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THE HIGH GRASS TRAIL

BEING THE DIFFICULTIES AND DIVERSIONS OF
TWO; TREKKING, AND SHOOTING FOR SUSTENANCE
IN DENSE BUSH ACROSS BRITISH CENTRAL AFRICA

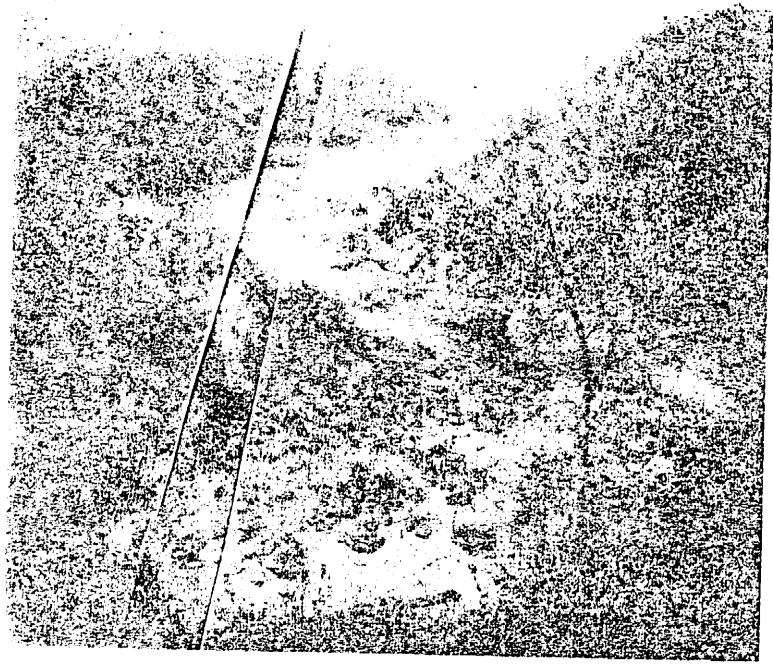
BY

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ILLUSTRATED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS



THE GREAT RIVER; THE GATEWAY TO THE HIGH GRASS TRAIL.
(See p. 10.)



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To
NORAH AND LEWIS
WHO MADE THIS POSSIBLE

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PREFACE

THE following pages describe a shooting trip across Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia—a trip differentiated from many like it by one thing alone. My wife and I went in the High Grass Season—the season during which the *intelligentsia* of shikar do not usually attempt to shoot.

Frequently I had to *feel* for game, so to speak, instead of stalking it. The interest of this experience was unailing, though the difficulties were great. But these last were not insurmountable, and we lived, for the most part, on the produce of rifle and gun.

In so doing we suffered no hardship or distress, and I believe that the words “absurd” or even “impossible,” so often quoted to me in this connection, adumbrate bubbles which I may claim to have pricked.

My very best thanks are due to Lewis Moggridge and to the Reverend S. Ranger for lending me photographs taken during a period when my own camera was useless.

F. S.

Hebrides, and set, as it were, under some huge magnifying glass for our appreciation. The Highlands contain no such lake as this, three hundred and fifty miles long, but in gigantic ratio the effects were the same. The temperature alone differed vitally. To Allah be praise! We were warm!

Suddenly from a black and threatening bank of haze a tiny cone or tongue of vapour flicked downwards to the waters below. I stared at it reflectively.

"If we were in the Caribbean," said I to the Brigade-Major, who happened to be at my elbow, "I should infer an imminent water spout."

He took up his binoculars, but had no need to use them. The little flickering tongue took on bulk, swelled, sank swiftly and, in the twinkling of an eye, was met by a knoll of foam in which it tangled itself. A water spout was in being—a really enormous one. For ten minutes this huge column linked the heavens and the earth, then dwindled, grew more and more transparent, and then was not. But it was followed by the sound of abundance of rain.

Through the night we ploughed our way steadily towards the north through shower after shower. Dawn found us anchoring off Maya, lately one of the principal lake ports of German East Africa; now, thanks to the system of mandates, permanently—we hope—in British hands.

We had added to our population in the night. The wife of one of the askari had given birth to a son. The event was treated by her colleagues, and, indeed, by herself, with an impassivity beyond praise. Of excitement or concern there had been no sign. The mother's aspect was entirely phlegmatic, her implication seeming to be that such accidents might happen to whom you will and called for no deviations from the normal. From

her expression and bearing I gathered that her conversation merely touched on the annoyance of adding one more to the burdens which she would have to bear in her coming trek to her home.

At Maya the General and Staff left us, as also the askari, and we departed south to the wooding station of Chirombo, where we anchored for the night. Round this district roam rhinoceroses. I thought I might find exercise and relaxation among them. I took my rifle and was paddled ashore.

Now the wooding station is practically on an island—a fact I had not realized—cut off from the mainland by a swamp. I called to me one of the wooding hands and indicated to him that I proposed riding on his shoulders to the firmer grounds beyond. He grinned and I mounted.

I should have mistrusted that grin from the first. We proceeded cautiously, the water deepening inch by inch. It rose to my courser's knees, to his waist, and finally to his armpits—a fact of which I became aware by an increasing sense of dampness in the outer keep of my fleshly citadel. I remonstrated. My pedestal shook. A little spurt of laughter escaped from the blubber lips which grinned between my thighs.

I called down a murrain upon him and his to the tenth generation. He laughed again—a perfect seizure of merriment gripped him—he swayed—Fate's arms rose and beckoned at me from the hungry filth below. I looked about me distractedly for escape.

Behind me another nigger was following—one with a pudding face of superhuman gravity. I shouted to him and he moved imperturbably to my rescue. With splashings and sputterings I climbed from my failing foundations on to his. Relieved of my weight the renegade behind us subsided into

promising to return before the year was out, an engagement I faithfully kept and with the best results. But this was in the time of low grass, when conditions were altered.

The next morning we were away early on the N'Gara trail. We could see the great wooded crag that overhangs it from a considerable distance. What I had heard the previous afternoon of the fine kudu which haunt these rocky solitudes recurred to me, and I addressed my aspirations to Fate that her benisons might be mine in meeting them.

Twelve miles out from Kusungu we struck the Upper Bua, crossed here by a ferry, attended by a local Charon. A point for discussion here arose. Should we follow down the near bank to gain the reed-covered, game-haunted flats of which Prentice had spoken, or should we walk on another few miles to the District Residency at N'Gara to receive the Commissioner's blessing and study his maps. We decided on the latter programme.

N'Gara is a delightfully planned Boma, set on a hill overlooking the forest-covered plains below. Seaming these plains are numerous *dambos*—dried swamps—on which the herds of game can be distinctly surveyed from the verandah, but, of course, in the low grass season only. We passed through the village down on to the flank of the hill and camped beside the trail in a delightfully open spot, close to the Residency gardens. Then, while tea was in preparation, I went up to call at the Commissioner's house.

I found Mr. Maule in possession. His predecessor met death on those very *dambos* below the Residency verandah. One day, superintending the firing of the grass and without a rifle, the unfortunate man was attacked and terribly

gored by a rhinoceros. He was got alive within reach of medical aid, but the fatigues of the journey completed what the enraged animal had begun. You cannot take liberties, unarmed, with Africa. Though the brute creation almost invariably give way to the human kind, the rhinoceros is not in this category. Unintentionally you may lash him up to rages in which all sense of fear is lost and then enters Tragedy. It is wisest not to take many steps into the wild without a rifle.

Maule was only too willing to impart to me any information that lay in his power, or to give me such help as the sketch maps of the District rendered. He agreed to come down and share our camp dinner and have a good gossip. I returned to the tent to get my shot-gun and explore the nearest *dambo* for guinea-fowl.

In this I was successful. A line of trees divided one of these grassy plains from another, and by dint of setting some of my heathen to thwack the bushes on one side of it while I waited on the other I got some rocketing shots which would have been worthy of an English pheasant drive. After this I wandered around for a bit on general principles to see what indications of larger game were about, picked up another bird or two, and retired to dinner.

There was spoor in plenty, I found, but none of it exceedingly fresh. However, N'Gara is a famous district for sportsmen, and I promised myself a vigorous probing of the thickets on the morrow.

Maule enlivened our after dinner smoke with much and varied information of the surrounding country. He also offered me the help of one of the local askari, a man not only skilled in shikar but possessed by a great love of it. Needless to

a triumphant yell came swimming down the breeze out of the distance.

"Madzi—Ma-aa-adzi! Water."

A far-flung searcher was bellowing his success from the deep of the thickets, and we followed the direction of the uproar joyfully.

We found him installed and grinning on the edge of a tiny hole, clear and limpid. With good sense he had set himself to follow the dry water-course and had avoided other distractions, to breathe, finally, triumph. All hands settled down thankfully and with much relief to the making of camp.

Adada and Yoahni started a fire and plucked a guinea-fowl. The others set about building a wind-break for me, with a grass bed at the foot of a convenient baobab. After this they fashioned a little zareba of boughs for themselves. Meanwhile I used the last of the light to investigate the surrounding spoor. It was various, showing that many beasts used the water-hole and the locality. There were traces of buck, elephant, rhinoceros, and buffalo. It seemed, indeed, as if we had come to the land of promise.

Promise, no doubt, but as the sequel shows, promise with an aggravating lack of fulfilment.

I had a good and satisfying meal of guinea-fowl and sweet potatoes, and baking-powder bread and jam. For a certain period I sat in meditative mood over the fire, and then rolled myself into my blanket at the foot of my tree and was almost instantly asleep.

A moment later as it seemed—it was really long after midnight—I was startled into sudden wakefulness by a hand gripping my shoulder.

Instinctively my hand reached out to and gripped the stock of my rifle.

"Njobyu—Njobvu—elephant—Bwana," a voice was hissing into my ear.

I scrambled up. The fire had died out. The night was moonless and pitch black. From all round me came the thump and thunder of many feet and the swish and crackle of reeds and boughs. It seemed that we were in the very midst of a herd come down to water.

It is a particularly eerie experience, in a locality which you have not properly sensed or found your bearings, to know that you are the pivotal point in a forgoing of the jungle folk.

I took one or two tentative and silent steps forward, holding my rifle at the ready, and trying vainly to get some sort of guidance from sound as light there was absolutely none. Someone stood beside me who held a rifle—that I found out by touch and knew that it must be Mikele with his service .303. Of course the darkness was not so utterly impenetrable if one looked upwards as if one stared against the mass of the tree trunks, and so it was upwards that I stared, watching for a chance to catch a possible and dim outline of a trunk or tusk. Beside me Mikele breathed restlessly.

We moved forward together a pace or two, and one of us must have trodden on a dry twig. — There was the sound of a tiny snap.

Immediately there was a response. A bellow broke the silence, followed by another. Immediately a perfect tornado seemed to sweep through the undergrowth, followed by the boom of innumerable feet in stampede.

Elephants?

Not a bit of it. We were on a sort of island, so to speak, in the middle of a vast sea of buffalo!

The spate of bodies roared away, beating down

flank of the hill, while another wandered higher and descended through a wooded kloof. I took the latter, judging it a likelier spot for game.

We saw none, but an enormous flock of guinea-fowl, which had been drowsing in the grass, startled us by bursting like a shell into flight all round us. I doubt if I have ever seen, or shall see, such a flock again. There must have been hundreds of them. One laggard gave me time to exchange my rifle for the shot-gun. I knocked him down into the thickest clump of reeds which it is possible to imagine. In this the boys rooted busily, and it says something for the denseness of the thicket when I explain that it took the best part of half an hour to retrieve the corpse.

In the evening we had a pleasurable wander through dense scrub in which nothing appeared, and only one crash of departing game was heard, and so to bed.

The next morning we were up and away for M'Petauke, the farthest point of our pilgrimage.

Here we received a beaming welcome from Mr. Thorneycroft, the District Commissioner, and his assistant, Mr. Henderson. The former insisted that no tents should be raised, and installed us in his guest hut, a most commodious building. In a moment, as it were, we sank out of the catch-as-catch-can routine of the wilderness into all the amenities of civilized life again, though the wild was still encircling us up to the door-step. An incident that had occurred a short while before emphasized this.

It appeared that a bull eland had waywardly wandered through the open gateway of the wooden stockade which encircles the Boma. The sentry, surprised, but keeping his presence of mind, had deftly bayoneted it through the chest before it had

sensed its new surroundings, and the askari had dined well. Does not this make you squirm—you who go and abase yourselves to master butchers for joints costing one and tenpence a pound? One easy stroke and ten or twelve hundredweight of excellent meat laid upon your threshold! Tell this to the man in the blue and white checked apron next time you compete with his avarice and thereby win his popularity.

We spent an idle and very pleasant evening in converse and in wandering round the Residency gardens which, thanks to an ample water supply, are most fertile, as we were to find at dinner. After a menu of yams, plaintains, and such-like solid fruits of the soil, how pleasant it is to munch real potatoes, lettuce, peas or what you will.

In the evening we sighed over some dozens of our host's photographs.

Mr. Thorneycroft is a real old timer of the Rhodesian Service. What he has not shot in the way of big game is negligible. But he has always had a particular devotion to "super" rhinoceros, of which his district supplies many. I licked my lips over the splendid trophies his camera had recorded. He is the discoverer, too, of the exceptional "reticulated" giraffe, of which two small herds infest a district through which we were to pass. They are strictly protected, being, as far as is known, the only species of their kind in Northern Rhodesia or Nyasaland. There is no particular joy in shooting a giraffe—though I will confess to having done so in a spot some thousands of miles north of M'Petauke, but I should have delighted in seeing *Cameleopardus Thorneycrofti*, if only for the sake of its rarity.

Our host was optimistic about my shooting chances, with the proviso, of course, that we could

yet even then my faulty memory failed to retain Rangely's word of warning spoken as we fed together by Kaniandula's village. We were in the valley of which he spoke.

Andreya and I—without carriers, for which fact let the wood gods be thanked—wandered back in the direction from which we had come and passed into the jungle to find ourselves, before many minutes were over, in a high and matted bank of reeds. It was possible but very toilsome to press through it. We did so with the naïve idea of using it as cover to approach an open glade—a glade which we had not seen, but which we decided, by reason of the distant lightening of the shadows, must appear on the far side of it. We endeavoured to move noiselessly.

Suddenly "Whoof! Whoof!! Whoof!!!"

I swung round to be aware that a groove in the reeds was opening towards us at the rate of twenty good miles an hour—to note that it was already within forty or fifty feet—and that it was coming as if a distraught steam-plough was putting in the most energetic work of which it was capable!

It is extraordinary what one can think of in a period of time limited to three-fifths of a second. I was perfectly aware that not one but two rhinoceroses were coming for me at the utmost speed their limbs could evolve. I saw no reason that I should not avoid one. The stump that I must assuredly fall over appeared to me to be that what the leader missed the second must infallibly pick up. Or so I reasoned. I saw my wife a widow of the wild, and I had a sort of vision of the nearest District Commissioner's sympathy, but, at the same time, stifled annoyance at having to pass her on her lonely way. Dominant above all was my frantic intensity of desire to assure myself of the direction

of the wind. I had to jump either backwards or forwards. To jump *into* the wind, where I should give the attack all the information it wanted to abolish me meant—bluntly—death. *Out* of the wind I had a fair chance of escape. I quite solemnly assure you that all these emotions and considerations had their separate and specific place in my brain throughout a period which could only have been measured by a stop watch.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Andreya jumping—backwards.

I made a desperate leap to follow his example.

Then the tunnel opened and out of it burst the Scotch Express!

Or so it seemed. A Scotch Express, too, with no restraint of metals to guide it, and one set sedulously on running over me.

They swept by at the charge, those two brutes, male and female, and the swiftness of their onset carried them right past us within almost touching distance into the impenetrable thicket beyond. We heard them go charging down the slight slope and away into the shadows with the crash and uproar of a storm.

They had lost our wind.

The hated taint of the human kind was no longer in their nostrils, and their powers of sight—to Allah be praise—are negligible. So on they burst blindly, appeasing their rage upon the woodland obstacles in their path.

Now, it is true that I might possibly have put a bullet into one of them as they disappeared, but I had less than a second of visibility in which to do it. Besides—and this, I think, proves that my presence of mind was not entirely rent from me—my Scotch blood and upbringing had not lost their spell.