

## CHAPTER III

### WILD ANIMALS AND THEIR FATE

**W**HEN first explored, South Africa was unusually rich in the kinds both of plants and of animals which it contained; and until forty or fifty years ago the number, size, and beauty of its wild creatures were the things by which it was chiefly known to Europeans, who had little suspicion of its mineral wealth, and little foreboding of the trouble that wealth would cause. Why it was so rich in species is a question on which geology will one day be able to throw light, for much may depend on the relations of land and sea in earlier epochs of the earth's history. Probably the great diversities of elevation and of climate which exist in the southern part of the continent have contributed to this profuse variety; and the fact that the country was occupied only by savages, who did little or nothing to extinguish any species nature had planted, may have caused many weak species to survive when equally weak ones were perishing in Asia and Europe at the hands of more advanced races of mankind. The country was therefore the paradise of hunters. Besides the lion and the leopard, there were many other great cats, some of remarkable beauty. Besides the elephant, which was in some districts very abundant, there existed two

kinds of rhinoceros, as well as the hippopotamus and the giraffe. There was a wonderful profusion of antelopes,—thirty-one species have been enumerated,—including such noble animals as the eland and koodoo, such beautiful ones as the springbok and klipspringer, such fierce ones as the blue wildebeest or gnu. There were two kinds of zebra, a quagga, and a buffalo both huge and dangerous. Probably nowhere in the world could so great a variety of beautiful animals be seen or a larger variety of formidable ones be pursued.

All this has changed, and changed of late years with fatal speed, under the increasing range and accuracy of firearms, the increasing accessibility of the country to the European sportsman, and the increasing number of natives who possess guns. The Dutch Boer of sixty years ago was a good marksman and loved the chase, but he did not shoot for fame and in order to write about his exploits, while the professional hunter who shot to sell ivory or rare specimens had hardly begun to exist. The work of destruction has latterly gone on so fast that the effect of stating what is still left can hardly be to tempt others to join in that work, but may help to show how urgent is the duty of arresting the process of extermination.

When the first Dutchmen settled at the Cape the lion was so common as to be one of the every-day perils of life. Tradition points out a spot in the pleasure-ground attached to the Houses of Parliament at Cape Town where a lion was found prowling in what was then the commandant's garden. In 1653 it was feared that lions would storm the fort to get at the sheep within it, and so late as 1694 they killed nine cows within sight of the present castle. Today, however, if the lion is to be found at all within the limits of Cape Colony, it is only in the wilderness along

the banks of the Orange River. He was abundant in the Orange Free State when it became independent in 1854, but has been long extinct there. He survives in a few spots in the north of the Transvaal and in the wilder parts of Zululand and Bechuanaland, and is not unfrequent in Matabili-land and Mashonaland. One may, however, pass through those countries, as I did in October, 1895, without having a chance of seeing the beast or even hearing its nocturnal voice, and those who go hunting this grandest of all quarries are often disappointed. In the strip of flat land between the mountains and the Indian Ocean behind Sofala and Beira, and in the Zambesi Valley, there remain lions enough ; but the number diminishes so fast that even in that malarious and thinly peopled land none may be left thirty years hence.

The leopard is still to be found all over the country, except where the population is thickest, and as the leopard haunts rocky places, it is, though much hunted for the sake of its beautiful skin, less likely to be exterminated. Some of the smaller carnivora, especially the pretty lynxes, have now become very rare. There is, however, a pretty good supply of hyenas.

Elephants used to roam in great herds over all the more woody districts, but have now been quite driven out of Cape Colony, Natal, and the two Dutch republics, save that in a narrow strip of forest country near the south coast, between Mossel Bay and Algoa Bay, some herds are preserved by the Cape government. So, too, in the north of the Transvaal there are still a few left, also specially preserved. It is only on the east coast south of the Zambesi, and here and there along that river, that the wild elephant can now be found. From these regions he will soon vanish, and unless something is done to stop the hunting of elephants the total extinction of the animal in Africa may be

expected within another half-century; for the foolish passion for slaughter which sends so-called sportsmen on his track, and the high price of ivory, are lessening his numbers day by day. A similar fate awaits the rhinoceros, once common even near the Cape, where he overturned one day the coach of a Dutch governor. The white kind, which is the larger, is now all but extinct, while the black rhinoceros has become scarce even in the northern regions between the Limpopo and the Zambesi. The hippopotamus, protected by his aquatic habits, has fared better, and may still be seen plunging and splashing in the waters of the Pungwe, the Limpopo, and other rivers in Portuguese East Africa. But Natal will soon know this great amphibian no more, and within Cape Colony, where the creature was once abundant even in the swamps that bordered Table Bay, he is now to be found only in the pools along the lower course of the Orange River. The crocodile holds his ground better and is still a serious danger to oxen who go down to drink at the streams. In Zululand and all along the east coast, as well as in the streams of Mashonaland and Matabililand, there is hardly a pool which does not contain some of these formidable saurians. Even when the water shrinks in the dry season till little but mud seems to be left, the crocodile, getting deep into the mud, maintains a torpid life till the rains bring him back into activity. I was told that Lo Bengula sometimes cast those who had displeased him, bound hand and foot, into a river to be devoured by these monsters, which he did not permit to be destroyed, regarding them as totems of the Matabili, or perhaps of the Makalaka.

The giraffe has become very scarce, though a herd or two are left in the south of Matabililand, and a larger number in the Kalahari Desert. So, also, the zebra and

many of the species of antelopes, especially the larger kinds, like the eland and the sable, are disappearing, while the buffalo is now only to be seen (except in a part of the Colony where a herd is preserved) in the Portuguese territories along the Zambesi and the east coast. The recent cattle-plague has fallen heavily upon him. So the ostrich would probably now remain only in the wilds of the Kalahari had not large farms been created in Cape Colony, where the animal is kept inclosed for the sake of its feathers. On these farms, especially near Graham's Town and in the Oudtshorn district, one may see great numbers; nor is there a prettier sight than that of two parent birds running along, with a numerous progeny of little ones behind them. Though in a sense domesticated, they are often dangerous, for they kick forward with great violence, and the person whom they knock down and begin to trample on has little chance of escape with his life. Fortunately, it is easy to drive them off with a stick or even an umbrella; and we were warned not to cross an ostrich-farm without some such defense.

Snakes, though there are many venomous species, seem to be less feared than in India or the wilder parts of Australia. The python grows to twenty feet or more, but is, of course, not poisonous, and never assails man unless first molested. The black *momba*, which is nearly as large as a rattlesnake, is, however, a dangerous creature, being ready to attack man without provocation, and the bite is fatal in less than an hour. One sees many skins of this snake in the tropical parts of South Africa, and hears many thrilling tales of combats with them. They are no longer common in the more settled and temperate regions.

Although even in Cape Colony and the Dutch republics there is still more four-footed game to be had than

anywhere in Europe, there remain only two regions where large animals can be killed in any considerable numbers. One of these is the Portuguese territory between Delagoa Bay and the Zambesi, together with the adjoining parts of the Transvaal, where the lower spurs of the Quathlamba Range descend to the plain. This district is very malarious during and after the rains, and most of it unhealthful at all seasons. The other region is the Kalahari Desert and the country north of it between Lake Ngami and the Upper Zambesi. The Kalahari is so waterless as to offer considerable difficulties to European hunters, and the country round Lake Ngami is swampy and feverish. So far the wild creatures have nature in their favor; yet the passion for killing is in many persons so strong that neither thirst nor fever deters them, and if the large game are to be saved, it will clearly be necessary to place them under legal protection. This has been attempted so far as regards the elephant, rhinoceros, giraffe, and eland. In German East Africa Dr. von Wissmann, the Administrator of that territory, has recently (1896) gone further, and ordained restrictions on the slaughter of all the larger animals, except predatory ones. The governments of the two British colonies and the two Boer republics, which have already done well in trying to preserve some of the rarest and finest beasts, ought to go thoroughly into the question and enact a complete protective code. Still more necessary is it that a similar course should be taken by the British South Africa Company and by the Imperial Government, in whose territories there still survive more of the great beasts. It is to be hoped that even the lion and some of the rare lynxes will ultimately receive consideration. Noxious as they are, it would be a pity to see them wholly exterminated. When I was in India, in the year

1888, I was told that there were only seven lions then left in that vast area, all of them well cared for. The work of slaughter ought to be checked in South Africa before the number gets quite so low as this, and though there may be difficulties in restraining the natives from killing the big game, it must be remembered that as regards many animals it is the European, rather than the native, who is the chief agent of destruction.

The predatory animals which are now most harmful to the farmer are the baboons, which infest rocky districts and kill the lambs in such great numbers that the Cape government offers bounties for their slaughter. But no large animal does mischief for a moment comparable to that of the two insect plagues which vex the eastern half of the country, the white ants and the locusts. Of these I shall have something to say later.