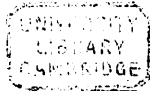




An 1890 Pioneer
(The late Arthur Eyre)



OLD RHODESIAN DAYS

BY

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CHAPTER XI.

WILD BEASTS.

THE entry of the Pioneer column with its long train of waggons, its search-light and other military paraphernalia, probably gave the big game animals of Mashonaland a scare from which they never really recovered. The column was followed by a steady and growing stream of transport, much of it in charge of Boer conductors who continually hunted "for the pot" on either side of the road, and the giraffes, zebras, buffaloes and other interesting animals of which we had heard so much learnt to give the beaten track a wide berth. The dispersal of prospectors and farmers in all directions drove them still further into the wilds, and from 1890 onwards the opportunities of seeing or shooting the larger fauna of the country in the immediate neighbourhood of the new townships and mining settlements rapidly decreased. Even further afield the panorama of immense troops of different kinds of big game grazing and galloping about, as depicted in the illustrations to the books of Gordon Cumming and Cornwallis Harris, and as described by Selous in his fascinating journals of travel and sport, was a thing of the past. Still a number of the more common species of antelope could at first be found within fairly easy reach of Salisbury. In 1891 a small herd of tsessebe was frequently grazing within two or three miles of the Kopje, sometimes coming as close in as the racecourse. A troop of about twenty ostriches haunted the Gwibi flats between Salisbury and Mount Hampden for many years, and two of them—a cock and a hen—survived until 1913, and could be seen almost any day about four miles from the township.

That the descriptions of the old hunters were by no means fantastic or exaggerated it was still possible, in the nineties, to have ocular proof—not in Southern Rhodesia, it is true, but in the neighbouring districts North of the Zambesi and on the Pungwe flats in Portuguese territory, on the way to Beira. Within a day's ride of Kalomo, the first headquarters of the Northern Administration, one could make sure in 1903 of finding roan and sable antelope, Burchell's zebra, wart-hog, eland and hartebeeste, besides innumerable small buck such as oribi and

duiker. The swampy country near the Kafue River teemed with pookoo and lechwe; the North bank of the Zambesi gave cover to impala and buffalo, while hippopotami abounded in the river itself. In later years these last-named were a great nuisance to boating parties above the Victoria Falls, and several fatal accidents occurred through their propensity for charging and upsetting canoes. Consequently the authorities in Northern Rhodesia who were nearest to the river encouraged their destruction. If, however, they chose to stick to the South bank they were safe, for under the laws of Southern Rhodesia they fell within the category of "Royal"—i.e., protected game. Absurd as it was, this legal anomaly seemed to be understood by the beasts themselves, which kept to the Matabeleland side and avoided the opposite one.

On the Pungwe flats, during the railway construction from Fontesville to Mashonaland and for some time after the line was opened, immense herds of buffalo, numbering several thousands of head, and mixed troops of *wilde-beeste* (brindled gnu) and zebra, nearly as large, were often seen by passengers travelling on the train; but that was before the outbreak of rinderpest, which wrought deadly havoc among ruminant animals, wild as well as domestic.

From what survived in these two neighbouring territories one could form an idea of the magnificent spectacle which the veld of Mashonaland must have presented to the hunters of the nineteenth century almost up to the arrival of the Pioneers, and it seems hard that the disappearance of grand creatures like the giraffe and the total extinction of such species as the white rhinoceros should be the inevitable sequel of European settlement. Two of the latter were shot in 1893, near Lomagunda by Mr. (afterwards Sir Robert) Coryndon, and were the last seen in Mashonaland, where they were, within the memory of living men, among the commonest, and certainly the least ferocious of the great pachyderms. Mr. Coryndon's pair were carefully mounted and sent, one to Lord Rothschild's private collection, and the other to the Capetown Museum, where it can still be seen.

The trivial hunting experiences which fell to the lot of most of us in those early years are not worth telling. Those who want the real thing can find it in the delightful narratives published by the late F. C. Selous. Incidentally he was the most modest of men where his own exploits were concerned and could seldom be drawn into talking about them. It is curious, however, that when a story of sport is told there is always some one who tries to cap it. A certain Major Hamilton

Browne—commonly known as “Maori” Brown, on the strength of his picturesque tales of real or imaginary adventures in New Zealand—was a man of this sort, albeit a most amusing *raconteur* of the Munchausen type. At the police officers’ mess in Salisbury the conversation turned one evening on snakes, and somebody asked Selous, who was present, whether he had known any interesting cases of pythons swallowing their prey whole. Selous replied that he had once killed a python which had gorged itself with an ant-bear whose body was found half-digested in its interior. This gave an opening to Maori Browne, who promptly recounted a circumstantial yarn of a victorious personal encounter in Natal with an enormous python which, on being cut open, revealed the complete carcase of a trek ox! Everybody gasped, and Selous quietly asked “What about the horns?” Maori had overlooked this detail, but realised that his reputation was at stake and that he must see the matter through. Only pausing to take a gulp at his whiskey and soda he boldly, and without visible embarrassment, took up the challenge. “Horns and all, my dear boy,” he replied. “Horns and all!”

Elephants, which were fairly plentiful throughout Mashonaland in Selous’ time, betook themselves after the occupation to the remoter districts. Occasionally a few would find their way to some of the outlying farms and do much damage to standing crops. About 1908, a herd became such a nuisance to farmers in the Lomagundi district that the Government temporarily suspended the clause in the regulations which protected them as “Royal” game, and several residents of Salisbury, anxious to seize this opportunity of a rare sport, made up expeditions with a view to trying their luck during the week end. But, while they were arranging their plans, a party of Boers stole a march on them, trekked out to Lomagundi on horse-back, followed by their waggons, and within a few days had slaughtered the whole herd, numbering, I think, about 30. They traded some of the meat to the natives and made the remainder into biltong, which, together with a large number of sjamboks cut from the hides, they brought into Salisbury for sale.

About the same time the mail train, on its way from the Victoria Falls to Bulawayo, collided by night with a large bull elephant which was strolling along the railway line. A certain amount of injury was done to the engine, but the train was, fortunately, not derailed. As generally happens to pedestrians, the elephant came off worst and was, of course, put

out of his suffering by a bullet. The railway company appropriated the ivory, which they realised to such advantage that they were able to defray the cost of repairing the damage to their engine.

Travellers, especially when using pack-donkeys to carry their kit and provisions, were often bothered by lions. One of the pioneers—Clay by name—having to make a camp by night in a district infested by these beasts, enclosed his donkeys within a stout *scherm* of thorn-bushes, and at one side of it pitched his patrol tent, where he retired to rest with his clothes and boots on and a loaded rifle by his side. In the middle of the night he was roused by a tremendous snorting and grunting and springing up found his donkeys plunging about in the darkness and straining at their head ropes. One of them had apparently broken loose and seemed to Clay, who could only dimly discern its outline, to be trying to leap over the fence. So he walked up and in order to turn it back gave it a couple of hard kicks in the ribs. The response to this was an angry growl. “A donkey that growls,” thought he, “must be a *lusus naturae*, and is better out of the way.” So he laid it low with a bullet at about two yards range, and, lighting a lantern, found that what he had been kicking was a fine male lion. The late Mr. Alexander Boggie, a prominent trader at Lobengula’s kraal, was less fortunate, for, hearing a disturbance in his camp one night and suspecting lions, he poured a charge of “loopers” at close quarters into a shadowy figure which, he thought, was charging him and found a minute afterwards that he had bagged one of his own donkeys. He endured the resultant banter with stoicism, and never turned a hair when someone asked him if he would send the skin to Messrs. Rowland Ward for mounting. Some years later he wrote a pleasant little book of his experiences in Matabeleland but omitted to record this episode.

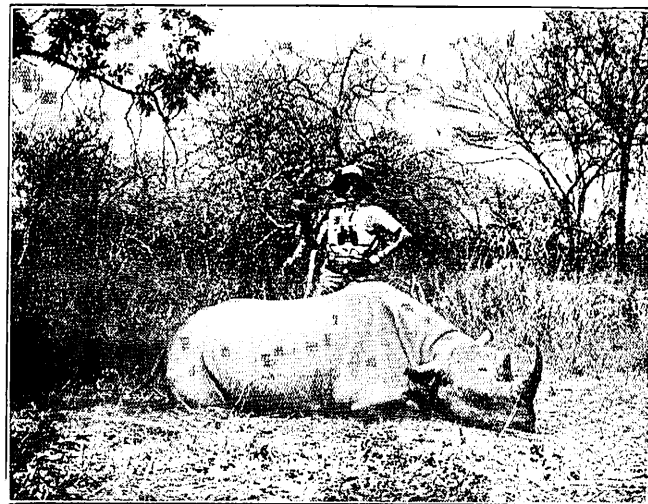
One characteristic of lions—and other beasts of prey as well—was their unexpectedness. You might go hunting for days in known lion-veld without finding even the spoor of one; on the other hand, you might be out for a quiet ride near your home without a rifle and run into a family party. Long after Salisbury had grown into an established town, with shops and brick buildings, a lioness strolled down Pioneer Street one Sunday afternoon, when most of the inhabitants were having a nap. She snapped up an unsuspecting bull-terrier—the only living thing she could see—which was dozing on the stoep of the Masonic hotel, and retired with her kill into the long grass at the back of the kopje, where she was routed out and despatched the same evening.

It was just the same with crocodiles. They had a discourteous habit of turning up unannounced. Dr. Rutherford Harris, the Secretary of the Chartered Company, went for a swim one afternoon in the Hanyani River, not far from Salisbury—rather a foolhardy thing to do—and afterwards sat, still in his birthday suit, on a rock at the edge of the stream and trimmed his toe-nails. While he was engaged in this absorbing task a crocodile crept stealthily up and attacked him from behind, inflicting severe wounds, which kept him in hospital for some weeks, and eventually necessitated his leaving the country.

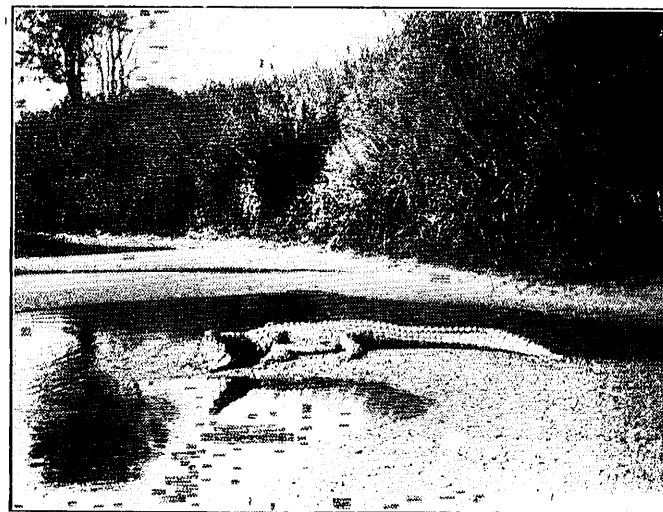
This was a most unusual occurrence in Mashonaland, for although crocodiles were plentiful in all the rivers, they were seldom bold enough to attack human beings. But they were very destructive to goats, young cattle, and even donkeys, seizing them by the head while drinking and holding them under water till drowned. Constant warfare was waged against them by white men. The usual weapon employed was dynamite or a detonator cartridge with a lighted fuse affixed to it. This was thrown into one of the detached pools of which in the dry season many of the streams are composed. The shock of the explosion stunned the crocodile (if there happened to be one), and caused it to rise to the surface, where it was easily despatched. White miners and prospectors accustomed to explosives also used this method for catching fish, and were very reckless in handling the detonators, sometimes even biting them to make them clip the fuse. In this way a ghastly accident befel one of the pioneers, Edward Suckling. The detonator exploded in his face, half of which it blew away, besides blinding him, so that his death, which followed a day or two later, was a merciful release.

This carelessness in handling explosives extended to firearms, even with men thoroughly used to them, as most of us were. My old friend Mr. Cooper Chadwick, a good sportsman and a fine shot, was standing with his hands resting on the muzzle of his loaded gun, when his little dog, which was fawning on him, caught the trigger with its fore-paw. The gun went off, and the charge passed through both hands, necessitating a double amputation. That was thirty-six years ago, and Mr. Chadwick, in spite of his severe handicap, has taught himself to do with his stumps nearly as much as other men can with their fingers. His handwriting is particularly clear, and he has published an interesting book—the manuscript of which I have seen—of his experiences during a three years' residence at Lobengula's kraal.

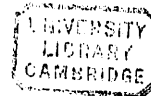
To return to our crocodiles. On the Zambesi River they are much bolder where human beings are concerned, and some think



Black Rhinoceros



A Maneater



this is due to their having acquired the man-eating habit in days past, when powerful native chiefs punished offenders and rid themselves of enemies by binding their hands and feet and throwing them into the river. I have heard of cases where a crocodile has knocked a native paddler out of a canoe by a swish from its powerful tail, but cannot vouch for this as a fact. The villagers on the banks of the river, and especially the women, are to this day very stupid about exposing themselves to attack. In 1903 I was at Kazangula, an old ferrying-point on the Zambesi, when one of a party of women who were washing clothes in the river near the bank, and standing up to their knees in the water, was seized and carried off by a man-eating crocodile. Her companions fled screaming, and all that day there was loud lamentation in the village, and no one ventured near the river, but on the following morning they were all back again, wading about and laughing and chatting, quite unconcerned at the danger. Small wonder that women's bangles and other metal ornaments are from time to time found in the paunches of crocodiles shot on the Zambesi River.

However, in Mashonaland "crocks" were not such a common danger as to cause us any sleepless nights. I wish I could say the same about some of the smaller vermin which followed us into our homes. Rats, for instance, during the first two or three years, were an intolerable plague. Besides eating our provisions, candles and boots, they would attack people when asleep, nibble their hair and gnaw the tips of their fingers. By day they used to play hide and seek behind the native-made cane mats with which we lined the sides and ceilings of our huts. We could hear them chirruping to one another, and follow their movements by the agitation of the mats as they scampered up and down. They were fond of carrying anything portable to their nests, and we once discovered a whole linen table-cloth tucked away in a rat hole—greatly to the relief of the houseboy who had been accused of the theft.

Then there were the insect pests which buzzed about in clouds whenever a lamp or candle was lit—beetles, large and small, flopping in the soup and crawling down our necks; mosquitos; midges—sometimes in such dense swarms that we had to swathe our heads in towels in order to have a meal in peace; an occasional scorpion, and creeping things innumerable. Never, I suppose, was there such a rich field for the study of entomology, and yet, with one exception, we were blind to our opportunities, and, instead of devoting ourselves to scientific research, we only indulged in bad language. The exception

was Mr. G. A. K. Marshall, now I believe professor of entomology, and one of the greatest authorities on "bugs" in the world. At that time Mr. Marshall was a civil servant in Salisbury, and he alone, being a true philosopher, saw that what merely provoked the many could be turned to profit for himself.

I must not forget the ubiquitous termites, or "white ants," as everyone calls them, so plentiful and voracious in places that the feet of tables and cupboards had to be stood in saucers of paraffin to keep these little pests from tunnelling up the legs. As for clothes and books, unless one inspected them constantly or kept them in airtight steel boxes, the ants would in a few hours consume every part of them except the bare outside.

That the life history of the termite is as yet imperfectly understood will be gathered from the following incident, for the truth of which others besides myself can vouch.

Two or three professional men who took their meals at one of the most "fashionable" hotels in Bulawayo had reason to suspect that the whiskey supplied to them was being regularly watered. They sent for the manager, who was profuse in his protestations that nothing of the sort could possibly happen in his establishment, and, as a proof of his *bona fides*, offered to open a new bottle in their presence. The bottle was brought—a well-known and favourite brand—and the manager pointed out that the lead capsule was unbroken and the cork intact. He then personally opened the bottle and poured a tot into one of the glasses, but was rather taken aback when, with the whiskey, out came an unmistakable white ant!

I began this chapter with some remarks on lions, and before closing would say that during a long residence in Rhodesia I never had a shot at a lion nor went out of my way to meet them, though I did so on several occasions when I was unarmed. My attitude towards lions has always been that of the late Mr. "Ikey" Sonnenburg, a celebrated trader who frequented Rhodesia in the early nineties. He was at Victoria, and lions had been doing damage to stock at some farms close to the commonage, so a party of two or three sportsmen started very early one Sunday morning to try and round them up. As they walked down the street with their dogs and rifles they passed Ikey, who, clad in his pyjamas, was sniffing the morning air at the door of his store. "Where are you boys off to?" he enquired. "We're going to look for the lions," they replied. "Will you come along with us?" "No, thank ye," said Ikey, "I ain't lost no lions."

CHAPTER XII.

"LOBEN."

MOST of the human obstacles encountered by Rhodes in reconstructing the map of Africa were either out-manceuvred or "absorbed." There were two, however, with whom neither of these methods succeeded—President Krüger and "King" Lobengula—and of them the latter is, I think, the more deserving of sympathy and admiration.

"Oom Paul's" sole interest in the Englishmen who swarmed into his country after the discovery of gold was as a means of aggrandisement for his own people and enrichment of his treasury. He tolerated them only in so far as they submitted to be bled without aspiring to political freedom. Although he proved too hard a nut for Rhodes to crack, he utterly misjudged the British temperament, and thereby compassed his own destruction.

"Loben," on the other hand, was the victim of inexorable circumstances. Equally with Krüger, he was anxious to protect the traditions and liberties of his own people, but very early in the day he realised that the English would not be denied. He made an honest endeavour to prevent a clash between two irreconcilable forces, and when the fates proved too strong for him he made his exit like a gentleman.

The Matabele régime was a survival from the time when African tribes lived by preying on one another; when outrage and robbery were the roads to prosperity, and when Chiefs maintained their authority only by a callous disregard of human life. Loben's father, the founder of the Matabele nation, was aptly named Mziligazi—"the trail of blood." His young braves were trained to look upon other tribes as existing merely to provide them with profit and amusement. Fighting was their profession and murder their pastime. They depended on their raids for cattle to augment their own herds, for youths to incorporate into their own regiments, and for girls to become their slave wives. Any adult man or old woman so unfortunate as to fall into their hands they butchered with every refinement of brutal and sadistic torture. With the possible exceptions of the Masai of Uganda and the Touaregs of the French Sahara,