

AMONG THE
ZULUS AND AMATONGAS:

WITH SKETCHES OF THE

NATIVES, THEIR LANGUAGE AND CUSTOMS;

AND THE

COUNTRY, PRODUCTS, CLIMATE, WILD ANIMALS, &c.

BEING PRINCIPALLY

CONTRIBUTIONS TO MAGAZINES AND NEWSPAPERS;

BY THE LATE

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WILD LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA.

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AH, Wild life!—Wild life! what a charm there is about it. I used to wonder, and have often laughed at the rhapsodies—as I then thought them—indulged in by Mayne Reid regarding his prairie days; but never, never more shall I be guilty of such silly incredulity, for have I not had similar experience? And while writing this paper exactly the same feelings come over me—my heart throbs; my blood boils; my frame tingles; and I long to be at the old game again.

I have given it up—I am afraid for ever; but am still subject to ever-recurring attacks of the prairie-fever, which, doubtless, is the same in its symptoms and effects in South-Eastern Africa as in Western America.

No one who has not lived such a Wild life can know the fascination which after-thoughts of it exert. It is not so much felt at the time, but when one has at last settled down in the midst of civilisation, the mind reverts to the old scenes with a vividness, a fondness, and an excitement, which must be experienced to be appreciated.

The glorious freedom of Wild life—free from every fetter except what you yourself may choose to wear; free from the constantly irritating contacts and annoyances to which you are subject in an old country; free to come; free to go; free to halt; free—and often necessitated—to experience the extremes of hunger and satiety, heat and cold, wet and dry; plenty of adventure to season your food; tale-tellers equal

to the Eastern ones to amuse your leisure hours; and the study of the habits, customs, and peculiarities of the wild races amongst which you may be thrown—constitute a life delightful to experience, and pleasant to look back upon.

These thoughts—or rhapsodies if you like—came crowding upon me, after reading over some sketches in a journal of old times—for, although not many years ago, it looks an age—and it struck me that a few of them might not be uninteresting, even in these days when everybody must relate his experiences to everybody else, whether he may travel to Aldgate Pump or to Timbuctoo, or whether he may scale Primrose Hill or the Matterhorn, or whether he may make a voyage in the Rob Roy or the Great Eastern.

I have no pretensions to be considered a *litterateur*, so that my reminiscences of Wild life, while wanting in dash and polish, may be pardoned on the ground that they are a faithful record of scenes I have mixed in, stories I have heard, and of some peculiarities of the natives I have observed. It is Zulu-land I write about, and the Sketches are taken at random.

I.—MORNING IN SOUTH-EASTERN AFRICA.

Nothing, in South-Eastern Africa, can be so charming to my mind as a fine morning after the first rain of the season. For months a dull, dry haze, called by the natives “Lofusseemba,” has covered the face of the country, causing even the nearest hills to loom as if in the far distance. The atmosphere has been dry and close; your beard frizzles and your skin crumples up from the want of moisture. Hunting is most unpleasant, from the dust and black ashes—the remnants of the grass fires—which you raise at every step.

The feet of the natives get cut up by constant trampling on the sharp stems of grass, left by the same cause; and altogether you feel as if the greatest luxury in life would be to "paddle in the burn" the live-long day; but, unfortunately, owing to the long drought, there isn't the tiniest pool to be seen.

The rains come at last, and with a vengeance too! For three days you have to endure the stifling atmosphere of a native hut—a sort of exaggerated beehive—and as the grass of which it is constructed has contracted during the long spell of dry weather, you may say you have a covering, but no shelter. However, that doesn't matter much—all your care is for the guns and ammunition; as for yourself, you won't melt, nor take harm by exposure in this fine climate, and it isn't the first time you have slept in the wet. Towards morning one of the natives looks out of the door and exclaims "Le Balele" (it shines—it is fair). You also rise at last from your damp couch and go out; when immediately you forget all the previous discomfort in the exquisite charm of the lovely morning. The country lies dark, yet distinctly defined, before you; the relief is magical, and would have enraptured Turner. No glimmering haze to pain the eye—no blur in the landscape—but all the outlines and details clearly mapped out before you. The sheen of the river is seen below, its heretofore dry bed now filled with a tumultuous flood; and here and there amongst the peaks, and dotting the flat-land, lie white, soft, fleecy nebulae of mist. The freshness and balminess of the air is delicious; the breeze—the handmaid of the morn—rises so pleasantly, dispelling the misty spots and wreaths; and then Aurora, on the wings of the morning, bursts upon us, bathing the whole face of the country in a flood of light; and all nature,

animate and inanimate, seems to hail the advent of morning in a chorus of joy! Such a morning is worth seeing, and worth writing about, and I only regret that I am so incapable of doing it justice.

II.—A DAY IN WILD LIFE.

The waggon has been "out-spanned" upon a hill overlooking miles upon miles of Hlanzi (open bush), dark and sombre-looking at this winter time in all parts. Here and there are small peaked and table hills, which, however, but slightly diversify the landscape. Beyond rise the high bare hills of Amaswazi* and the Bombo†. Through the middle of the flat runs the river Pongolo. The uniformity of colour imparts a dull yet grand aspect to the river. You feel, in descending to the habitat of the game, as if you could realise Dante's famous inscription on the gate of the Inferno. Although there may be a cool breeze blowing in the hills you have left, directly you reach the flat, and are fairly amongst the mimosa trees, it ceases. The sun beats down on your head in such a manner—so directly and with such perseverance—that you are half inclined to believe in the ancient mythology, and ascribe the infliction to some offence unwittingly given to Phœbus. Occasionally the chirrup of a bird is heard, but otherwise all is hot, silent, and lonely.

When, however, you are once fairly in the Hlanzi the sense of oppression ceases in the excitement of hunting. Game is abundant and sufficiently wild to give zest to success.

First, most probably, the graceful Pallah will be seen in troops, gazing with evident wonder and terror in your

* Amaswazi, the tribe on the N. and N.W. of Zulu.

† See "Bombo," Sketch No. 4.

direction. As you draw nearer and nearer a little movement will be seen—one or two will change their places, then suddenly the whole herd, without any further preliminary motion, will start away, each leaping high as they go. The effect is very pretty, for as they leap the red of their backs and sides, and the white of their bellies, alternately appear and disappear, producing a glittering zoetropic effect on a magnificent scale.

Next your attention is drawn to the other side by a loud sneeze, and on looking thither you behold a troop of Gnu and Quagga mixed. They, on the other hand, are in constant motion—gnu and quagga passing and re-passing each other without pause. A single gnu will every moment plunge out, whisk his tail, give a sneeze, and then back again to the ranks; but the head quagga stops any impudent manifestation of this kind by laying his ears back and biting any forward youngster which attempts to pass him. When this herd considers you are near enough for any agreeable purpose, away it goes, kicking and plunging with such an evident “catch me if you can” expression that you feel very much inclined to send a bullet among them to give them a lesson of respect to the *genus homo*; but we are after “metal more attractive” and therefore leave them alone. It is very interesting to notice the discipline kept up in gnu families. Any laggard amongst the youngsters is immediately taken to task by its mother or by a bull, and well switched with their horse-tails to make it keep up. From this circumstance the natives say that a gnu’s tail is “medicine,” and that, however tired you may be, if you brush your legs with it the sense of fatigue passes away. Of course, one hair of faith is more effectual than all the hairs on the tail in producing this result.

A little further on a troop of the noble-looking bull Koodoos is seen—the most wary buck I know—with their spiral horns and large ears laid back, glancing between the mimosas ; when, if you manage to get within range, a bullet either arrests the flight of one, or hastens the stampede of the whole.

Again you march on, when with a crash out rushes a noble Wild Boar from the thicket in which he has been lying. With head up and tail on end away he goes at a short, quick gallop, and, as he breaks through the long grass and thick, tangled underwood, a flock of Guinea-fowl and Pheasants are roused, and, flying hither and thither, the air is filled with their discordant notes, and also with a shower of sticks which the natives shy at them with some success. To this noise and confusion is added the cry of a species of Caurie, which attracted by the din, perches on a tree close by, and reiterates “go away” as plainly as an angry child of four or five years of age would do, and with something like the same effect on your nerves.

Again on the tramp towards the thickest part of the Hlanzi—the deepest gloom of this Tartarus—where larger trees of the mimosa species prevail—where the creeper, the “wait-a-bit” thorn (called by the natives “catch-tiger” and “come-and-I’ll-kiss-you”), a long-spiked thorny bush (called by the natives “the cheeky”), the cactus-thorn of three inches long, the nettle, and all sorts of such abominations most do abound ; and on entering there, in sternest silence as regards speech and footfall, the business of the day commences.

With a very black, lithe, active native in front, whose most prominent features are the whites of his eyes, and whose name, “Bah-pa,” deserves to be recorded, away we

go, to be met by a Black Rhinoceros, who, having smelt our wind, is coming to see who has ventured to intrude into his habitat and disturb his mid-day siesta. He is the only wild animal I know who, deliberately and without provocation, will set himself to hunt down man on the slightest intimation of his presence. He comes! The thunder of his gallop and the sounds of his displeasure are only too audible. It is stand fast, or up a tree like a squirrel, for there is no running away from such an antagonist in such a thicket. Fortunately, however, his sight is not very good, and a very slight screen suffices to save you; and, as he furiously plunges past, a shot through the lungs brings his career to a termination; but even his dying scream is indicative of pain and anger, not of fear. Certainly he deserved to live for his pluck, but is bound to die from his vicious disposition, for there is no quarter in the battle with such as him. The sound of the shot seems to vivify the bush around, and crash, crash! on all sides is heard, caused by the hurried flight of the startled game. Never mind! they leave tracks by which we can easily follow and find them through the wood. On emerging from the thicket we come across a White Rhinoceros, much larger than his sable cousin, but not at all vicious. Our sudden appearance startles him into a trot, which presently breaks into a gallop, especially if he has a dog at his heels. His trot and gallop are exactly like those of a well-bred horse. He is a heavy animal, but what splendid action he shows! He keeps his head well up, and lifts his feet cleverly from the ground, and goes at a pace which few horses can equal. What a sensation a *Rhinoceros race* would create among your Dundrearys and Verisophts at Epsom! When he has "gone from our gaze" we follow buffalo tracks which evidently lead to another thicket, and

on approaching it we hear sounds of wild-animal warfare—grunting, bellowing, and roaring, and roaring, bellowing, and grunting, as Tennyson would jingle it; but the Kaffirs call it “belching.” Cautiously Bah-pa whispers “Lion, Lion!” and warily we draw near to the scene of the commotion. In a clear space are a Lion and a Buffalo cow fighting; and a Buffalo calf lying dead, sufficiently explains the *casus belli*. The lion springs—immediately the cow rushes through the thick bush and wipes him off, turning instantly and pounding away at him on the ground; the lion wriggles free after tearing the nose and face of the buffalo; and the same process is repeated, all so quickly and in such a whirl of motion, that you can only see the result and guess how it has been effected. The last time the lion is brushed off, he evidently gives up the game, as we can hear the buffalo tearing after him through the bush. Two or three of my fellows creep forward and quickly draw away the calf; the cow returns, smells about for a little, and finding her *lui machree* gone, dashes off, more furious than before, after the lion again, and we can hear the renewal of the conflict, gradually dying away in the distance.

On, on again; this time towards the river. We have rhinoceros and buffalo beef for lunch; but although ravenously hungry, we are too thirsty to eat or even to talk, and in silence therefore we make our way towards the water. On our road we put up a herd of “Peeva” (water-buck). One goes down; the remainder dash to the river—their haven of refuge—we following close on their heels. As we use the last little incline, before coming in sight of the Pongolo, the natives, with eyes and fingers on the stretch, point to the other side, where a file of Elephants are slowly making their way down to the drift or ford, and, forgetting

hunger and thirst, we creep carefully to the edge, and form an ambuscade for their reception on crossing. They enter the river ; on their way over, one halts for an instant and looks back, then goes on again, but he appears to be dragging a weight at his leg; and when he comes into the shallows on our side, we observe an Alligator holding on to his knee. Without much ado the elephant drags him out on to the bank and utters a peculiar shriek, when immediately another turns round, and, seizing the alligator between his trunk and his teeth, carries him to a stiff-forked thorny tree, and there deposits him with a smash—hung in chains one may say—and before long his bones would be all that remained of the voracious brute—causing some curious speculations in the mind of some future hunter as to how the animal found its way there.

During our wandering observations we have allowed the elephants to go. Never mind, we can follow after lunch, or even mid-day, as we know where they were heading for.

Then the tramp home—coffee and biscuits, and biscuits and beef, round the fire, and consumed with such an appetite ! The recapitulation by the natives of the whole day's sport, in animated language and appropriate gesture—one story leading to another till far on in the night—then the last pipe and cup of coffee, and to bed with a healthy frame and a clear conscience.

Such is a day you may spend in Wild life; and ah! tell me, if you can, what is there to equal it?

Or it may be a quieter day, yet full of its own beauty and excitement. I wish I had the pencil of a John Leech, who delighted so much in, and depicted so well, sporting scenes; as a sketch of "waiting for dinner" in wild life would have been a first-rate subject.