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TWENTY THOUSAND MILES IN THE AFRICAN JUNGLE

by

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THE BLOOD-DRINKERS

REARING ITS HEAD above a halo of mist and a plain dotted with clumps of umbrella trees, the fabulous Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa, loomed, conical and gleaming, above me.

The name Kilimanjaro—used by the natives of the Chagga tribe who live at the foot of the mountain—means “the shining mountain”. Another of the tribes of the plain, the famous Masai, call it, respectfully, “the white-bearded father”. The legends which surround this mountain are passed down among the natives from generation to generation, and almost word for word.

Halted beneath a tree beside the road, near the village of Namanga, I heard a story-teller reciting, to a group of natives, one of these legends about Mount Kibo, the higher, and Mount Mawenzi, the two peaks of Kilimanjaro. Formerly, he said, they were brothers, and enemies, and the great Master turned them into volcanoes to prevent them from fighting each other. But, although reconciled in appearance, the two brothers still manifested their rage from time to time, by spitting fire and causing the earth to quake. I noticed that the audience protested loudly when the story-teller modified the usual phrases, and forced him to begin again, using the traditional words of great antiquity, which they had known since birth.

I had come upon the magical mountain after a very hard drive of a hundred and twenty miles from Nairobi, which had taken me round the salt-lake of Amboseli. “The shining mountain!” It was well-named.

The vertical sun struck down on its slopes of ice and snow, so that they shone and glittered like an immense diamond. The peak, which is over nineteen thousand feet, dominates, with all its great height, its freshness, and its purity, the arid plain, all yellow and dusty, dotted with herds of cattle grazing among the square huts of the Masai villages.

What had brought me to this region were the rhinoceros, for these animals live at the foot of the mountain. The African rhinoceros—which is only to be met with on the eastern side of the continent—has two horns. Moreover it is more powerful, more dangerous and shorter-tempered than its Asiatic cousin.

The Masai, like the splendid Batutsi, to whom they can be compared for physical beauty, nobility of bearing and pastoral mores, migrated from the north, from Ethiopia, or perhaps even from Egypt, to escape from the oppression of the Pharaohs. Like the Batutsi they clashed with the aboriginal tribes, the Pygmies and the Wakamba, who fought hard to defend their rich grazing lands. But the Masai were fine warriors, intelligent and contemptuous of death; they defeated the natives and enslaved them; and they themselves were thereafter able to confine their labours to stock-raising.

They built their huts of leather, by stretching fresh cattle hides on a framework of branches. These rectangular huts, called *manyattas*, to which they have remained faithful to this day, lasted only one season.

To defend their cattle the Masai had to defeat the lions, and to do so armed only with a short spear and a round leather shield. In the course of time this endless battle with lion became a tribal tradition. Before being admitted to the ranks of fully-fledged warriors, the young Masai must go into the bush and return with a trophy—a lion's mane.

In the middle of the last century, when the first white explorers set foot in Zanzibar and on the mainland of Africa near it, they found their way barred by the savage Masai. And although more than a century has passed, these people, despite contact with civilization, have remained hostile to the intruder. Their hostility no longer takes an aggressive form, but is manifest in contemptuous looks and indifference to all that comes from the foreigner.

Evening was falling as I stopped the car near a village of a score of huts, built side by side to form a circle in the middle of which the cattle are enclosed. My appearance roused no interest whatsoever. The inhabitants went about their business with majestic grace of bearing, their magnificent velvet-skinned bodies draped with a length of red or ochre material,

leaving one shoulder bare. The women continued with their household tasks, the copper bracelets tinkling on their wrists as they moved. The necklaces and anklets were also of copper.

Taking no notice of the unwelcoming atmosphere, I pitched my tent outside the kraal, in the middle of some clumps of bushes with withered branches. I chose a site at some distance from the village in order not to be troubled with the sickening stench of their hide huts. However I had, according to custom, to pay the headman a visit: this was a matter of protocol, but in any case I had an interest in doing so, since without the chief's authority no native would serve me as a guide.

The chief's hut was, as is usual, larger than the others. At the door a young Masai was standing on one leg, with the other bent under him, the foot resting against his thigh, like a heron. He was holding a long assegai, and his hair was arranged in a number of fine plaits, falling to his shoulders.

A fire was burning inside the hut and my eyes, irritated by the smoke, had difficulty in picking out the man I sought among the five or six persons present, all crouched about the hearth. I asked for the chief. There was an instant silence in the hut, and every face was turned towards the tallest man present whose muscles, powerful but graceful, gleamed in the poor light. Then began a difficult and disconnected conversation. The chief seemed not to understand what I repeated ten times in my best Swahili: that I had come there to film rhinoceros and should like him to provide me with a guide. I had repeated my long explanations several times, but he still asked me,

"Why Bwana come?"

"To make photos rhino."

"Why take photos rhino?"

"I photograph all African animals."

"Why?"

It was like dealing with an eight-year-old boy! But it occurred to me that he was pretending not to understand because my offer of a reward was not sufficiently definite.

I left the hut as if I regarded the negotiations as being broken off, and went to my car to fetch a bottle of rum. By these means matters were arranged without the slightest difficulty. The famous Masai, drinkers of blood, are also, on occasion,



Kifaru sagai, an enormous species of rhinoceros.



The Masai trackers.

drinkers of other beverages. The chief promised me two guides for the following day, two *moran* brothers—that is, young warriors who had already done battle with lions.

The two young men were outside my tent at dawn, their bodies gleaming with an ochreous colour. They were armed with long assegais and shields decorated with white and red arabesques. One was wearing a brown loin-cloth, the other a reddish one and, what surprised me a good deal, both were smiling. They were two splendid lads, and I thought we should get on very well together. The tallest approached me,

“Bwana, we are the men who will take you to *kifaru sagai*.”

Kifaru is the Masai word for “rhinoceros”, and the word *sagai*, which always goes with it, means that the animal’s horn is as sharp-pointed and dangerous as a spear. To indicate the size of this horn the young man stretched his long arms wide. If I were to believe him, it seemed the rhino’s horn was longer than the tusks of an elephant. Allowing, however, for the usual exaggeration practised by the natives, it was still possible that the variety of rhino to be met with in that region had a horn a yard or more long. I had heard Africans speak of this species, but no white man had ever seen it, much less photographed it. Which was one more reason for going to look for it. If I should succeed in capturing it in my camera, that would be a fitting last trophy to add to my long tale of picture-hunting.

The two Masai brothers were called Surai and Keru. The price of their services was agreed in advance, but the two of them made oblique references to an extra bonus in the form of a bottle of rum.

“Agreed; but after you have shown me *kifaru sagai*, not before. When do you think we shall see him?”

“Tomorrow, Bwana. The savannah is dry, so *kifaru* goes away, over towards Kilimanjaro. There, the white-bearded father gives him water to drink and mud to wallow in.”

For two days we travelled across the plain, getting near to the wooded foothills. In the evening of the second day, after a fruitless attempt to beat up a rhinoceros, I had gone into my tent to sleep when the shadow of one of my guides appeared on the canvas.

“Bwana,” Surai whispered, “are you angry?”

"Why should I be angry?"

"Because we have not yet found *kifaru sagai*."

"It is true that you said we should find him today."

"Tomorrow, Bwana, we shall find him."

"You told me that yesterday and the day before yesterday."

"But tomorrow, Bwana, it is sure, for we shall come to the end of his territory. Further on, in the woods, there lives another family of *kifaru*, with a short horn, and *kifaru sagai* does not go on to his neighbour's territory, or there would be a battle."

"Good. Go to bed now, and leave me to sleep. We shall need all our strength tomorrow, when we meet *kifaru*."

But Surai did not go away, but stayed crouching by the flap of the tent.

"Why do you not go and sleep, Surai?"

"I am waiting for what Bwana promised me."

"What was that?"

"The bottle of rum."

"I told you that you should have it after we had met *kifaru*."

"Well, then, the bottle is really mine already, for tomorrow we are sure to find *kifaru*."

I was beginning to be both amused and exasperated by this argument, typical of the kind of discussion one is apt to become involved in with the natives.

"But supposing we do not meet him tomorrow?"

"Bwana does not trust Surai; so Surai does not trust Bwana to give him the bottle of rum."

"Enough of this palaver, Surai. Go and sleep."

"Give me part of the bottle, Bwana."

He meant a mouthful. Beaten by his persistence I handed him the bottle to drink from. At a single gulp he lowered the level by about a third of the litre. When I tried to take the bottle away from him, he protested, gasping,

"My brother, Bwana? He will smell it on my breath and he will be displeased. Me and my brother, we are like Kibo and Mawenzi."

"Like the two peaks of Kilimanjaro. Why?"

"In the past they were two brothers who stole fire from the great god who lives under the mountain. He pursued them and

caught them just as they were about to escape. To punish them, he changed them into peaks of ice."

"I don't see the connection with you and your brother."

He burst out laughing and tapped the bottle. "Why, we like fire too!"

At that he jumped to his feet and went, taking the bottle with him.

We were going forward up a gentle slope, covered with bushes and umbrella palms. The soil was so light that every step we took sent up clouds of dust. Rotten water lingered in a few cracks. Suddenly the two Masai both pointed to the tracks of numerous rhino in the mud beside one of these damp places. They examined them carefully, and, having argued the point in their own language, told me that a number of "black rhino" had passed that way some hours ago.

One often hears talk in Africa of "white" and "black" rhino, but the fact is that the white is as grey as the black, or would be if the mass of mud with which these animals are commonly covered enabled one to see so much as a square inch of skin. Formerly, the settlers distinguished two families of rhino, according to the size of the snout—that is, its width. The word "wide" has, in course of time, become corrupted to "white", the original description being *wide-mouthed rhino*. There is another curious difference between the two kinds. In the course of family moves, the black rhino travels in a traditional order: father, mother, offspring. The "white" rhino, on the other hand, causes his spouse and his offspring to walk in front of him, which is more logical, since it enables him to keep an eye on them and protect their rear. Stooping over these tracks, Surai and Keru showed me how the footprints of the male, as large as dinner plates, were covered by those of the young animal and the female: hence the male was in the lead. Shortly afterwards these tracks were joined by others, the size of which astounded me: they were almost as large as those of a young elephant.

"*Kifaru sagai*," Surai whispered.

Rhino have bad eyesight, but their hearing is as acute as their sense of smell. We needed to go cautiously. The animal

was apt to appear suddenly from behind a clump of bushes, in which case it would not be necessary to study the "critical distance"!

From behind the bushes came the gleam of a sheet of water. My two Masai began to move even more silently. My camera, fastened about my neck by a chain, was ready. I took a rapid light-measurement and set the aperture with my heart beating like a hunter as he cocks his gun.

In the mud of the little lake three grey rocks, three large chunks of granite, were half submerged. The nearest to us was about nine feet long and five high. On top of it stood a bird, a tick-bird, who, turning his long, quick beak this way and that, suddenly rose and flew away with a brief, sharp cry. The great rock became animated. The whole enormous mass rose, turned about in the wallow of sickening mud, and lay down on its side. Whereupon I could at last see the famous horn. And I could not believe my eyes! It was unquestionably more than four feet long. It was like a slightly curved sabre, slender and sharply pointed. It must be a formidable weapon. But so fragile, too, that it was a miracle it had not been broken. Had I been a killer-hunter, what a trophy this would have been!

The wind was in our favour. I was able to move about so as to get shots of the beast from different angles, and from so close that few if any picture-hunters can ever have beaten my record. The camera hummed away within ten yards of the dozing creature's nose.

The two Masai brothers had remained behind, silently brandishing their spears. I noted a certain nervousness becoming apparent in the three blocks of granite sunk in the mud. One of them rose suddenly and, with a growl, moved off into the reeds.

Kifaru sagai rose suddenly to his feet, with an agility one would hardly have expected in the case of a personage so obese and so heavily caparisoned. He had still not seen me and made off the other way. I followed, still filming him, hidden behind the trunk of a convenient tree. "Now, I've got you, *kifaru sagai*," I was thinking triumphantly when I felt a blow in the small of the back from the haft of a spear, and Surai's urgent voice brought me to my senses. "Look to your right, Bwana!"



A pair of "white" rhinoceros.



The charge of the *kifaru* photographed from the tree in which we had taken refuge.

I swung to the right. Fifteen yards away stood a rhino growling low and pawing the ground with one front foot. Then it snorted and lowered its head with its massive horn. It was about to charge!

The two Masai had jumped for the tree and up it. Laden with my camera and my rifle, that would not be so easy for me. But in any case it was too late. I tried to unhitch the sling of my rifle, but fumbled it and the gun fell on the ground. To turn and run would be certain suicide. The brute charged. Like a matador in the arena, I watched it coming. The great mass was hurtling down on me at thirty miles an hour. The horn, about eighteen inches long, seemed nicely aimed at the middle of my chest. The ground shook and the heavy feet beat clouds of dust from the soil. Five yards, four, three; then one jump to the side. The beast, like a locomotive on rails, went straight on, but its great heaving, growling weight had almost brushed my shoulder. There was not a second to lose, for it would turn and come back. Three strides took me to the tree, whence the two Masai reached helping hands. A heave and a scramble, and we were all three settled in safety. A pity my gun had been left on the ground. Not that I should have made any use of it, but I feared that it would be trampled underfoot by the rhino.

The *kifaru*, a female, had returned to the attack. But now she was not alone. *Kifaru sagai* came crashing through the bushes at the foot of the tree. The two animals could not see us, but they could smell enemy. They galloped round the tree in a cloud of dust. I made a quick adjustment to my camera for distance, and started filming again. The two brothers held me, first by the arms, and finally, as I hung over this extraordinary *corrida* absorbed in filming it, by the feet.

A third rhino now came to join the furious pair. It was an extraordinary spectacle: they would hurl themselves at full speed in one direction, tear up bushes with their horn, stop abruptly by braking with all four feet, whip round in a sharp right or left turn, and again hurl themselves against an invisible enemy which they could smell quite near to them. The tree shook at the passage of these dozen or so tons of mastodon, as their feet hammered the earth. Absorbed in the action, I was

held to our sustaining branch only by the strong hands of Surai and his brother, clinging to my belt and my boots. And suddenly the storm was past. The ground ceased to shudder, silence reigned and the dust subsided: the *corrida* was over.

On our way home Surai and Keru chattered away in their own tongue. I guessed that they were telling over our exploits. I listened to them, full of joy myself because the picture-hunting had been so good and my FN rifle had been spared. I could now finish my long trip with a clear conscience, for I had done all that I came to do. But, as it happened, one more ordeal awaited me in the Masai country, an ordeal which had not been included in the programme.

When the two brothers were able to tell their tale—with the customary embellishments—the tale of our encounter with *kifaru sagai*, I became a hero in the eyes of the tribe. The chief himself asked me to remain that evening and join them in a meal. Knowing the usual hostility of the Masai towards white men, I realized that this invitation was an honour which I could not refuse without offending them very seriously.

I therefore took my place in the circle of men, when the time came, sitting on the ground outside the chief's hut. Two women brought two large gourds. One contained milk, the other a red liquid: it was blood. The women mixed the two together in an earthenware cup and handed it to the chief. It is customary for the chief to drink before his guest.

The tribal drink of the Masai is the milk of their cows mixed with cow's blood. To refuse to drink it would have been to affront them. I had the cup in my hand. My stomach heaved, but everyone was looking at me and the act of drinking blood which they were waiting for me to accomplish would be the seal on our friendship. It was out of the question to draw back. I shut my eyes and touched my lips with the warm, sticky, insipid fluid. Oh, Africa, what things I have done for your sake! A few months past I was being accused of cannibalism by the Mangbetu; now the Masai had made me a drinker of blood.

I drank: the liquid slid down my throat. It was not, after all, so unpleasant. And perhaps it was thanks to this drink that the Masai were so strong and enduring. I passed the cup to my neighbour, and the silence which, until that moment, had

oppressed the assembled company, was broken. Surai was crouching near to me. I said to him,

"I gave you rum, and you gave me blood to drink. We are equal."

"We gave you blood to drink, not because you gave me rum, but because you were brave, Bwana. And now you owe me another bottle."

"How can that be, Surai?"

"Because soon I shall take you to hunt lion."

"Yes, you shall take me lion hunting, but later. Tomorrow I must be on my way."

"Listen, Bwana, give me part of the bottle you owe me for the lion hunt."

"Presently, when the feast is over."

Surai got his part of a bottle; and by this means I confirmed my promise to return to his tribe and to take part, camera in hand, in one of their famous lion-hunts.