar plantation. The Pangwe villager came with us to show us the way to Ramisi. As dusk began to fall he grew restless. He said that he was afraid to walk back to his village in the dark because of lions, and went off to spend the night with a friend. The three of us went on waiting.

When it became obvious that the lorry was not coming, we set out to walk. The road was, as usual, full of pot holes and it was pitch dark. Where the road had been made up and recently sanded it glimmered palely. Otherwise it was quite invisible. We fell into pot holes; we wandered off the road and ran into thorn bushes; the mosquitos ate us. And where the devil was that camp.

My toothache came back full force, an interesting ache that rose to a peak of intensity and slowly subsided. I got quite fond of it as a distraction from other discomforts. I almost felt

sorry for my toothacheless companions as they floundered along at my side, always ready with a helping hand and a solicitious murmur when I tripped up. What thoughts were passing through their minds? Were they perturbed by the Pnagwe villager's talk of lions? Did they blame me, or the unreliability of lorries for our present predicament? Were their minds full of home problems beyond my powers to imagine? Were they meditating on the colonial situation, its drawbacks and perhaps less easily appreciated advantages? Or were their mental processes subdued by the clamour of their empty bellies to an absence of conscious thought?

How should I know? My acquaintance with these coastal people was not based on a free exchange of ideas. For that you require a fluent command of a common tongue and an urge to communicate unlikely to exist between a member of a dominant minority, and <sup>a</sup> female at that, and these masculine members of a dominated majority. We knew each other, as we know so many people, from an observation of behaviour, sharpened by the fact that we belonged to different cultures and, when travelling together, were dependent on each other. We formed, so to speak, a working hypothesis of ~~each other~~ <sup>one another</sup>. I met people from a number of tribes and found some easier to get on with than others; I became aware of inter-tribal jealousies; I sometimes wondered if I were being naive. But my general impression was of a potential fund of good will between my people and these people of the coast which was being gradually whittled away by petty irritations and occasional injustices, by arrogance and lack of imagination and by perfectly honest misunderstandings.

The camp was pitched about seven miles down the road, a most tedious seven miles. We arrived about 10.30 p.m., were pounced on by outposts, and greeted with relief and hot tea, and the next day we were back in Mombasa. I returned reluctantly to the chilly shores of my native land on an Italian boat stuffed with Belgians. The only other English speaking person on board was an American oculist, who told me firmly that the reason for

the decline of the British Empire was that we would insist on learning other peoples' languages, a quality which I had not previously associated with my compatriots. I could converse with the Belgian passengers, but he, poor fellow, could only talk to me, and I fancy that, by the end of the voyage, he was beginning to revise his opinion.

At home people said to me, "If you find the climate so pleasant and the country so interesting, why don't you go and settle in Kenya?", and I found it difficult to explain that it is one thing to be a transient wanderer in the bush, catching fascinating glimpses of a culture that had remained static for so long but was now changing at a dizzy pace, and quite another to become part of British colonial society with its elaborate structure of racial and hierarchial protocol. I am not very good at protocol.