

OUR AFRICAN ADVENTURE

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LONDON

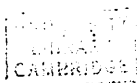
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PLATE I

Rest in the Thorn Bush

Our first stop after five and a half hours of tramping over hard and sunbaked earth in waterless country



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loveliest of the antelopes, would raise their heads and stare. Now and again, they would go dashing about in their own strange way, leaping high over each other—then leaping back again—twenty feet perhaps, at a bound. Wildebeest, those silly clowns of the game fields, were as common as any. These creatures are the *gnus* of the cross-word puzzles, but no one in Africa calls them that. Wildebeest are more curious creatures and, as someone has remarked, they look as if they were made up of spare parts. With heads not unlike those of the American bison—with rumps and tails like those of a horse—and great long beards such as traditionally characterize the solemn prophets of antiquity, they combine dispositions that are downright kittenish. No other animal is their equal when it comes to aimless and spirited cavorting. And one wonders, after watching the rapid corkscrew motion of their tails, why it is that they do not end up by simply twisting them off.

Nowhere in the world are there more magnificent collections of animals than in the Masai Reserve. On any good day, and within a few miles of the camp, we were almost certain to see the long-faced, crooked-horned kongoni—glossy, purplish-brown topis, with coats that looked like watered silk—big, heavy shouldered eland, the greatest of the antelopes—elongated giraffes with their heads often towering over the tops of the mimosas—wart hogs which, when seen through shimmering heat waves, with their heads and tails up, sometimes looked in the distance exactly like alert rhinos. This always caused us to look carefully, for rhinos were about and they are always ready to charge at anything of which they have caught the scent.

Secretary birds were forever striding through the grass on their endless search for snakes. Apparently they had

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no great difficulty in finding them, though we were almost never conscious that any were about. Then there were ostriches—great cocks with handsome black and white plumes—and lesser hens more modestly dressed in greyish brown. Jackals were common, almost always appearing in pairs, and likewise spotted hyenas. Every evening numbers of them were sure to complain of their sad fate at the very edge of camp. A hyena is certainly not a prepossessing animal, but it can fill the air with moans so pitiful that one feels that the poor heart-broken beast should be given the most sympathetic kind of comforting. Only an overly tender-hearted person would attempt such a thing. For although the hyena is not bold and is only a scavenger, it has a pair of strong jaws—jaws that can crush really heavy bones and could, were such an animal cornered into a fight, be very formidable.

Even after half a century during which this country has been the world's pre-eminent hunting ground, wild animals are to be counted in almost unbelievable numbers. They roam these plains by the hundreds of thousands. We were told by the Game Department that at the time of our visit the wildebeest alone were estimated to number about 400,000. Nevertheless, numerous though the inhabitants of these plains are—powerful, clever, and swift though many of them are known to be—there is no question as to which is the greatest. It is the lion that is the king of beasts. All the time we knew that almost any little valley or sheltered spot or clump of bushes might hide a lion. Now and again we came upon them in the open.

Now in a zoo a lion is often a handsome animal, imposing and powerful. But a lion in the open differs so enormously from those behind steel bars as to give the

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impression of being a different species. Even when one is armed with weapons infinitely more powerful than the muscles, jaws, and claws of any animal, one must nevertheless look on any lion with respect. The lions in the Masai Reserve were well fed beasts. And why should they not have been? They are able to care for themselves with the utmost ease amid those ideal natural surroundings. Before the coming of the white man with his unanswerable guns, even the natives did not far outmatch the lion. Nor is even the best gun unanswerable unless it be well used.

Other animals in the Masai Reserve also command respect. For one there is the leopard. A nocturnal hunter, bold and cunning when darkness falls, for rapidity of movement, and for slashing energy in an attack, a leopard is hard to equal. Then the buffalo must be included. In fact, some oldtimers consider the buffalo the most dangerous of all. He is a tremendously powerful animal, and is known as a vindictive fighter. Though unlikely to charge unprovoked, he is quite unwilling to desist once trouble has begun. Again there is the blundering rhino, with poor vision, an excellent sense of smell, and a touchy disposition. But of them all, we were most interested in the lions.

At Barkitabu, our first hunting camp in the Reserve, we spent three days, and were kept awake most of our first night by the barking of baboons, the coughing of a leopard among the trees nearby, and by the long drawn "moo-OO-oo" of hyenas. A leopard's cough sounds like the muffled rasping of a rusty pump, but what gets you is the mournfulness of the hyena's wail. Oddly enough, this common sound of the game fields is not unmusical. The notes are not sharply defined, and it would be impossible to set them down accurately on

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distant, did not feel free to remain for dinner. In driving home after dark, he told us, there was too great a likelihood of meeting elephants or rhinos on the road.

Not far from Nyeri—a few miles away in the forest—is a hostelry that is utterly unique. It is a very simple place, containing only four rooms. It is unusual in more than size, for it is built high among the branches of a huge wild fig tree beside a forest pool. Here the animals of the region come regularly to drink. This little inn is appropriately called "Treetops," and it must be clear that, in the ordinary sense of the word, it is not an inn at all. It is a glorified observation post from which one may watch the animals that come nightly—especially during a full moon—to drink and wallow in the pool. Except for the salt which had been put in the pool to attract the game and this curious structure high among the branches of that big fig tree rising beside it, this pool is exactly as Nature made it.

We were fortunate in being able to take advantage of the full moon on the night of September thirtieth. At the hotel in Nyeri which operates this quaint vantage post we had been told something of the procedure that is followed at Treetops, but when we entered the station wagon to drive across the intervening six or seven miles, we began to learn more. We found, for instance, that in addition to the driver and several boys with boxes of food and supplies, there was also a white hunter, complete with a heavy double rifle. His duty was to escort us in safety to our quarters in the fig tree. Having recently done a bit of hunting, we were impressed by this precaution, which indicated that dangerous animals might be encountered, and as this area is a game preserve we had not brought our own rifles. We soon learned that no road led into our destination. The last

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half mile of the way was nothing more than a winding path through thick forest and dense bush, and here we had to make our way on foot. Soon we achieved a new understanding of that last half mile. We saw that almost every reasonably sturdy tree along the trail had cross bars nailed to its trunk ladder fashion. This was to render possible a really quick and effective getaway if elephants, rhinos, or buffaloes should make that seem a good idea.

So we didn't linger on that trail. After an uphill climb we reached a little glade and there caught our first glimpse of Treetops. Directly beside a smooth glassy pool a few hundred feet in diameter stood the huge fig tree, its massive trunk five or six feet thick, and with several great branches standing boldly out at a height of thirty to forty feet. It was among these branches that Treetops was built. As inns go, of course, it was very small, and yet, having been erected high up in that immense tree, it did not seem so. But we spent little time observing it from the ground. The forest pressed in close on every side, and animals, we were told, would soon be coming to the pool. Naturally we wanted to be "topside" in order to see and photograph whatever came while daylight lasted.

We began our climb into the tree up a narrow ladder. This quickly gave way to a flight of steps winding back and forth, and leading ultimately to this treetop bungalow. The assistant manager and two native boys accompanied us, some supplies were sent up and, once that was done, the white hunter turned back with his boys to Nyeri. But even before they had disappeared along the trail, the ladder that formed the lower section of our way into the tree was hauled up and made fast, leaving us safely installed above the ground. The trunk