

TREKS & PALAVERS

BY

CAPT. R. R. OAKLEY, M.C., B.A.

Sometime Political Officer and Magistrate
Nigerian Administrative Service

With 40 Illustrations & Sketch Map



London

Seeley, Service & Co. Limited

196 Shaftesbury Avenue

1930

1-300



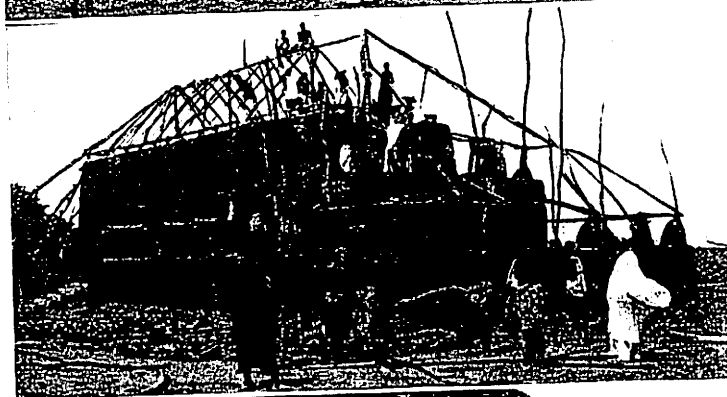
"MOTHER OF WATERS."

[Copyright by Kurt Lubinski.]

"IT WAS PLEASANT TO LIE LISTENING TO THE LAP OF WATER AGAINST THE GUNWALE AND THE PLASH OF POLLS AS THEY WERE LIFTED OUT OF THE WATER."

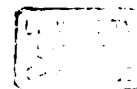
little birds, from the king vulture to the tiny honey-sucker, ibis, darters, oyster-catchers, avocets, thick-knees, plovers, sandpipers, duck and teal, and many species of geese. It is indeed a bird paradise. Perhaps the most striking of all is the droll ground hornbill. Larger and more ungainly than a turkey, he calls to mind when seen waddling among the scrub some extinct species like the dodo, at the same time suggesting the turkey in his plumage and the great red wattles of the male. On top of his huge toucan bill is a large ridge of horn, an added weight and protection to his beak, with which he prises open the rotting trees and ant-hills, on the contents of which he mainly lives. Drollest of all are his large eye-lashed eyes, which he blinks at you when made a pet of, as he readily is, in captivity.

As regards game animals, the basin of the Benue and its largest tributary, the Gongola, is one of the best districts in Northern Nigeria. Elephant are to be found in the French Cameroons and on the Maio Loko in Adamawa, Nigeria, or the Ningi Bush. There are giraffe on the higher ground north of the river and also bush cow, the West African buffalo. A few rhinoceros of the black variety are left in the same area; while small herds of kob, roan and two species of hartebeeste, as well as waterbuck, frequent the bush and low hills on both banks of the river. Among the lesser antelope are the bush-buck or harness antelope, the Senegal gazelle, the oribi and the red-flanked and common duiker. Wart-hog and bush-pig, with their numerous families of little ones, are frequently met. Carnivora are represented by the lion, few and far between; leopard are plentiful, but seldom seen. Farther north are occasional chitas; while the beautiful serval cat is common everywhere. Both the spotted and striped hyena are found, the former being the more common, and very occas-



HOUSE-BUILDING EXTRAORDINARY.

IN OUT-STATIONS A DISTRICT OFFICER'S HOUSE IS BUILT IN NATIVE FASHION. *From top to bottom:* "MUD-PIES" IN THE MARKING; THE WALLS GOING UP; PUTTING ON THE RAFTERS THE FINISHED ARTICLE.



day. These were quickly forthcoming, for the pagan likes nothing better, when he finds himself "in the soup," than to have company; besides, this village owed a grudge to the others, since they had already paid some tribute, while the others had so far escaped.

There were three other villages, all some miles away across the top of the escarpment, and a good many rumours about them were rife.

Towards sunset I strolled out to the edge of the escarpment, passing through a grove of *kuka* (baobab) trees like huge giant oaks, reminiscent of the Druids; and, in fact, it was a sacred grove, for around the base of some of the trees were embedded the cannon-bones of rhinoceros, elephant and giraffe, and suspended from the branches were the skulls of baboons and the horns of antelopes.

Standing at the edge of the cliff, I could see for miles across a flat plain, where thirty miles away lay the bed of the Benue River. It was obvious from the terraced formation of the escarpment and the continuous, though broken, line of hills stretching out of sight on either side of me, that I stood on the lip of a prehistoric bank of the river; that once all the plain beneath had been swamp, through which the river flowed, and that its other bank was sixty miles away, formed by a range of hills thirty miles south of the present channel, until at last, through the ages, the basin had been drained and the river had worn a bed for itself, in its present channel, where we had crossed it three days before. It was a scene like that described in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, and I pictured in imagination the antediluvian monsters which might have lived in that swamp, followed in more recent times, as the swamps dried up, by their no less prehistoric-looking cousins, the rhinoceros and the elephant. That these animals had once been numerous here was shown by the

collection of bones and the ingrained fear of rhinoceros among the natives, though few specimens now remained.

The sun went down in the west, far over the edge of the escarpment, throwing into silhouette the naked figure of a woman pounding her millet in one of the numerous holes worn in the top of the granite cliff by many generations of pounders. I turned back towards my camp, passing the weird outstretched arms of the *kuka* trees with their ghoulish trophies. A tomtom throbbed in the village, while Jabdi, the arnado's son, went from hut group to hut group shouting the orders for the morrow.

"*Mumbooli—umpla—plo—bum*," or so it seemed to me. As I approached my grass hut my Fulani interpreter, Hamidu, rose up from the shadows.

"*Zaiki* (Lion), it is not good for us to stay here. They make talk in the village to-night that Bokopi and Luru, the villages which have not paid tax, have said that if the White Man comes to them, they will take his skull for their *tsafi*, and so will have a stronger juju than Tambo, and then Arnado Bokopi will be a greater man than Arnado Tambo."

I had been warned of such reports by an old and experienced Political Officer, one who had spent his life among pagans, who said that some of my Mohammedan staff might try to frighten me, if they themselves were frightened or if they disliked the discomforts of a pagan village. Of course there might be a grain of truth in the report, or it might be that the interpreter, being a Muslim, wished to stir up strife against the pagans, unbelievers and accursed of the Prophet. Accordingly I took the news *cum grano*, and assured Hamidu that I had no intention of leaving until my job was finished, and much less intention of losing my head.

since I had had anything to do with pagans I slept in my shirt, with a revolver beside my bed.

At 2 a.m. I awoke suddenly with that feeling that something was a-foot. As I sat up in bed and listened, I heard a cry of alarm—a woman “kururuwing”—the pagan ululating cry made by beating the hand on the mouth, and used to alarm the clan. As I struggled with the mosquito net, the cry spread from hamlet to hamlet. I hastily pulled on a pair of flannel trousers and thrust my feet into tennis shoes, and, as I did so, I heard the corporal’s whistle blown shrilly three times and the pad-pad of naked feet, as the police ran to their stations.

By this time, revolver in hand, I had emerged from the hut. The carriers were huddled together around the fire in fear, and, indeed, the hair on my scalp felt uncommonly cold. I ordered wood to be thrown on the fire to cast a circle of light, while we withdrew into the shadow and there we stood tense, peering into the darkness, awaiting the attack.

At first I thought I could see running crouching figures working to our right flank, so, keeping out of the circle of light, I went to the rear of the hut and gazed intently, but could see nothing. We waited anxiously, but nothing happened. The two sentries on the corn had fallen back on the camp at the sound of the corporal’s whistle, so, after a little while, with them and the corporal, I proceeded stealthily to the baobab tree. A fire flickered in the hamlet beyond, and a wailing sound rose and fell on the still night air. Carefully we approached. An old wizened hag crouched low, uttering imprecations as she stirred the embers to a flame. It was she who had raised the alarm. A leopard had taken her milch goat as she tended her daughter’s travail. I peered within the hut from whence the wailing came. A young naked woman wept over the

dead body of her new-born babe, stretched out across her thighs.

The leopard had taken the goat and Death a tiny soul. I went back to bed knowing full well which event troubled the old hag more; but my heart was heavy for the “daughter of Aiya.”

The following morning I was delayed in making a start, for I had to see the remainder of the corn collected and measured. It was very annoying, as I had planned a long trek for that day among the outlying villages, terminating at my next camp among a neighbouring tribe. It was the more annoying as I was particularly anxious to find a certain village said to have been formed near the borders of this tribe. Accordingly, keeping two police with me, I sent the rest off in charge of the corn, together with my carriers, to make a camp for me, which I hoped to reach before nightfall.

We had a long way to go and had not finished with the other villages until well into the afternoon, and there still remained the one which I particularly wished to find. None of my staff knew the country, so we took a guide from village to village. On leaving the last village we took a guide in the usual way. He was stark-naked and sullen, and walked a few paces in front of me and my horse-boy. We had been travelling about two hours when suddenly, without warning, he dived into the long grass and was lost: and so were we. Of course I had been a fool; I ought to have anticipated this and kept someone to look after him. One could not very well blame him; he had been impressed into service against his will, and each step away from his village meant a journey back in the dark with perils real and imagined with which to contend. Most of these villages had feuds *inter se*; besides, it was also rhino country, and added to which were all the spirits of the night.

It was now about 5 p.m., only another hour to sunset and we were at least three hours from our camp, so I was obliged to abandon the search for the elusive village until another day. I knew that my camp was due east; accordingly we turned about and marched in that direction. The country was very rough, composed of broken kopjes, with swamp-land in between. We soon found ourselves in beds of reeds which towered above our heads, while our horses were up to the saddle-flaps in water. At last, just as the sun was going down we stumbled across a pagan village of another tribe, who appeared quite friendly. A guide was produced who said that he could lead us to our camp. It was now dusk, and soon we were once more in a tall reed swamp. A mounted man was in front of me, and it was a case of keeping my pony's nose almost on his pony's tail to keep touch, or the reeds would have closed in upon him and all trace would have been lost. Suddenly, just when I had lost ground for a moment, there was a splash, a plunge and a shout, and he disappeared, horse and all, from sight. He had apparently walked right into the middle of the stream-bed without knowing it and only by his shout had I been saved. Others came to the rescue and he and his pony were dragged out on the farther side, as, fortunately, it was not very deep, though deep enough to submerge man and horse in places. Now I had to cross this place, and my heart was in my mouth, for crossing rivers or streams in daylight can be unpleasant, but in the dark or half-light and with reeds that closed in over one's head, made it a frightening proposition. Luck was with me, however, for I found a shallower place; though my saddle-seat was awash all the time. We now came into kopje country and in the dark were soon at fault. It proved to be a very dark night, and after dismounting and trying to find our way among the rocks I decided that it was safer to stay where



PAGAN PALAVER.

Above: PAGAN WOMEN OF THE KILDA TRIBE. NOTE THE CHASTITY-BELT WORN BY BETROTHED AND MARRIED WOMEN.

Below: THE PALAVER AT POGNOR. THE ARNADO IS SEATED IN THE CENTRE.

we were until dawn, than to risk taking a header over a cliff at any moment.

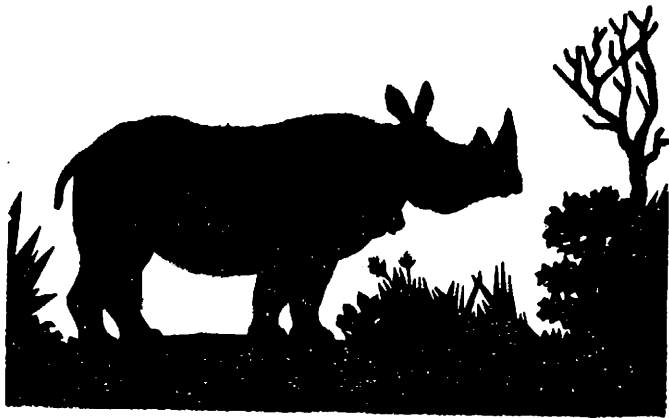
One of my two police and the guide volunteered to try to find their way through to the camp, so I selected a good piece of slab rock, still warm from the day's sun, and curled myself up in my mackintosh to make the best of it.

We had not been very long like this when we heard the beating of drums not far away, and suddenly there was a big blaze, then the chanting of weird songs and shouts of frenzied excitement, while black figures could be seen silhouetted dancing round the fire. It was, in fact, a living representation of what Robinson Crusoe might have seen, and was an awe-inspiring sight. How far they were away it was difficult to judge; but it could not have been very far, as the figures could be distinctly seen against the blaze, capering and gesticulating with their arms. There was evidently a beer-drink in progress, so we kept quiet, as pagans under the influence of their native beer are best left alone, unless it is necessary to interfere with them. This tribe was not yet properly under control and, as my few followers were Fulani, their hereditary enemies, and we had only two rifles among us, I deemed discretion the better part of valour and we remained silent.

We sat here for some hours, until the fire burnt out and silence reigned, the revellers no doubt overcome with exhaustion and the fumes of the beer, when in the far distance came the faint sound of tomtoms. Gradually they grew louder, until at last we could see torches blazing. The pagans were too drunk to be disturbed, and the search-party saw our answering flares and soon found us. The guide and policeman had won through.

Then began a most weird and eerie trek. We left the kopjes and waded through swamp after swamp. It was a strange sight to see naked savages wading waist-deep

through water, holding up blazing torches and forcing their way through dense reeds reaching many feet above their heads. It was an unsafe feeling also to be riding in the midst of them, water often over one's knees and the chance of a false step and a ducking, if nothing worse, at any moment. Therefore it was with a sense of relief that we emerged from this fantastic underworld and, gaining higher ground, finally reached camp in time for a welcome breakfast.



C H A P T E R E I G H T

Ardo Malabu

IT was shortly after I returned from my first leave that I was sent to tour the north-eastern districts of the Yola Emirate. I was to check assessments for tax made by the Native Administration and in some cases to make a new census of the villages, their inhabitants, domestic livestock and crops. The first district which I visited was that of Malabu, which adjoined the northern area of the Cameroon. I was accompanied by the Ardo Malabu, the Fulani feudal chieftain of the district with his mounted escort of armed retainers, his band of stringed and conch-like instruments and his Muslim scribes. The ardo was a very fine-looking man, standing some six feet two inches in height, not an unusual height for a pure-bred Fulani. He had a hawk-like aquiline nose and was no darker in colour than a sunburnt European, except that he was more sallow. He was possessed of great dignity of bearing, as befitted one born to rule from a long line of princely ancestors, for he was of the blood royal, and thereby hangs a tale.

We completed the census of practically the whole district, until only one small corner was left. I had wished to do this portion first as it was the most difficult from a geographical point of view, since it was a steep granite escarpment, rising sheer from the plain some 1500 feet. It was really a toe-point from a range of granite mountains that ran back into the Cameroon, but only the very tip of

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Beef

"The little more and how much it is:
The little less and what worlds away!"

I HAVE reached that state when one has to live largely on one's memories; when the hits become "bulls" and the misses, if not "magpies," which God forbid with live game, are at least excusable.

This is the humble chronicle of a tyro who has had to take such chances of sport as opportunity offered. It is a chronicle of hits and misses, and mostly misses—the might-have-been. To do myself justice, I think that I was often so lost in wonder at seeing some magnificent beast in its natural surroundings, formerly only dreamt of, that I was too astonished to fire. The naturalist-sportsman should be armed only with a camera; but even the best of us will let the worst in us, if it be the worst, come to the surface in moments of primitive instinct.

Let me say here that big game hunting in West Africa is a very different matter from what it apparently is in East Africa. Even the commoner species of game are extremely wary, and if a chance is missed it does not readily come again. It must be remembered that besides a large settled Mohammedan population and nomadic Cattle Fulani, who disturb the game, Northern Nigeria is peopled with numerous pagan tribes, who are extremely virile and nearly all hunters. The very term universally used for "game" — *nama* — means "beef," and that

Beef

exactly expresses the native's attitude towards game. To him the word is comprehensive, for it includes anything from a locust to an elephant.

It has been said that one walks fifty miles for every head one gets in Northern Nigeria: a "one" in front of the fifty would be nearer the mark. In West Africa there is little going on *safari* purely for sport; one has not the time and the abundance of game hardly warrants it. On the other hand, it is a Political Officer's job to be always on trek, living in his boxes from year's end to year's end, moving about the country and off the beaten track, and it would be supposed that one had plenty of opportunity for seeing game, if not to shoot it. This, however, is not so. The country is all orchard bush, with very few open spaces, so that there is plenty of cover and game is difficult to see even if present. That there is more than one thinks, I feel sure, judging from spoor; but it is extremely wild, seldom leaving the neighbourhood of hills, and shunning all roads and tracks regularly used by man.

If in a game district it may be possible, by starting in the early hours of the morning before sunrise, and instead of trekking by the ordinary route used by one's carriers, to make a detour and get a shot before the day's work begins. Or, if "sitting down" in a good locality for the purpose of one's work to take a Sunday off, though generally one has to work on Sundays as much as any other day to keep up with things.

Not much can be done in the evening—the time is too short between 4 p.m. and dusk, and if one wants to shoot at all the time is better devoted to small-game shooting with the shot-gun.

Lastly, it must be remembered that the shooting months are limited, from December to June, owing to the height of the grass during the rainy season, except perhaps

I followed spoor along the sand of a partly dried-up river bed and then into tall thick grass a little way. We found a place where the grass was all trampled down, where the lion had made his kill, the hunter said, but there were no other signs and it looked as if it had happened some days before. There was a tunnel in the grass where it had probably dragged its victim, but having read of the folly of hunting lion in thick grass, alone, I thought discretion the better part of valour and backed out again. Yet even in Nigeria one does hear of people walking into a family of lion, when they least expect it, or seeing one crouched on a rock overlooking a road, but they seem to be restricted to very definite areas. In the same way in Adamawa province there were a few black rhinoceros left, possibly not more than half a dozen specimens. Three times I have come across tracks, something like a large trefoil set in a circle, and once I spent most of one Sunday looking for one, but never came up with him. The same day also I was close on the heels of a small herd of giraffe; I even found where they had been lying down and the grass only then springing back into place; while the fronds of leaves, bitten off the tops of trees, partly chewed, were lying on the ground, hardly withered. Yet not one did I see. Naturally I did not want to shoot any, but I should have enjoyed watching them. The cover was thick; tall thorn trees with speckled shadows playing in and out of the branches and long thick grass which crackled as one walked, however careful one might be, so that they probably heard or saw me long before I could catch a glimpse of them. Bush cow and elephant were to be found in this province, also, if one could choose the time and season to go in search of them. I have seen a regular elephant road, where a herd came each year, trekking from the French Cameroons on to a tributary of the Benue. The trees on either side of

the widely trampled track were nearly all mutilated, having had many branches torn down, and the route itself was pocked with holes, like small shell holes, where the great feet had squelched in the mud; while the remains of their droppings, full of fibrous matter and undigested shea nuts or the fruit of the giginia palm, lay all over the place. They were known to come each year and destroy the crops of certain villages; but one could not go on a wild elephant chase at this precise time, unless other work happened to bring one into the neighbourhood.

One day news was brought to me that an old bull hippo had been located in a pool not far distant and that he had chased some people in the early morning as they went to their farms. I knew of the old gentleman by repute, as he was the last of the hippos in that district, so I persuaded myself that I was only going to have a look at him and frighten him away from the farms. I took my heavier rifle, however, in case we should find the disgruntled old warrior on land and accidentally place ourselves between him and the water, when I knew there would be trouble. We found him in the pool, but immediately he sank out of sight. I was now tingling in every nerve; the lust of the chase had got hold of me. Suddenly I heard a blowing—like an engine letting off steam—a little farther down the pool. I sneaked round through some undergrowth to another gap. There he was, nose on, like a great chess knight, sunk deep in the water, with only his nostrils, eyes, ears and back of his head showing. I felt that he was about to submerge and instinct prompted me to shoot and shoot quickly, which I regret to say I did. My bullet struck the water about two feet in front of him and he disappeared immediately. I sent runners in opposite directions along the pool to watch, but not another sign of him did we see.

That night I spent tossing about in bed wondering

