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Brutus

By H. de Vere Stackpoole

I

IF you want to know the truth about things, you must go among the men who make a practice of life. Only yesterday I met a perfectly luminous tramp on the Cambridge road who showed me an England quite different from the England I knew—or thought I knew, and, eleven years ago this June, Siebert, the big-game hunter, told me a story that cast a new light for me on the human, and the animal creations.

Siebert at that date ranked third, after Selous and Schillings, amongst the famous big-game hunters of the world. He is dead; so is Selous, and Schillings alone remains of that trio whose chief glory was their understanding of the beasts they hunted.

He was a big man, quick of action but slow of speech; I had met him years before in Africa and meeting him again in a German town, I went with him one day to the Zoological Gardens to see the beasts.

At that date the Berlin Zoo was far behind the London, and maybe still is. The German African Colonies sent practically nothing and, as Schillings notes, Manges was the chief importer and his animals came chiefly from Somaliland. The other Zoological Gardens of Germany were no better, a fact that Siebert lamented as we passed along from cage to cage till we came to the rhinoceros.

He stood there in his enclosure, his broad-side turned to us, a huge brute, five feet high at the shoulder and twelve, if an inch, from rump to snout; the anterior horn must have been four feet in length, a mighty weapon, but useless against the iron bars of his prison. Motionless, as though carved from granite, he seemed asleep or dreaming under the hot sunshine of the July day, and the faint breeze blowing across the pen brought us his musky scent.

"Now, if we were to go to the other side and get to windward of him," said Siebert, "he would rouse up and come to us. He knows me and would pick me out by my smell. I was the man who brought him to Germany many years ago, when he and I were younger than we are now. 'Brutus' was the name I gave him and it sticks to him still with the keepers. If you go to the Berlin Zoo you will see 'Fatima,' the rhinoceros presented by Schillings, a female, and the first to be brought to Germany; these are the only two beasts of the sort in the country."

There was a shady seat near by and we sat down to rest whilst Siebert went on.

"A man said to me some time ago, 'When you die, Siebert, aren't you afraid that all the animals you have killed will haunt you and hunt you in the spirit world?' and I said, 'Not a bit, death is nothing in the wilderness, but sometimes I am doubtful of my reception by the animals and birds I have exported, giving them the bars of a prison and taking from them the one great gift—freedom.' Well, I don't know whether beasts have souls, but in captivity the wildest of them will show you a mind if you know where to look for it. I'm going to tell you a story about Brutus known only to myself, Kemplin, and a woman. I think it will interest you, but at all events it won't take long in the telling.

II

"Kemplin in those days was the rival of Manges; he had a place outside Hamburg and he supplied Hagenbeck, I believe, as well as the different German zoos. He was an extraordinary man, a trader pure and simple, hard, without pity; I was going to say heartless, but that would be wrong; he had what one might call an intellectual heart. Not only was he kind to his animals out of policy, he understood them. From what I have seen of the world more men have an understanding of Greek than of animals, and the understanding is based on sympathy. With Kemplin its basis was logic.

"He commissioned me to supply him with a variety of specimens, offered me prices higher than I was likely to get elsewhere, and a week later, having settled up my affairs, I left Hamburg on my sixth African expedition. German East Africa was my hunting ground and at Tanga I got my expedition together, bearers and Askaris, nearly a hundred and fifty men all told. This was quite a different business from the ordinary hunting expedition. I was out more to catch than to kill, and I had five or six absolutely dependable men with me for the purpose of taking live specimens back to Tanga, there to wait my return. All the same I

did a good deal of hunting for the sake of hides and tusks, and there was lots to be done in that way, for it was after the rains and the whole country was out. The herds were on the move, and by the Rufu River the buffaloes were coming down to drink; clouds of gazelles showed moving in the distance where today the gazelles may be reckoned by dozens, and on that expedition I met eight or ten roan antelope—yet today the roan antelope is all but extinct.

"Day after day the snows of Kilimanjaro stood clearer and higher in the blue sky, and day after day the country before us grew more vast.

"It is the attribute of a great mountain that it casts its size like a cloak on the country around it and on the soul of the observer.

"Day by day the storks flew overhead, for it was the season of the migration of the storks, and day by day the game we met with showed less knowledge of man—that is to say, less fear.

"We met in with elephants at the big bend of the Rufu. I secured four pairs of tusks, the longest weighing some 250 pounds, and then, leaving the Rufu, we struck for the hills surrounding Manyara Lake.

"I had sent back two lots of specimens to the coast, and now I was so far from Tanga that I had to arrange a central depot, a half-way house, and I chose a native village midway between the Rufu and Manyara. Here I put up for two days to rest and make arrangements which included the purchase of half a dozen cows. Exporters fail as a rule, because they fail to assure a supply of milk for the young animals they catch, but I was used to the game and taught by experience, and so established my nursery, the first denizen of which was a young elephant. A little pinkish brute, not very much bigger than a big Newfoundland dog, I labelled him Carlo—it is one of my fads I suppose, but an animal always names itself to me, and once I have given it its name, we always get on well together.

"Next day I met Brutus.

"I was pushing on for the lake when one of the Askaris struck fresh rhino spoor. Then we came on a mound of dung. The rhino makes roads across the veldt and wilderness, and he makes the milestones with his dung. It's one of the strangest things about the rhino folk. I've seen an old bull bigger than Brutus there scratching out behind him just as a dog does. I thought it was a sense of decency in the brute, but not a bit; he was making a sort of milestone that would tell him through his nose in a month, ay, or in six months' time, where he was.

"An hour after, getting along for sun-down, I saw what looked like the stump of an old tree away to the east. Next moment I saw it was a rhino. Through the glasses I saw it was a female. I could only see the head and anterior horn and a foot of the shoulder, but the horn was enough. The horn of the female is thinner and different from the horn of the male.

"I reckoned she might have young with her and that here was a chance of getting what Kemplin hungered for more than heaven—a young rhino.

"The wind had fallen dead. I lit a match and the flame stood up without a bend or quiver, it might have been carved from cairngorm.

"Then I spread my men to circle as much as possible the place where she was, and that done, I began to creep towards her.

"She had sunk down again in the thick stuff. I could see nothing as I drew close to the great tuft of which she formed the unseen centre, and the rhinoceros birds, as one sometimes finds in the case of a female with young, were absent.

"I had not gone two yards when suddenly a coolness came to the nape of my neck and the long grasses of the tuft quivered. A breeze had suddenly risen. I remembered it was near sundown and cursed my luck.

"I knew that she would have beaten down the grass in the centre of the tuft till it was like a great pie-dish, and I was reckoning on the chance of getting close enough to fire through the grass wall. That was all up. The breeze had scarcely stirred the cover when I heard her getting her legs under her, and then out she came.

III

"That chap there was half blind; all the rhinoceros folk are; and his mother was no exception. But she had the scent of me and she was charging down it, holding on to it as a half-blind man might hold on to a leading string.

"Every second it grew stronger and every second her fury increased. If you can imagine the engine of the Cologne express armed with purpose and a horn you can imagine what the mother of Brutus looked like to me as I stood there tied to the metals, you may say, and right in front of her as she came, Brutus after her.

"I fired twice. The first bullet made her swerve, the second got her through the heart, and next moment my arms were round the neck of Brutus. He had charged me with his chunky head, but I had

managed to get my grip. Three of my men came up at the run, and between us we managed to secure him and get him back to camp.

"I tied him to a tree and there he stood dazed and stupefied with no more fight in him, swinging his box-shaped head slowly from side to side. He seemed tamed all of a sudden, but I would sooner have seen him in a fighting mood. I brought him a pan of milk and tried to feed him with a Heinz pickle bottle. I let him sniff the milk in the pan, knowing it would talk to him and tell him he wasn't amongst enemies, but he cared nothing for enemies or friends, and wouldn't touch food. Ten o'clock that night it was just the same and I reckoned he was going to die. I was wrong, for next morning, when I came out of my tent, I found he had chummed up with a goat.

"Bimbi, one of the goats that were with us, had sniffed him out in the night and there they were close together and as thick as thieves, and a couple of hours later he took his first milk.

"Well, I got him to the coast and I got him across seas to Hamburg, him and the goat, to say nothing of the other specimens, and Kemplin was pleased. To Kemplin it was not a baby rhinoceros so much as victory over Manges and the others, to say nothing of the profit. He was so pleased that he asked me to stay at his place a fortnight for a rest, and I did.

"For the first day or two the telegrams were coming and going all the time, negotiating for the sale of Brutus. Then, one morning Kemplin came into my room in his pajamas.

"'My great God!' said he, 'the goat's dead!'

"It was; it had died in the night and the body had been removed. Brutus was moving about here and there in his pen, fretful and restless. He had taken no food. Kemplin was at his wits' end. He had another goat brought and Brutus turned on it when he had got its scent, and charged it like a battering ram. He had no horn, but he knocked it to the rails and we got it out half dead.

"At six o'clock that evening his mood changed to depression, and next day at noon we knew it was all up with him. He had taken no milk for twenty-four hours.

"Kemplin had resigned himself to the loss, and as we stood there watching the poor little beast, he explained that Bimbi had been what he called a 'mothering animal,' some animals being so highly charged with mother love that they will expend it on anything young, no matter of what species. It was like an electric force, he said, and that was why Brutus, after losing his mother, had chummed up with Bimbi. He was talking like this when Naumann, one of his assistants, passed going to his cottage nearby for dinner, and Kemplin, as if struck by a sudden idea, flung his cigar stump away and ran after him, spoke to him a moment, and came back.

"'There is still a chance!' said he.

"'What way?' I asked.

"'Wait,' he replied. He lit a new cigar and we stood, scarcely talking. Then along the path came Naumann's wife. A woman of the people, without a hat, just as she was when called from the kitchen where she had been preparing her husband's dinner. Yet her face had that refined look which suffering gives to the commonest countenance.

"'Ah, there you are, Gretchen,' said Kemplin. 'I want to see if you can make this beast take a little milk. Come into the pen. He won't hurt you, he's only a baby. There, put your hand on his head. The milk pail is over there in the corner in the shade. No, he won't take it yet, just make friends with him first. He's only a baby and he's lost his mother. That's what's wrong with him. He's lost his mother.'

"Kemplin didn't say another word, and Gretchen saying she would do what she could, got down on her knees beside the little creature and began stroking and talking to it.

"Then Kemplin took my arm and walked me off to the house.

"'She's lost her baby,' said he.

* * *

"The day I left I saw Gretchen going about the grounds followed by Brutus. Naumann's cottage had a pig-sty and the pig was ejected, new straw put in and Brutus installed. She'd been up half a dozen times in the night to look after him and her face had changed, it had lost that horrible, searching, far-away look. Brutus had changed too, frisky as a pup and impudent as a bagful of monkeys.

"Well, in a year or so, Kemplin told me that Gretchen had another baby and Brutus had a six-inch horn, and that he had tusked the pigsty down one night and had been sent back to his pen. He was no longer a baby, you see, but just a rhinoceros —'look at him now.'"

I did, and it was strange enough to think that chief among the architectural forces that had gone to the building of that vast and monstrous figure, one had to reckon the love of a goat and the love of a woman; the same spiritual force, neither human nor animal, but universal and divine.