

SPEAK TO THE EARTH

*Wanderings and Reflections
among
Elephants and Mountains
by*

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With a Preface by
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*Oh, happy he who not mistook
Can read in Nature's mystic book!*

Marvell

All right, let them turn back if they were no better than a pack of dogs to come cringing after me. Good heavens ! was not this their own country, and had not God put eyes in their heads ? That tree there with the twisted trunk, that patch of red foliage on the opposite ridge : would they not know these landmarks when they saw them again ? Besides, Asani had an axe, let Asani blaze the trail. Saying which, I turned my back upon them and strode on. Little did I expect from this outburst, but, to my surprise, they followed without a word.

Asani was a quiet, stout-hearted little fellow, and though he had taken no active part in the altercation, I knew that he was with me. He was glad that we were not to give up, and he now heralded our way through the oppressive stillness with the cheerful ring of his axe as he notched our course.

Then, suddenly, toiling upwards through trees and creepers, I came out onto an open crest, and there before me, lifting its head above the forest, was the bare, grey summit. It might have been three hours away and it might have been thirty : all depended upon what lay between those intervening ridges suffocating under the tangled green barriers of forest. But to the eye it looked attainable, and the more I looked, the more it lured me on. It was no use discussing the possibilities with the men, and I took a high hand.

"The mountain is near enough," I said, "we'll follow the crest," but I dared not meet Mohamed's eye, nor did I glance at him.

Sometimes one guide led, sometimes the other, and when they flagged, or cast about, I struck ahead. But all at once it was borne in upon me that their resistance and also that of the jungle itself had both given out at the same time. Finding that I was not to be put off they had now cheerfully accepted the position, and put their interest in what lay ahead. As for the jungle, we had left the worst of it behind, and the ridge

brought us out into the daylight clear above it. Following one ridge to the next, with occasional drops into the forest, we climbed a straight and broad path which was hemmed in on either side by dense hedges of greenery.

It was paved all the way with the droppings of rhino, buffalo and elephant. I was ahead and walking along with my eyes bent on the spoor, when I came to a grey boulder lying across the path. I was in the act of walking round it when it suddenly heaved itself up beside me with the terrifying snort of a rhino. I recoiled and leapt backwards, while the rhino (who was presumably facing the other way) tore off in the opposite direction. This is only conjecture ; for the instant the boulder sprang to life, I did not wait for a second glance but turned and bolted, colliding with the man behind me, who also turned and ran for his life shouting "Faru ! faru !" (rhino) and in the twinkling of an eye we had scattered like chaff.

The rhino had disappeared, and the forest gradually settled back into silence. One by one, with hearts still beating with fright, we stole out of our several retreats and back to the path.

I suppose that the boys were now worked up to the adventure, or that they had hopes of finding more ivory, for none of them thought of using this as a pretext for going home before worse befell. Still out of breath, they laughed over the scare as each contributed some detail to our comically expeditious flight. But as I started off again, now a trifle daunted and very much on the alert, I began to think that losing the way was a minor evil compared with nearly falling over a sleeping rhino. I was trespassing in a sanctuary where no human being (according to the natives) had ever set foot before, and I could not tell but what there might be plenty more rhino ahead. The forest was ominously silent, and everything pointed to its being unusually full of big and possibly dangerous game. If any of them took it into their heads to charge, and casualties resulted, the blame would

be mine for exposing my men to undue risk. It was an unpleasant thought, and responsibility began to sit so heavily upon my shoulders that I almost wished that I had given in to the boys an hour back, and left the forest alone.

The rhino, very naturally, had been annoyed at having his sleep so rudely disturbed; and since the path was the only place where a rhino could bask in the sun, the path was obviously a dangerous one to walk, and other sleeping rhino, (or buffalo) might be less good-natured.

I was debating within myself whether I was at all justified in going on, when sure enough I detected another grey cumbersome shape above the grass-stalks ahead. It was only a few yards off, but I trained the glasses on it to make certain, and they showed up clearly the grey corrugations of a rhino's hide. I retreated on tiptoe and held a consultation with the boys. A *détour* was made impossible by the thickness of the jungle on either hand, but Lembogi, always the resourceful one of the party, said that if we retired to safety down-wind, he would climb a tree, wake the rhino by throwing sticks at him, and try to drive him away.

The reader may well wonder why I did not seize this golden opportunity myself, and (with the wind blowing so true) nothing would have been easier than to have crept up to the sleeping rhino and scratched him behind his ears. He might have loved it (and introduced me to the whole forest as a reward) but on the other hand if he hadn't, my chances for experiment would have been for ever curtailed. This would always be the difficulty, for when chances came I did not dare.

So Lembogi threw sticks and bits of caked mud at him till he awoke, and with many surprised and indignant snorts he took himself off, and we continued on our way.

Each time I hoped that we were on the final crest I would come to another disheartening drop. Mohamed urged me afresh to turn back, saying we should be benighted. I minded

very little if we were, for it would hurt none of us; we had matches and could make a fire. The more work I put into that climb, the less I could relinquish it. It is one thing to come home dead-beat but successful, and quite another to be defeated after all; not only that, but I could never get the boys to face it again, and even I was not over-keen on a third venture.

Finally, it was the boys themselves who pointed to the summit and said that it was not very far.

Enviously I admired the way they could climb. As for me, I had put all my energies into the lead when it had been necessary, and now, under the burning midday sun beating fiercely down between thunderclouds, I was badly spent; my knees trembled as I panted up through the reeling boulders. We rested a little, and Asani pointed (as I thought) into a tree-top at "a bird that makes a noise like a motor-car." I scanned the tree vainly for some strange kind of hooting vulture, when I heard the unmistakable throb of an engine, and picked up a black speck in the sky. I looked at it with profound disgust. Artistically, dramatically, from every point of view, its appearance was ill-timed, not to say tactless. Just as I was blazing the unknown trail, to find I was being actually looked down upon was sheer anticlimax. The fact that the aeroplane was ten miles off was only very mildly consoling. "But at least," I thought, "he can't land on the summit"; and I pushed on.

At last I climbed above the forest zone, passing beneath the last outposts—stunted trees ragged with beard-moss in whose chequered shade lay a carpet of tiny peas (a kind of vetch with a leaf like wood sorrel, probably the *Parechetus communis*) whose blossoms were a lovely transparent blue. Above them flitted miniature blue butterflies, as though the petals themselves had taken wing.

Heath and boulders rose up against the flying clouds and

deep blue sky. I waded through billowing masses of white flowering shrubs, and beyond, all the ground was decked gold and blue and purple with flowers. There must have been fifty different kinds (possibly far more) and one I have never seen anywhere before or since clung to the rock in profusion like a blue mist. It had velvet purplish leaves and clusters of little powdery blue flowers like down, with a sprinkling of golden stamens.

This part of the mountain was a paradise of wild flowers. The Alps in the full glory of springtide could not have unfolded anything more tender or more vivid; indeed, the intensity of those burning blues and golds nodding in the hot scented air against the almost sapphire sky and the shimmering pillars of cloud produced an effect that was peculiarly Alpine. I lingered there, willy-nilly, promising myself that I would return another day when I should have plenty of time. How often one bribes oneself with these false promises to return to something specially entrancing glimpsed on the road to something else!

The top, when at last I reached it was, after all, not really the top, and beyond a dipping saddle another granite head still frowned down upon me.

But meanwhile, below me the south side disclosed a grassy depression girt about by the two summits and bare granite scree; and amid that desolation the grass stretched so green and rural that you had looked there for shepherds with their flocks. Instead of which, on the far side of a quaking bog, I saw—grey among the grey slabs—two rhino.

Leaving Lembogi, Kabechi and the old guide behind, I took Asani with the cameras and ran down the slope, crossed the bog and climbed up the far side. Mohamed was to follow at a short distance, on account of the clatter of his boots on the rocks. I drew to within forty yards of the rhino, yet they still looked like a couple of grey boulders as they browsed

off an isolated patch of sere grass. The bleached stalks bowing before the wind alone gave a flicker of life to that adamantine expanse of stone.

The wind had risen to a tearing gale, and nosing straight into it I approached the rhino somewhat downhill. There was no chance of this steady blow jumping round to betray me, and it was strong enough to carry away any sound of my footsteps. Precaution was therefore unnecessary, and I walked boldly up to them. Just how close I was, it is hard to say; but I felt that I could have flipped a pebble at them, and I noted subconsciously that the eye of the one nearest me was not dark brown as I had imagined it, but the colour of sherry.

And the experience has left me in some doubt whether a rhino has such poor sight as is commonly believed. Perhaps they heard the clicking of the cinema camera. This may have given the nearer one my direction, and then my coat or the brim of my hat flapping in the wind possibly caught his eye. At any rate, his ears pricked up, his champing jaws were held in suspense, and that little pale eye was very definitely focused straight upon me.

He lifted his head, trying to catch the wind. It told him nothing, but he now came deliberately towards me, nose to the ground and horn foremost, full of suspicion. I pressed the button and tried to keep a steady hand. This was not easy; for a rhino seen through the finder of a small cinema camera looks remote, and it is only when you take the camera down to make sure, that you are horribly startled to see how near he really is. In the finder I saw his tail go up, and knew that he was on the point of charging. Though it was the impression of a fraction of a second, it was unforgettable. He was standing squarely upon a flat boulder that raised him like a pedestal, and he seemed to tower up rugged and clear-cut as a monument against the flying clouds.

Such a chance could never possibly occur again, and the

magnificence of that picture for the moment blinded me to all else. I had done better to bolt then, while he was still hesitating. I read the danger signal, yet in a kind of trance of excitement I still held the camera against my forehead. Then Mohamed fired a shot over the rhino's head to scare him, and I turned and fled for my very life.

The rhino was only momentarily taken aback. Before I had time to skip out of his sight he had made up his mind to charge me. The angry thunder of his snort, mingled with a screech like an engine blowing off steam, lent me wings. When I dared throw a glance over my shoulder I saw that both rhino were bearing down upon me with frightening speed. The boys had had a start of me, and as I raced after them across the vistas of stone bare as asphalt without a blade of cover anywhere, conviction swept over me that this time the game was up.

Though I ran and ran as I had never run in my life before, and my heart pounded in my ears and my lungs stiffened with the pain of drawing breath, time went suddenly into slow motion. Each step was weighted with lead; I wanted to fly over the ground and, as in some horrid nightmare, I felt as though I were scarcely moving.

The rhino were swiftly gaining upon me; their furious snorts overtook me on the wings of the gale. The boys, on the other hand, had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed them. I made one more desperate spurt and then, as I realised the utter futility of it, a fold in the hillside opened to receive me also. I tumbled headlong down a little cliff and landed on a ledge of heather.

The rhino would never face this drop even if they looked over and saw me. I glanced up apprehensively, but there was no sign of them.

In this sheltered place there was not a sound, and even the wind had dropped. With a thankful heart I stretched myself

face downward on the heather, and panted as though I could never get a complete lungful of air again, while waves of crimson and orange rushed and throbbed before my eyes.

The boys climbed up to me (they had landed farther down) and seeing Mohamed's lugubrious expression of disapproval I quickly put my word in first.

"That," said I, "is the best picture I have ever taken!" And though unable at once to control my trembling fingers, I turned my attention to the intricate business of changing the film. Asani, taking his cue from me, stoutly declared he had never seen anything like the way the rhino had stood out on that rock; and the three Masai, who had witnessed the whole thing from the other side of the bog, now joined us and gave their version. Even at the time, I had been dimly aware that they were yelling with excitement as though they were cheering the winner of the Grand National. It must have been worth watching, and the pity was that there had not been a second photographer.

During their graphic recounting of what had happened, even Mohamed began to unbend and smile. Congratulations rained down upon his modest head, as well they ought, for his well-timed shot had undoubtedly saved my life.

As I was busy with the camera and listened to their talk, I too began quietly to enjoy myself. There is nothing like an escape to give you the feeling of exhilaration. The pleasant glow of it was stealing over me when I made a crushing discovery. In changing the film I found that I had overshot the end by fully six feet. This meant that the rhino's mad rush and the dramatic moment when he had stood silhouetted against the sky, were recorded on nothing but blind, red paper. The disappointment was bitter, so bitter that there were no words for it. The boys still talked of the marvellous picture, and I had not the heart to deceive them.

I put the camera back in its case, and ran down the steep slope to the head of the bog where the ground was flat and we could rest in comfort.

It was now after three o'clock and we had been on the go for eleven hours. A rest and food had been well earned by all; but by this time I was past food and only consumed by thirst, so I sat down in the reeds with a tin of peaches. It had been one of Jimi's last-minute inspirations, and to this day I cannot eat tinned peaches without evoking a picture of frowning summits, and rhino, and the crude green of the bog against the scudding grey clouds. Nor, of course, have I ever quite recaptured the flavour of those heaven-sent peaches.

I was deriving not a little consolation from them when Mohamed came up to ask if I was ready to start for home. What with my recent adventure with the rhino, the lure of the summit had temporarily slipped into the background. Mohamed now recalled it and I jumped to my feet, for the hour was late:

"We must reach the top first," I told him decisively, and I strode off up the long grass slope at a speed which I knew that I could not possibly keep up. Mohamed had no choice but to follow. I heard him grumbling away disconsolately about it being so late and that surely we had seen enough. The three Masai did not even make a pretence of following, but openly sat down to wait for me. Asani alone came with a good grace. Perhaps he shared my curiosity to see the summit.

My course wavered deplorably as I zigzagged up the steep side with knees that were now like water. I was ready to own myself dead-beat, but that the boys (who climbed as easily as chamois) could be tired was a thing which I could not consider seriously. Yet I could not help reflecting how tremendous is the power of mind over matter, or I would rather

say imagination over mere physical strength. Having just recovered from a sharp attack of fever, I was in no condition for the climb, but the idea of reaching the summit meant so much to me that I was incapable of giving it up. Lacking this incentive the boys felt only the fatigue, and to my amazement they all said that they were too tired to go on. Even Mohamed pleaded this excuse. I could not believe my ears: Mohamed, late of the K.A.R., and I had actually tired him out.

I reached the summit in about twenty minutes. Again beyond it was yet another dipping saddle rising up to a shoulder of rock. *Was it higher?* There was little to choose, a matter of a few feet either way, and I longed to make a last dash to be quite sure. But this was the moment to be generous, and I kept my doubts to myself. At least we were on the middle and most peak-like summit, marked 8,374 ft. on the map.

It was four o'clock, later than I cared to think about, and there was not a moment to lose. The sun was hidden by a dark curtain of cloud, Longido loomed out through the murky pall, and the wind whirled about us, moaning dismally among the rocks. We hastily built a cairn, and took one last look round at that unforgettable view and that curious black mountain with its vista of hills and valleys forty miles in circumference, moulded in gentle contours beneath the unvarying mantle of forest, and culminating at the point on which we stood.

Then I turned and ran down the descent. The climb achieved, I now shared the common thought which was to escape from all that forest before nightfall.

It was laborious enough, then, to have to follow the game track conscientiously up and down every knoll instead of cutting round; but the moment you left this middle line which ran up and down the crests like a seam, you met jungle as impenetrable as a mesh, and dark withal, and short cuts were

too risky. Retracing our steps was not without its difficulties, and Lembogi alone had the true instinct for direction. I followed close upon his heels and, except for the unavoidable climbs, we kept up a steady trot the whole way. The others wrangled among themselves over the right course, dropping ever farther into the rear, and I shouted many a "hyah!" over my shoulder, for nothing mattered save racing the daylight.

At last we came to the place where I had blundered on the rhino early in the morning; and Lembogi was carrying straight ahead over a fallen tree when I remembered that we had come upon it at right angles, and I swerved to the left. Lembogi shook his head, but I was sure, and Kabechi, catching up at that moment, bore me out. Farther down, where it was thick going, the tree on the opposite ridge with the red foliage caught my eye through a gap; and several landmarks met me like friends just when I needed them most, for we were all casting about for our bearings, and it was I who had gribed at the boys on the way up for having no eye for landmarks. In the forest again, there were some anxious moments till by luck I hit on one of Asani's blazed trees, and all was well. I may have been sure of my ground here, but higher up I was nowhere in the running with Lembogi, who was a born guide.

We picked up our ivory, reached the water again and I called a halt; for we were by now all parched with thirst.

Two more hours saw us home. They were a very painful two hours stumbling through the darkness among loose stones hidden under the grass, and we all arrived limping into camp. Poor Mohamed had fallen and hurt his hip and could scarcely walk. I was filled with remorse, for it was my fault for having made him take the nails out of his boots weeks before, so that they made less noise; consequently he had hardly been able to stand on the slippery grass slopes. It was as cruel as drawing a beast's claws and turning him loose to fend for

himself; and Mohamed had that same uncomplaining patience of the dumb animal which always touched me.

It was good to be sitting safe in camp again, better than a bivouac somewhere in that lovely, frightening forest; and when I looked up to the mountain standing so silent against the stars, I did not feel the glow of victory, but rather an intense gratitude. Conquering a peak is, I think, only a phrase, and no one ever meant it. For the mountain itself has so much to do with it, and can at any moment turn you back with even so small an accident as a sprained ankle, if it wished. And on this particular climb, the mountain and the forest and all the beasts whose sanctuary I had invaded had (except possibly the two rhino) been very forbearing, and I was grateful to them.

I soared on the crest of such high elation that despite having been strenuously on the go for sixteen hours, and still weak from malaria, I could stoop to nothing so prosaic as physical fatigue.

Long before I had dreamt of Africa, mountaineering had enthralled me. This climb up Ol Doinyo Orok, through tropical jungle with its own peculiar difficulties, held also its own fascination and spurred me with the old keenness. Stirring the fire till the flames shot up their forked tongues into the night, I played the Fifth Symphony; and on its irresistible tide, ambition rode untrammelled to the summits of the very giants themselves, and again I turned my thoughts to Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya.