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KENYA

THE LAND OF ILLUSION

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ELEPHANTS AT HOME

Frontispiece



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Much of the lower country round Nairobi was planted with coffee during the boom after the War when prices were very high, and the shallow soil is incapable of resisting the least drought. A great deal of land that now carries coffee will, I am told, shortly revert to its wild state. I fear that many fortunes have been lost, and labour wasted, in this unprofitable soil.

We drove on through the arid land, and as this country is mostly inhabited by Europeans we met few natives, but I was struck by the easy walk and fine carriage of those we passed. For clothes they wear skins, softened with castor oil, which, mixed with the red clay of the country, is also well rubbed into their bodies. The men often have their front teeth filed to sharp points which gives them a hungry wolfish look; some of them wore attractive belts embroidered in tiny beads of many colours, and both men and women had shaven heads. They were the Wakikuyu tribe, and the women's ears stood out stiff with loops of pink beads threaded on wire, like small bracelets—often as many as twenty or more in each ear. The female beauties have their heads plucked till they resemble ebony billiard balls, which shows they are prepared to suffer for appearance sake, and that feminine vanity is the same the whole world over.

The drive from Nairobi to Thika is perhaps the dullest in all Kenya, and Thika itself cannot boast of its beauty. It is mainly inhabited by Indians, and has its uses; a post office, a garage, several tailors, and a large "store," which store can supply you with anything within reason. The Blue Post Hotel stands a half-mile outside the town on a

picturesque site between the Thika and Chania rivers, and it was here that most of the film "Trader Horn" was made. Also thirty years ago it was here that the battle took place between the Kikuyu tribesmen and the Government, when a Government official was killed. Up to 1905 the country to the north of Kenya and the Tana River remained a closed district.

Some miles beyond Thika we crossed the Athi River where a short time ago Hubert was the spectator of a terrible fight between a rhino and a crocodile which had seized the former's leg. In point of weight they were evenly matched, both a crocodile and a rhino, when full-grown, averaging about two tons. But the rhino was at a disadvantage on a slippery bank, and after a battle lasting two and a half hours the poor beast was dragged under the water. We now entered a more smiling country; the brilliant verdure and stately trees that marked the sinuous course of the Athi River, the flat-topped acacias and mimosa that dotted the plain gave way on our right to the forests of a massive hill. We skirted the base of the mountain Donya Sabuk, thickly wooded and seared by deep ravines, where rhino and buffalo roam in safety, as Lady MacMillan, the owner of this mountain and much land around, keeps it strictly preserved.

We were now approaching the Kianzabe estate, and turned into a lovely tropical garden; here was the home of the MacMasters where we stopped for tea on our way to Hubert's house at the other end of the property. Toby and I both appreciated our beautiful surroundings. Though the sun scorched, the heat was not oppressive, for there was a cool freshness in the breeze, and, as we were five thousand

through which meandered streams. Some of these can be dignified by the name of rivers, and in them trout, both brown and rainbow, have been introduced. These trout, brought from the peaty burns and rivers of Scotland, grow with astonishing rapidity in the cool waters that descend from the glaciers of the Mountain.

As Hubert is an expert fisherman we pulled up the car, and heedless of the warning, "Beware of Rhino," we penetrated the green depths of the wood beside the stream in search of pools, but the trout ignored the tempting flies, and as we came on fresh rhino spoor, and the brute was probably close by hidden in the thick vegetation, we hastily beat a retreat. Later on we heard that the day before a native had been killed at the spot where we left our car.

Many of the trees we passed have hollow boles placed in their forks or hanging from their branches. These cylindrical barrels are the hives the natives make use of to collect the honey of the wild bees. They blow smoke in through the many crevices of the boles and the bees go away stupefied; they then seize the honey, no provision being left for the poor bees who have lost the result of their labour. The careless natives often set fire to the trees while smoking out the bees, and the damage resulting is very serious in this dry country.

The practice of smoking out bees is the origin of almost every bush fire in Africa. It is a practice which the Forestry Department have for years endeavoured to rigidly suppress, but the Home politician is weak in the matter and looks upon it as an intolerable interference with native rights. Very considerable damage has been done to sisal estates as the result of

the wanton carelessness of the natives, to say nothing of the great tracts of forest that have been destroyed.

Sometimes the bees build their combs in the living camphor trees, for in their old age the mighty trunks are hollow as an ancient English oak. These combs would never be discovered if it were not for the cunning of the honey-bird, whose favourite food is the wild honey which he cannot extract from its hiding-place except through the agency of man. The bird does his share of the joint business by leading his human allies to the spot where rests the hidden honey. This he accomplishes by hopping from branch to branch in the desired direction, all the time twittering loudly. The bird flies from tree to tree, and the full significance of his manœuvres is soon apparent to the natives, who at once follow him with a burning torch from the cooking fire or a box of matches for the purpose of smoking out the bees if they happen to be at home. On arriving at the cache, the little bird indicates the spot by flying round and round, then swinging himself head down, or, perched on an adjacent branch, he will stop chirping and watch expectantly for the feast to come. The honey-bird looks on it as a matter of business and trusts his partners to give him his share.

If the bees are there, they are soon bemused with the smoke arising from the green leaves and fly away, sometimes half-heartedly landing a sting on their aggressors. As soon as the whole nest is exposed, the comb full of delicious wild honey mixed up with leaves, grubs and all manner of mess is scooped into a cooking-pot brought for the purpose. The honey is eaten in the dirty condition in which it happens to be obtained, often black with age and smoke. The

Next evening Toby returned to the lion swamp and saw three of the brutes about to leave for their kill ; Toby was taken up in the Ford car to within 35 yards, while A. T. and his uncle covered the lions with the rifles. Poor Toby confessed to feeling a bit nervous at first, but managed to secure a very interesting picture of the beasts. One of them looked nasty and kept crouching as if to spring, but luckily for himself he did not do so, and we hope that Toby has secured a very unique film.

A. T. had got some rather extraordinary pets. A python, fifteen feet long, lives in a box in his room and comes out every six months to be fed ; a young baboon, which may become dangerous, as they are difficult to tame, wanders about at its own sweet will ; and he once had a baby rhino weighing 700 pounds that walked into the dining-room, looking for its bucket of milk. When it grew to over a ton in weight it was sent to the Hamburg Zoo, where it now is living contentedly and still waxing in size and weight.

Lion cubs are most attractive pets ; they love a romp, and exact a lot of attention from their owners, lying on their back and asking to have their fat little tummies tickled.

Some years ago my sister brought two cubs back from Africa. Her husband had shot the lioness not knowing that she had cubs, and these babies were scarcely a month old. G—— wished to give one of the cubs to the local zoo, but was warned to keep both, for lions have great hearts, and the one alone would expend all its love and devotion on her, which would make the parting that must eventually take place a tragedy.

STARTING FOR MARSABIT

glimpsed a rhino in the distance. I would never have known the brute was there, standing motionless in the shade of some thorn trees, if A. T. had not drawn my attention to her. She appeared a very old lady, with her loose wrinkled skin hanging in folds. Near her stood her infant son, a little less wrinkled, a little less monstrous than his mother. We stopped the car to watch these prehistoric beasts, by no means beautiful, and so stupid and easy to shoot that one fears their extinction is only a matter of time. Their one protection against the human foe is the tick-bird that lives on the vermin hidden in the loose folds of their skin; these birds are always on the alert to give the poor old rhino warning when danger threatens.

We also met a solitary ostrich, a male bird in magnificent plumage; his jet-black coat and the white feathers of his wings as he spread them out to run showed his truly royal pedigree. There were many Grevy zebra. The Grevy stands from 15.2 to 16 hands high, has a finely-striped coat, large soft ears and is a strikingly handsome beast. The difference between him and his plebeian cousin is that between a racehorse and a hack. As these animals are immune from the tsetse fly, a white hunter named Rattray conceived the idea of taming them and breaking them into work in districts where horses and oxen cannot be used. The ordinary zebra is a vicious brute, but the Grevy showed himself quite amenable, and I believe that Rattray once drove a team of four of these beautiful beasts from his farm near Isiolo to Nairobi, a distance of nearly 200 miles, without a mishap, the animals showing no fear or resentment at motor-cars or street traffic.

Unfortunately Mr. Rattray died last year, leaving



RETICULATED GIRAFFE NEAR UASO NYERO RIVER



lit the sky, making our lamp superfluous. Soon the rain arrived—the rain of the tropics—that comes in sheets, blotting out the universe. Toby and I were safe from it in our small double tent. The natives crouched under the rain-proof sheet which is always carried, while A. T. took refuge in the driver's seat of the lorry.

After an hour the rain ceased, and then started the voices of the wild; beasts of prey were creeping out for their night's hunting, hyenas howled, zebras grunted and once a lion's deep roaring made me hold my breath. It was some way off, but there was no mistaking that impressive hollow roar. Toby awoke to it, and we listened for it to come nearer, for when the lion roars all other sounds are stilled. The rain had put out our fires, but we knew that A. T. was on the alert, with his two powerful rifles and his gun-bearer, Simba, who had been with him, and with his father before him, for many years and could always be relied on in whatever emergency arose. Again we heard that deep-throated sinister roar, but this time it was farther away.

In the early morning started the chorus of the birds; the harsh call of the guinea-fowl; the shrill chirp of the cricket, varied by the deep note of the bull-frog, and later followed the hornbill, the fly-catcher, the mocking-bird, the ubiquitous cuckoo and the plantain-eater, in whose plaintive cry we thought to hear the echo of the voices of the old men of the mountain.

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THE LONE MOUNTAIN OF MARSABIT

WE had broken camp and were away by 7 a.m., and in a couple of hours arrived at Lai-Sarmis, which is a collection of hills and fantastic rocks hurled up in chaotic fashion by long-extinct volcanoes. Here, beside the road, were spread a long line of whitened skulls—all that remained to tell of the many rhino that had fallen victims to the insatiable greed of the game-hunter, or possibly to his lust for the money the Chinese are willing to pay for the horn, from which they make medicine. A. T. told us he never camped here on safari as there were too many rhino about and from being continually hunted they had become very savage. We only saw a few nomads with camels.

We were now about to enter the Kasut desert which, studded with thorn bush, stretched on our right to Abyssinia, 300 miles away, while to our left still farther off, lay that sinister lake, named Rudolf, situated in the Kasut where it merges into the Koroli desert—a land of heat and thirst, uninhabited by man or beast.

Entering the Kasut one felt the last contact with civilization was broken; to this remote corner of Africa no echoes of the busy, noisy world could penetrate. All cares are washed away in the clean

mies and Grants, we pulled up on a small rise and with our glasses searched the Bush around. We were expecting to see lion, and certainly rhino, but the springs had dried up and the game had wandered on, probably to the Tsavo River. All was silent, not a leaf stirred. I asked my host what he would do if we suddenly met a rhino face to face, and he answered that he would at once turn the car to windward off the track, and the chances are the rhino would go on as he hunts entirely by scent. His eyesight being very feeble, his half-blind rushes are directed to a taint in the air and it is quite likely that the brute will lumber on for miles, probably wondering what it is all about! With his absurd tail up, and snorting like a steam engine, he rushes about as if wishing to exterminate you, while he probably is only trying to locate you, so that he may run the other way. To-day we were in no danger, as the only animals we saw besides antelope, were some of the Masai cattle which feed on the Reserve, for it is understood the Masai only kill a lion if he attacks the herds.

But famine has stalked the land and the awful stench of the dead cattle drove us away. Later we heard that the whole Reserve is one ghastly shambles, strewn with the carcasses of the Masai herds, victims of the drought.

Though we were disappointed at not seeing the larger game, we had a most beautiful drive back over the hills, the sunset tinging the snows on Kilimanjaro to a delicate rose which was reflected in the plain below.

On our return to the house we were greeted with the astounding news, that a few miles away some elephants had wandered on to the farm. As it was



A RHINO SNIFFING FOR SCENT OF DANGER

with prehistoric caves, the homes of a mountain people. Strange men and women are said to live their isolated lives high up in the intense cold that is always experienced when 10,000 feet above sea-level. This hardy tribe and their forefathers have occupied these caves from time immemorial, and doubtless in the centuries to come their descendants will still share the caves with the bats and the ghosts of their ancestors.

One peak of Kenya, over 100 miles away, pierced faintly white to the sky. The rest was hidden in cloud.

To our right and left, sharp ridges and great jagged rocks cut the horizon. Below, in the deeper valley, game was plentiful. Elephant, rhino, lions, roamed in peace, undisturbed by man, because of the heat and fever in that low latitude. The grandeur, the impressive silence, the titanic size of the landscape were bewildering. One felt that here it was fitting to make one's farewell to Africa.

I am again at the Muthaiga Club, where Toby joins me. I feel myself back in an effete civilization. Toby has had a very successful safari. He and A. T. went first to Nanyuki, where Toby shot an oryx on the lower slopes of Kenya. They then went on to Embu on the east side of the mountain and descended to the Emberrri country in the Tana Valley. Here Toby succeeded in getting some good photographs of rhino.

While looking for buffalo, they bumped into two rhino; it was open country and the rhino, with their feeble sight, could not make out what sort of animal

was approaching. Toby got within 20 yards and was able to make a film before they realized that it was the enemy, Man, who was invading their sanctuary. They debated for a second or two whether to charge or run, and decided on the latter, snorting hard, with their little ears upraised. The buffalo were disappointing, for though Toby and A. T. followed the spoor for many miles, both in the car and on foot through the hot Tana plains, they never came up with them.