

AMONG
SWAMPS AND GIANTS
IN EQUATORIAL AFRICA

AN ACCOUNT OF SURVEYS AND ADVENTURES
IN THE SOUTHERN SUDAN AND
BRITISH EAST AFRICA

BY

MAJOR H. H. AUSTIN, C.M.G., D.S.O., R.E.
FELLOW OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

WITH TWO MAPS AND MANY ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON
C. ARTHUR PEARSON, LIMITED
HENRIETTA STREET

1902

ELEPHANTS AND LOCUSTS

were issued that these should remain untouched, as it was hoped that when the natives understood we were not a marauding party they would summon up sufficient confidence to visit us, for anxiety as to water was felt, and the men were performing their duties in an apathetic manner, as though they anticipated disaster. If we could secure the services of guides confidence might be restored, since none of us knew what lay between us and the river Sacchi, for which I was steering. The animals were left alone all that day and night, but the natives evidently feared to return; and when we marched off next morning the donkeys gave us a parting bray, which was the nearest approach to friendly intercourse which we experienced in this neighbourhood.

A second Omdurman mule had to be destroyed before we left camp, and a camel a few days previously, so the wear and tear was beginning to tell. As regards distance and direction we did well on the 27th, but at last we became stranded without water. During the early part of the march we skirted the south end of the conical peak towards which we had marched after passing the rock in the plains. From its shoulder I detected a distant hill to the south-west, fifty or sixty miles away, which we never saw again. Over undulating stony ground covered with thorn-bush we still moved east to the north of a prominent rocky ridge. Several large, well-wooded khors, on the banks of which deserted kraals and zeribas were seen, had been crossed before we made our first halt, and our route was traversed in addition by numerous small, dry-water courses, which impeded progress:

ELEPHANTS AND LOCUSTS

the country was thickly wooded with thorn-bush, which also caused considerable delay and inconvenience. Finding now that low hills barred progress to the east, it was decided to turn north-east to discover if a pass existed. Our good luck was in the ascendant, and one was found which took us across the ridge; but on the other side we descended into another valley, shut in by low hills beyond. A large sandy khor ran down this in a southerly direction, but the whole place was parched and not a drop of water was available. It was getting late, so the animals were unloaded and camp pitched, whilst two parties went in search of water to another valley to the north, between us and Mount Naita. One party returned about 8 P.M. saying they had found a little; but the second, which returned later, reported they could discover none. Next day we entered the valley at the base of Naita, which proved to run in an easterly direction into the Sacchi, and which we followed for the next few days. We only marched three and a half miles to the place the first party had found, climbing up out of the valley in which we had been camped by an easy pass, in a northerly direction, and then trending off north-east over a gently falling open plain, camped on the bed of a khor at the foot of a conical peak. The reported water supply proved an absolute fraud, for although some was found on digging, the quantity was infinitesimal, and it ran dry almost at once. There was nothing for it but to send out fresh search parties, for our animals had had no water for two days. Mabruk Effendi went with one lot, and the

ELEPHANTS AND LOCUSTS

Jehadia, Abdalla Tahir, with another. By 3 P.M. neither had returned, and I had gone out of my tent to send a party with the animals back to the last water we had seen—some sixteen miles distant—with orders to fill up our skins there, after watering the animals, and to return at once. I was actually giving the orders when Abdalla suddenly arrived and reported he had discovered water in a large pool some two hours off. The animals were sent off with him, and all the available men in camp.

Shortly after four Mabruk Effendi also returned from a long search and reported another pool fouled by game, so we were relieved of anxiety. This water business, however, was unnerving, as, had their efforts proved unsuccessful, we should probably have lost the bulk of our transport next day in struggling back to the last watering-place, and there would still be the same difficulties to be faced. I felt we could not be more than twenty-five to thirty miles now from the Sacchi, so it would have been a bitter blow to have been compelled to retrace our footsteps, losing the majority of our animals in doing so. To stimulate the search parties to real efforts, money rewards were always offered to the fortunate discoverer of water, and Abdalla had evidently cultivated the art of smelling it out, for he had now twice rescued us from an unenviable position, and was always prepared to volunteer. A thirty-piastre award (about six shillings) was ten days' pay to him, and having obtained it twice he was much to be congratulated.

The party who had taken the animals to water did not get back to camp until 9 P.M., and just had time

ELEPHANTS AND LOCUSTS

to get the animals into their zeribas before a heavy thunderstorm, which had for some time been playing on the hills to the east, had worked its way west and broke heavily over us. The rain was most welcome, for it relieved us of much anxiety, and we now hoped to reach the Sacchi without any further drought. We started off again next morning, the ground being very sodden in parts, and shortly after leaving camp crossed the main water - course of the valley, which had just been joined by another flowing south from the highest peak of Mount Naita. We marched generally north of due east on the left bank of the khor, which flowed at the foot of a rocky escarpment enclosing this wooded valley to the south, the ground falling from the base of the Naita mass in a southerly direction to this point. We had only made about five miles when Abdalla turned off and took us down to the pool that had been found. Its dimensions exceeded our expectations, for it was from thirty to forty yards in length and from five to ten in breadth, and the supply of water was ample for two or three days at least, whilst a second pool had been discovered at which the animals could water after the heavy rain of the night before. We seldom found water in the actual beds of nullahs, as, owing to their stony nature, the water runs off at once. This pool, like others we had come across before, was in a depression some little distance from the bank of the khor, where the clay had prevented percolation and retained the water until it should be consumed by game or evaporated by the hot suns.

Whilst camp was being pitched I went after a herd

ELEPHANTS AND LOCUSTS

of zebra, which were grazing at the foot of the hills on a long grassy slope to the south of us on the opposite side of the main water-course of the valley. Getting within 150 yards of one concealed by a fold in the ground, I placed a bullet in his lungs. He galloped off, however, with the rest of the herd; but I saw him coughing blood as he disappeared down into another nullah. When my orderly and I reached the bank we saw him lying on his side in the grass, and stalking carefully up to him, ready to fire again in case he dashed off, found that he was dead. He was a fine big stallion—perhaps the biggest I had ever shot—and provided plenty of meat for the next two days to the column. We rested next day on this water-pool, so I went off in the early morning with my orderly, taking gun and rifle to pick up something for the mess if possible. We saw tracks of rhino, elephant, giraffe, zebra, and either eland or oryx, as well as gazelle; but no living animal beyond partridges and hares, so we started for camp again with the intention of using a gun, as there seemed no antelope to disturb. On the return journey the bag, though small, was mixed—a hare, bush-fowl, and a partridge, in addition to a gazelle; so we had hare-soup and venison for dinner!

On the last day of March we continued our journey towards the Sacchi down the valley slightly to the north of east, through thick thorn-bush with open patches here and there. In many places the scenery was charming, and we camped for the day at the foot of a small isolated hill terminating to the south in a precipitous bluff of rock. By great good

ELEPHANTS AND LOCUSTS

fortune we found a splendid pool at the base of the hill, and between it and the bank of the main khor, so were now confident of reaching the Sacchi next day. We were probably, as I thought, ten or twelve miles distant, so I was pleasantly surprised, on April 1, to reach that river after we had followed the khor east for only five or six miles. We were delighted to find it a running stream, and my reputation as a pathfinder was established, for, the previous evening, I had told Mabruk Effendi and the men that their anxieties regarding water would soon be at an end, adding, "to-morrow we shall reach a flowing river again." Here, then, we were at last, and for water there were now tons of it, as a fine stream six to ten yards in width was flowing down a sandy bed twenty to thirty yards wide, with high perpendicular banks clothed in luxuriant vegetation. A fervent "Hamdo illilah" (Thanks be to God) broke from the lips of Mabruk Effendi and the men when they saw the delightful vision—a remark which we most cordially endorsed in our own language, for indeed we had much to be thankful for after the trials of that desert land.

So far we had been favoured by fortune, but for a large party to cross this tract of country from Boma to the Sacchi by the route followed by us would probably be a most risky undertaking during nine months of the year, owing to the extreme scarcity of water. The many water-courses shown on the map were found to be almost without exception merely dry stony beds in which no water was procurable by digging. Fortunately rain had fallen

ELEPHANTS AND LOCUSTS

about March 20 to the east of where we then were, and we subsequently were able to find water in pools after long-continued search and by extraordinary good luck. When Bright and I visited Lake Rudolf from the south in 1898, our old Suk guide Nyanga had on several occasions pointed out to me the striking Naita peak away to the north-west, and told me that the country thereabouts was the most dreadful he knew for drought. I believed him, as he was the most intelligent native of his class regarding the geography of the country that I have ever met. His information had now been verified by us, and it was with a sigh of relief that we had found the Sacchi a running stream. To the Swahilis the tract of country we had traversed was always known as Don-yiro; but as we were unable to communicate with any natives, I have followed Dr. Donaldson Smith's nomenclature in assigning that of Musha to it on the map.