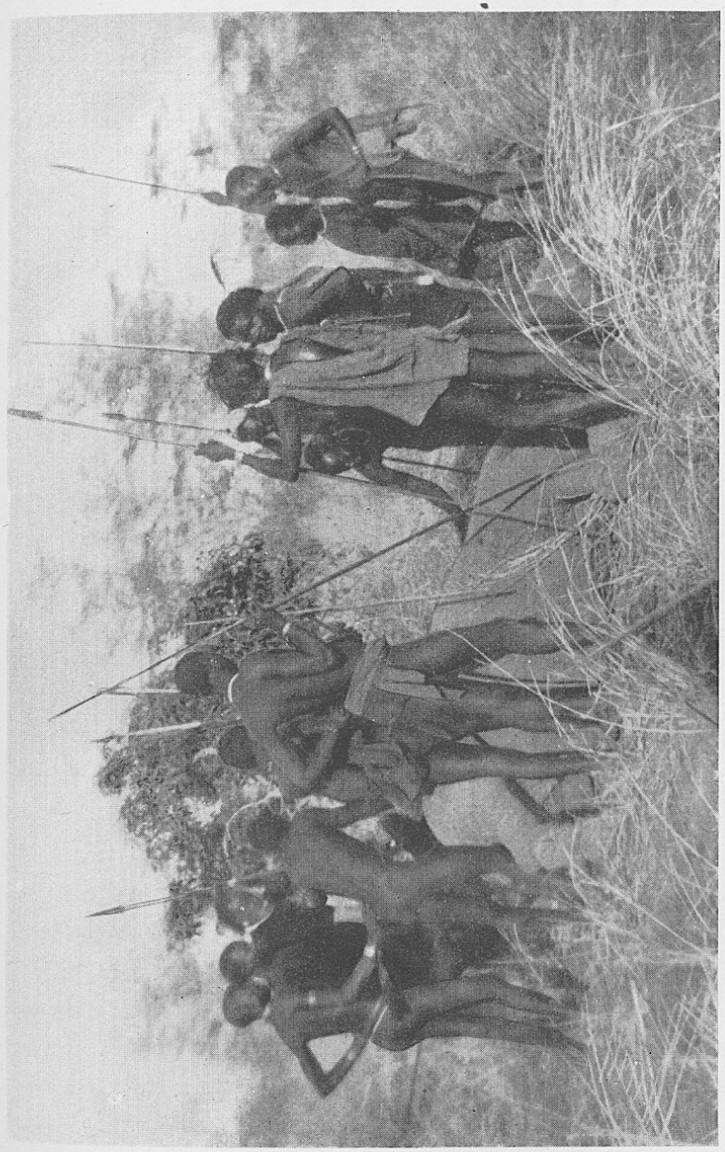
CHAPTER VIII

GAME ALONG THE RIVER KERIO

ENVIRONMENT naturally determines the distribution and abundance of wild life in a particular locality and in many parts of Africa the predominant factor is the existence of an adequate water supply. In this connection I have in mind, particularly, a 30-mile stretch of river in Kenya Colony several marches south of Lake Rudolf, which I had the good fortune to visit just before the termination of two and a half years of acute drought.

This district is set in remarkable surroundings and towering above it only a few miles distant is the beetling western scarp—rising seemingly sheer for several thousand feet—of the immense Rift Valley. This escarpment, however, is less fearsome than it at first appears, and though at this point averaging 4,000 feet in height there are numerous well-used paths scaling its precipitous face. Stranger still, it is possible to ride a mule up and down these tortuous tracks, in many places little short of perpendicular!

It is almost incredible to find a thriving native population—the Marakwet tribe—at home amongst these dizzy heights, more especially as the greater proportion dwell with their flocks and herds two-



SUK TRIBESMEN ROUND A DEAD RHINO

thirds of the way down the escarpment. Who would be an inspecting officer with such a command? Until recently one of the wildest and most backward tribes of that part of Africa, one would scarcely expect the Marakwet to have devised a highly developed hydraulic system whereby the mountain torrents are harnessed high up the scarp to irrigate a broad strip of fertile—formerly barren—land at its foot: but such is the case. The levels of the channels at the bottom of the escarpment are perfect; in fact it has often appeared to me that the water must be flowing uphill! and the various areas are allotted water in rotation. In the event of a traveller arriving at a camp on the water system when the channels are dry his followers call to their brethren above and one can hear the shouting and other signals travelling up and across the escarpment till the news reaches the keepers of the water-gates; and within three-quarters of an hour of reaching camp and sometimes sooner, the welcome stream arrives.

At the top of the escarpment are dense forests of cedars, *podocarpus*, olives and other trees interspersed at the higher altitudes with impenetrable tracts of bamboos and open grassy downs; but it is the less attractive country in the bed of the Rift with which this chapter is principally concerned. When the scarp on the downward journey accompanied by loaded porters has been negotiated one has usually had quite enough for the day, especially at the commencement of a safari, and it is customary to camp at the foot for the night. Small game is

abundant, and if lucky a few brace of green fruit-pigeons, guinea-fowl, yellow-throated francolins (often called erroneously " spur-fowl ") or the tiny Grant's francolins may be obtained. The last-named birds run like rats, and without dogs are very difficult to flush.

A few miles away, forming the eastern boundary of the Marakwet district, and flowing north, is the River Kerio, which is fed by various mountain torrents from the west, the most important being the River Arorr. Looking down from above upon this drought-stricken land, the one refreshing feature is the dark green ribbon-course of the river winding northwards till it becomes lost in the murk which so speedily obscures everything in those furnace-like regions.

To the south-east and across the river rise the inhospitable, gravel-strewn ridges of the Kamasia hills, truly a country to be approached with respect ; to the east and north-east lies mile upon mile of *nyika*, until in the dim distance, far, far away, rises the opposite scarp of the Rift ; to the north is more *nyika* and yet more *nyika* until everything is swallowed up in the infinite.

It is the *nyika* with which this story is intimately concerned. What is it ? An adequate description is scarcely possible to give : it is a region where, after bitter experience, the true meaning of thirst is fully realised. Dry-thorn scrub masking the view in all directions ; cruel spikes and wickedly curved thorns ever-ready to grip and hold and tear—how well are they named " wait-a-bit " ! Vegetation

in the usual sense, there is none. Underfoot, the blistering lava—above, a fiery scorching sun in a cloudless sky. Camp in such a neighbourhood in the vicinity of high ground, and for more than half the night the porous rocks exude so great a heat that sleep is quite impossible.

Such conditions are typical of the *nyika*—the thorn desert—a place of desolation, where abound hardships well-nigh beyond human endurance. And yet to many there is a peculiar feeling of exhilaration—a pleasurable anticipation when the confines of settlement are left behind, when the fertile hills and grassy downs give way to the sterile and almost limitless plains ; in front, the mysterious —behind monotony !

What is the fascination of so uninviting a country ? What is the lure which drags the white man time and again from the peace and comfort of civilisation into the toil and moil of life in the desert ? Is it the wondrous grandeur of the vast spaces where man is so insignificant in the domain of Nature uncontrolled, or is it just a dare-devil spirit enticing him to test Nature at its worst—Nature bitterly exacting, helping but rarely ?

Truly a land beset with mystery and wonders—wonders manifold that have already been revealed, though doubtless as many yet remain to be discovered. Turn to a map of these parts and consider those vast areas marked tersely with the inscription " Lava and thorn-bush—Impassable "—what astounding secrets still lie hidden in those cheerless, waterless tracts ? This then is the *nyika*

in which, on the march, day after day, the same routine holds good.

To avoid the rays of that scorching sun the safari, as far as circumstances permit, marches well before dawn in order to accomplish as great a distance as possible during the coolest hours of the day. " Circumstances permit " is a loose phrase which embraces much—and includes a variety of conditions such as bright moonlight on the one hand, density of the thorn scrub, the broken nature of the country, prevalence of rhinoceroses, and other similar attractions on the other! In some areas where there are streams and swamps it may be necessary at certain seasons to cross tsetse-fly belts, so it is advisable to travel entirely by night, and if accompanied by pack animals, imperative. Night travelling is no joy, for the leafless thorn-bush is invisible in the darkness and impossible to avoid. Tiny game paths, or the well-worn tracks of elephants, have to be followed, and one must always be prepared to meet an inquisitive, blundering rhinoceros, or a herd of screaming, terrified elephants. In such country water is likely to be very scarce ; and marches from one water-hole to the next are often of great length : it is not unusual to have to carry water sufficient for two or three days.

This, then, depicts the *nyika* at its worst—situate in East Africa, mainly in the vicinity of the Rift Valley, that wondrous scar on the earth's surface, bearing testimony to some remote and awful cataclysm ; and into the *nyika* we will now plunge,

having pondered from our lofty vantage point the meaning of life down there.

It is not long since that this particular strip of *nyika* to the south of Lake Rudolf rocked with violent earth tremors which, with a mighty rumbling and roaring, could be heard from a distance. As a consequence, an important watercourse dried up, and great expanses of country have been denuded of their nomadic, pastoral inhabitants.

One would scarcely expect to find a population, however scattered and nomadic, living under such adverse conditions, yet in parts it is actually numerous, and the inhabitants manage to eke out a precarious existence with their herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats, moving from watercourse to water-holes, from water-holes to wells, in a never-ending struggle to keep body and soul together, as ever and anon the water dries up and disappears. Food is scarce, and in some cases the tribes hardly come within the limits of administered areas. Might is right—the law is the law of the strong—the unalterable law of the jungle—and the strong rule by virtue of the position they have wrested from others by brute force. Only foul water is usually available, and this brings in its train disease and degeneration ; and by reason of their constant exposure to the sun in the almost shadeless desert many of the races which inhabit the *nyika* are extremely attenuated in build, as if the sun had drawn them up like plants. The tribes in the vicinity of the River Kerio are the Marakwet on the left, or west, bank, and the Suk on the right, or east.

At the time of which I write the Marakwet, with the exception of the two sections in the neighbourhood of administrative headquarters, were wild and savage ; expert hunters with an inordinate craving for meat who were ready to afford every assistance in hunting until a kill was actually made. Meat secured, they speedily drifted away with their share and would not reappear for several days. When it was a case of transporting meat to their own home there was no second thought in the matter ; the safari loads had to wait ! Also, there was no question of coercion ; on one occasion during the return journey having unwisely killed several zebras for pathological examination I found myself abandoned by all but my personal following and a couple of local native agents. The efforts of these agents met with little success—in fact the local tribesmen were so meat-drunk that they had the impudence to dress up in their war-paint and with their shields and spears demonstrate vociferously and derisively around the camp ! We laughed at them as if they were a pack of naughty children, telling them to go home and not be silly ; and all was well ; but it is not difficult to see how from a small incident such as this there might arise disaster and tragedy. It was impossible to do anything and, leaving an agent in charge of the main dump, we had perforce to push on lightly equipped to the camp at the foot of the escarpment and enlist the aid of the paramount chief to get us out of our predicament.

Accustomed to the head-loads of the plains-



TWO SUK CHIEFS

dwelling natives, one's attention was at once attracted by the pack-carrying method of the Marakwet, indicative of the precipitous nature of their habitat where conditions preclude the carrying of loads in any other fashion than on the back ; and very sturdy porters did these wiry hillmen prove.

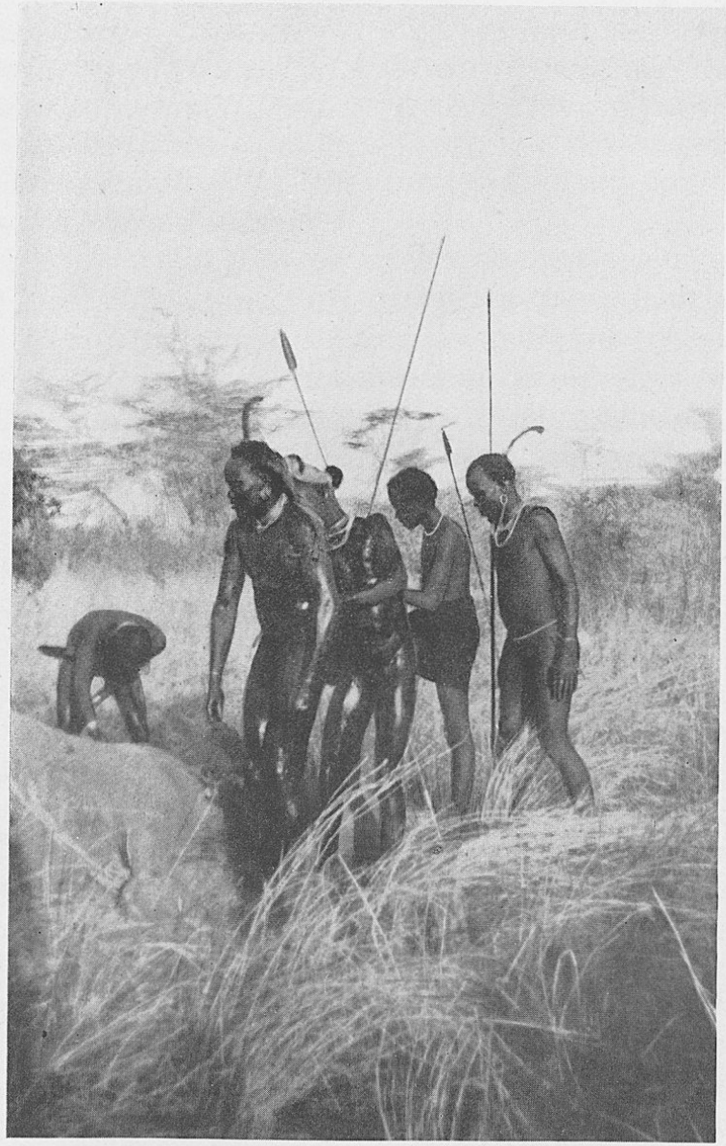
The Suk were of finer physique, and from time to time numerous volunteers—in the hope of obtaining meat—attached themselves to our party ; their chiefs were fine-looking men, hospitable and willing to assist in every way, and evidently exercised considerable control over their followers. One could not help remarking on the amazing length of the spears—some as much as eleven feet—carried by members of this tribe.

Further north and north-east some of the Suk, the Turkana and Karomojong wear a curious stiff head-dress consisting of a mixture of cow-dung, clay and ashes into which is worked a treasured heir-loom—the hair of their forefathers ! This disgusting mixture is plastered solidly on to the growing hair of the wearer at the back of the head and hangs downwards in the form of a small shield ; the privilege of wearing this adornment is only permitted to those tribally recognised as having attained manhood.

It would appear that these races have a certain amount of respect for the sun, as this head device undoubtedly protects the cervical vertebræ from its rays. In the case of the youngsters not old enough to enjoy the benefit of this distinction, yet whose daily employment with the flocks and herds

entails constant exposure, the whole spine is covered with a pennant-shaped strip of hide, hung round the neck, the point reaching the lumbar vertebræ. This plaster head-shield is further ornamented with a long piece of pliable wire which extends downwards, outwards and upwards, being brought back over the top of the head in a graceful curve, the end of which is adorned with a fluffy marabout's feather or a tuft of similar appearance. One marvels how the warriors of various African tribes ever manage to obtain any sleep as their extraordinary, rigid head-dresses are permanent and would seem to preclude any possibility of lying down in comfort. A small, wooden three-legged stool with a concave top is used as a head-rest. One cannot avoid attributing to Ancient Egyptian influence this unusual type of pillow, which constituted the normal head-rest of the much bewigged ancients of that brilliant era.

A particularly unsavoury custom to which I was introduced by some of my voluntary assistants in the course of this trip was that of bathing in rhinoceros blood! It is even more disgusting than it sounds; and the photograph portrays faithfully the procedure, as well as depicting the curious head-dress described. Two natives indulged in this luxury in order, so I was told, to acquire unlimited courage and strength. As soon as the rhinoceros had breathed its last the throat was cut and the jugular severed, the skin below the gash being pulled outwards to leave a capacious hollow, which was speedily filled with blood—foul-smelling, evil-



SUK TRIBESMEN BATHING IN RHINOCEROS' BLOOD

Note the peculiar head-dress

looking, and black, more viscid than fluid. Having stripped themselves of their scanty body adornments, these two savages, with evident delight, smeared themselves from head to toe with the filthy slime till they reeked with offensiveness and literally shone in the brilliant sunshine.

Perhaps I digress too much with these accounts of local natives and their strange customs, though nowadays when endeavouring to acquire knowledge of the habits and idiosyncrasies of the denizens of the wild it is important to collect as much material as possible respecting the more backward members of the human race; they are daily progressing nearer to sophistication and so-called civilisation, and discarding a mode of life and customs which in the past made their study so attractive; consequently the tribal-lore of to-day may be forgotten to-morrow; and once forgotten it is lost for ever.

Several reasons had prompted a trip to this uninviting region. First and foremost I wanted to bag my first elephant, one with really fine ivory. Then there was the tale—well worth investigating—of a diminutive race of elephants peculiar to this area. I was also anxious to obtain specimens of the black rhinoceros, lesser and greater kudu, oryx and gazelles, all of which, with the exception of the first-named, were unfamiliar to me. Then there had been a report of numerous buffalo herds, and I owed the buffalo a debt which would take a long time to repay fully. Above all there was the promise—later fulfilled more than abundantly—of great concentrations of game in that district

consequent on the abnormal climatic conditions of the preceding years. Therefore, though the story of mere killing must be nauseating to the genuine sportsman, such incidents as I am about to record may soon be relegated to a dim past for the very cogent reason that the animals concerned have disappeared for ever.

The day of the great tuskers is passing all too rapidly. Each year brings its quota of a few more giants laid low, and the time cannot be far distant when the "hundred pound" elephant—so it is termed in sporting parlance referring to the weight of each tusk—will be only a sportsman's dream no longer to be realised. It is true that the small Uganda Protectorate can still boast an elephant population of fully 20,000; that Kenya Colony contains more "hundred pound" elephants than any other part of Africa; and that the vast area of the Belgian Congo supports herds possibly aggregating hundreds of thousands; but one can almost say they are here to-day and gone to-morrow—railways, roads, settlements, reclamation, are all combining to drive the game, and especially the greater fauna, off the face of Africa and the world, not less than the activities of the present-day "sportsman"—destroyer, rather would we say—safeguarding himself behind high velocity, big-bore rifles and operating from motor cars. Some such men would resort to the use of aeroplanes if any advantage would thereby accrue!

One must not forget that an elephant is born without ivory and that the 100-lb. tusk is only

developed after the lapse of a very considerable time. Can one honestly believe that an elephant born to-day has any possible hope of surviving the lengthy span requisite to the attainment of such growth—and if so, where? Present-day "sport" has in many cases reduced "butchery" to an art so fine that the hunter is growing to regard his unfortunate quarry from the "heads I win and tails you lose" point of view!

I had selected this region, to the south of Lake Rudolf along either side of the River Kerio, as my hunting ground, as it was well frequented at certain seasons—especially in the dry weather or during periods of drought—by numerous herds of elephants from which in the past mighty tuskers had been obtained. Unfortunately, for various reasons, during the preceding years Habesh poachers from Abyssinia had been able to operate in the country directly south of the lake—a well-known elephant refuge—and there unchecked, they wrought havoc. However, in spite of uneasy forebodings, I hoped that at least one goodly tusker would pass my way. The month was January, but February was near at hand, in the latter days of which rain might be expected; and with the approach of the rains there would be a tendency for the herds to move north. The protracted drought, of course, might prove an unknown factor in its influence upon elephant movements and distribution, so it was all a gamble. On arriving at the Kerio I was none too pleased to be told that elephants had been plentiful in that locality a few days previously,

but that now they were all moving steadily northwards.

The time at my disposal was strictly limited and so was my field of operations, as several marches north lay a military area which could only be entered with special permission. Spoor was plentiful, but everywhere old, and the outlook was distinctly gloomy.

Although all the local tribesmen are keen hunters, and intimately acquainted with the habits of game, they are singularly unready to provide any information which might be of real assistance to the sportsman. It did not take long to recognise their optimistic, happy-go-lucky nature, but it is scarcely credible that they should have omitted to inform me of the existence of a well-used elephant road, leading roughly north and south, only a few miles east of the point where I first struck the river. This great highway, which the elephants had probably used for centuries, leading south-easterly in the direction of Lake Baringo, traversed a flank of the Kamasia Range, and in some of the valleys otherwise choked with impenetrable bush a waggon and team could have been easily driven along it. If only I had known of its existence at the commencement of my trip, it would have made my quest much easier.

The conditions along the Kerio were delightful, as there was an abundance of shade provided by gigantic, thickly-foliaged trees. A goodly stream of clear water flowed down the river-bed, but " all is not gold that glitters " and we were later to

become only too well acquainted with its curious antics ; it had the habit of suddenly disappearing beneath a dry bed and not reappearing for many miles ! Mosquitoes were conspicuously scarce and tsetse-flies which were known to occur in places were never encountered.

The country on either side of the river was well-bushed with low thorn-scrub—at that season leafless—and there were strange creeping and other plants in great variety, two of the more striking being the Sansevera, fibrous, pithy and reed-like, wickedly-pointed and inflicting injuries which immediately turn septic and for which the recognised remedy is an application of the acid juice of the plant itself ; and a species of small prickly-leaved aloe with bulbous base, both of which are much relished by elephants. I can imagine nothing more unpleasant than a mouthful of Sansevera ; the elephants' digestion must be extremely powerful and their mouths and throats singularly insensitive. The natives twist rope out of the fibre, but leave its preparation to the womenfolk, whose hands quickly become terribly disfigured from the action of the powerful acid.

As the type of country was peculiarly favourable for the detection of all manner of game, I did not bestir myself unnecessarily in actual search for my quarry, but awaited patiently reports from the local inhabitants.

As the Suk *manyattas* were located in the *nyika* several miles east of the river, and those of the Marakwet on the escarpment to the west, it followed

that the several herdsmen on their way down to the river to water their flocks would be bound to cut the tracks of any elephants moving north or south. Meanwhile I was not idle and made numerous personal reconnaissances on either side of the Kerio, besides steadily advancing my camp further and further north, though at first I was doomed to disappointment, as I was always greeted with the tale that the elephants were still travelling and far ahead. Moreover, I was not made any happier when one of my Marakwet guides in a moment of misguided confidence acquainted me with the true reason of the elephants' hasty retreat. It appeared that the tribe had a general permission to drive off by their own methods any elephants which raided and damaged their crops.

Just prior to my arrival a herd of several dozen animals had taken up a temporary abode in a patch of river cover shaded by lofty acacias close to the point where the Kerio debouched from the northernmost extremity of the Kamasia Range. My informant admitted that the huge beasts had been peacefully disposed and had done no damage, but, of course, their presence was a threat. Also the temptation of securing a glorious meat-gorge coupled with the reluctance of the elephants to move away spurred the inhabitants to action, and an organised hunt to be carried out in their own primitive style was arranged. The general line of flight the elephants would take was known to the natives, who posted numerous spearmen high up in the groups of acacias, and it was anticipated that

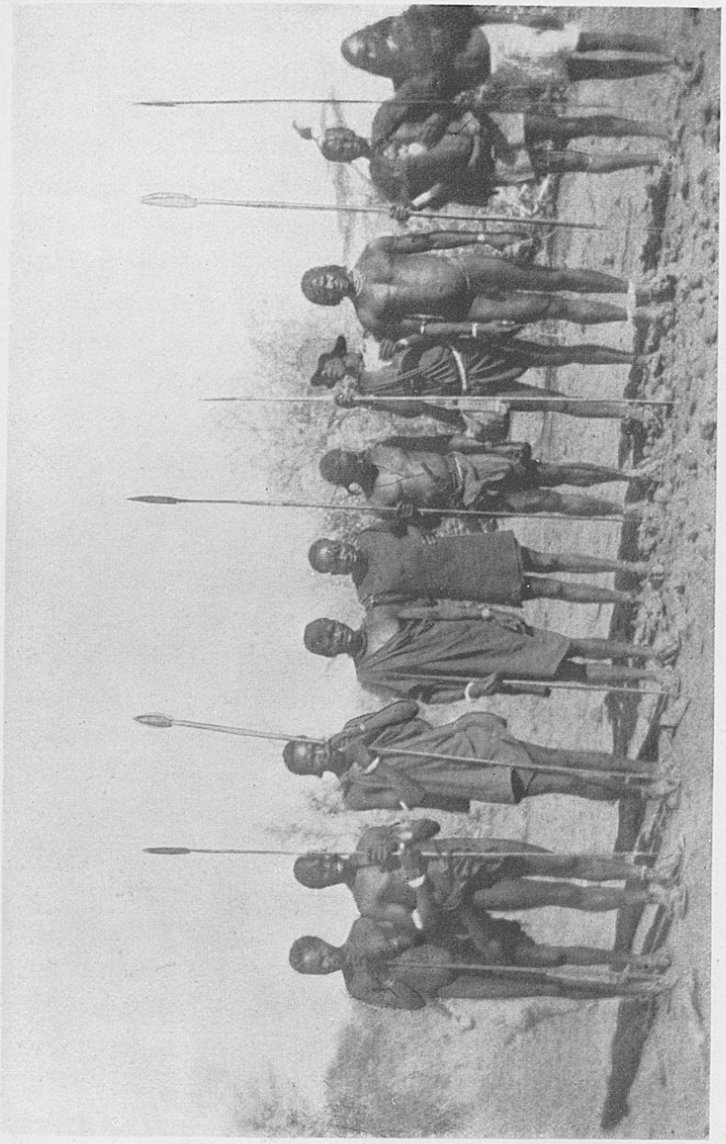
opportunity would occur for at least one elephant to be speared from above. A cleverly delivered thrust in the region of the spine will incapacitate the beast, and if the razor-edged weapon is driven home far enough vital organs will be injured. But on this occasion the hunters were doomed to disappointment; plans went astray and they returned empty-handed, though incidentally they had successfully dispersed the elephants for the time being. There was no doubt that when the animals were in that neighbourhood such hunts were of frequent occurrence.

Although there was a temporary absence of elephants other game was abundant, and I was astonished to find several herds of buffaloes in the thorn bush on the Marakwet side of the river. Grazing was exceedingly scarce and these great ruminants must have been hard put to it to find a sufficiency of food, especially when in competition with large flocks and herds. On both sides of the river the domestic stock began to arrive at the water between eight and ten o'clock in the morning and left again not later than 3 p.m. grazing slowly all the way back to the *manyattas*. Consequently, all the wild creatures had disappeared into hiding by eight o'clock, after which hour ordinary hunting was useless ; it was really extraordinary where the large numbers of animals in evidence early and late managed to conceal themselves.

Numerous buffalo grazed nightly along the river where in places the grass was almost lush, and they could have been tackled there with little

difficulty in the brilliant moonlight, but it would have been impossible to ensure selection of a good head. No matter how early we started, these animals always seemed to be well away from the river long before daylight. Amongst the thorn bush they had one at a complete disadvantage, visibility being reduced to a matter of feet, so that we never saw them until right on top of them, while they were invariably aware of our approach from a distance. A very occasional, isolated acacia afforded a vantage point from which a dusky helper could locate a herd and direct our advance ; but it was all to no purpose, for the animals, which were usually lying down in the shelter of a patch of dense scrub, must have been watching us unseen, and when they deemed it imprudent to remain any longer they were up in an instant, crashing off to the accompaniment of loud snorting and thunder of hoofs. We usually got close enough to see indistinctly a blackish mass moving away in a cloud of dust, and that was all. The trail of such heavy creatures on the sun-baked soil was easy to follow and sometimes when I knew that the quarry must be near at hand I had recourse to removing my boots and, defying the thorns, advancing noiselessly in my stockinged feet ; but it was of no use, as alert, concealed sentinels must have early detected us and scrutinised our every movement.

It did not take us long to find out that " hunting " in Marakwet mentality is associated solely with meat-supply : a creature of small dimensions,



MARAKWET TRIBESMEN WITH PRIMITIVE WEAPONS ABOUT TO HUNT BUFFALOES

no matter how rare or interesting, did not appeal to them.

They listened patiently to frequent enquiries about lesser kudu, oryx, impala, gazelles and a curious species of duiker, and gave assurances of success with promises of a heavy bag ; but when we sallied forth to try our luck it was speedily made evident that the only attraction was mass meat-supply. If there was no chance of an elephant, then the chase was always diverted after rhinoceros or buffaloes ; and on the rare occasions when these two animals proved scarce, they would condescend to seek for the ox-like eland or the more humble waterbuck.

The elephants having disappeared and our initial efforts at tracking rhinoceroses to their diurnal lairs having resulted in failure, the Marakwet suggested a buffalo hunt in which they intended about one hundred and fifty spearmen should participate. This sounded extremely entertaining with the promise of excitement, but little did I realise how exhilarating it would be.

Early one morning trackers located the approximate position of a herd, which was soon after sighted by look-outs who had ascended the few available acacia trees, from which they could command an area of several acres. Then the fun began, as from aloft the spearmen were directed to surround the herd, a manœuvre which was successfully accomplished. Next I discovered that *I* was to be the mug ! *My* function was to be *inside* the ring, where the contest " man *versus* buffalo " was eagerly

awaited by a host of meat-crazy savages—" man " alone with one heavy and one light rifle and numerous cartridges, " buffalo " in numerical superiority, each individual of colossal strength and equipped with a formidable pair of horns which can be put to very effective use.

The combatants in the ring, the spearman closed in guided by shouts from above, and contact with the herd was quickly established—off went the buffaloes with a drumming of hoofs. I was utterly bewildered, and *very* lonely, for whenever danger threatened my followers disappeared with the agility of monkeys. Pandemonium reigned supreme ; round and round the ever-decreasing circle pounded the frightened creatures ; hither and thither I ran in the wake of my confident guides who, constantly on the look-out for the chance of a shot, invariably rushed headlong in the direction of the most noise.

After nearly half an hour of this I was not only exhausted but thoroughly frightened, and wondered where it was going to end. Momentarily I expected the maddened herd to come charging along the path upon which I stood : escape would be impossible, for the great brutes could have swept through the bushes with ease. Opportunities for shooting did not arise and the ring of spearmen held their ground to such good effect and yelled so lustily that every few minutes there would be a thunderous roar in the vicinity of my precarious position, and I would catch a glimpse of huge, black bodies vanishing in a dense dust cloud. At last the buffaloes began to

feel the strain of the chase, and the herd passing closer to me than it had previously done, suddenly halted. The dust blew away, the animals stood their ground and offered me the long-awaited chance ; the hindmost beast—not twenty paces distant—collapsed mortally stricken, only to be enveloped immediately in the swirling dust-cloud raised by the disappearing herd, which this time was not to be denied, and carried its determined, panic-stricken rush through the surrounding foe. " All's well that ends well," and no harm had been done ; but I admit that my feelings when the proceedings terminated were those of distinct relief.

If any big game hunter seeks a new thrill, where the odds are all against him, I recommend buffalo hunting as conducted by a large party of Marakwet spearmen !