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TANA TALES.

Being Stories of Life in East Africa
on the Red River.

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Tana Beast Tales.

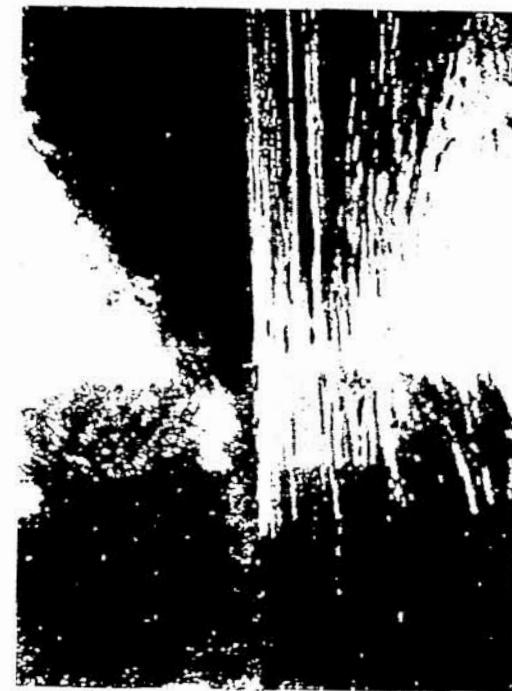
CHAPTER X.

Rhinos.

SOME of the early chapters in the tale science tells of the ascent of man become very real and vivid to the African traveller. Here and there he gets a prehistoric peep, and looks in on the old-time struggle of man with beast, and sees the triumph of cunning over force.

Every Galla boy covets a knife, and looks forward to the day when he shall possess one. The knife is the pledge of masculinity; it is the sign of the warrior; it is the tool by which a man masters the world. Put that in his hand, and the man is mightier than the beast. By the fire, stories are told of great heroes who, single-handed, dared to attack the two horned rhinoceros and, spite his armour and might, slay him.

The great fight of man and beast is acted; the fierce charges, the quick avoidance, the plunge of the knife, the beast's madness and desperation, the long, drawn-out conflict, and the last deadly stroke that lays the monster low. In the heart of every boy burns the longing to be a hunter. The centre of interest is the knife, with its long, broad blade, tapering to a fine



River Scene, Upper Tana (Balati, Hamneya).

(Photo : J. H. P.)

point; a weapon shaped for quick, upward blows, driven home by strong and skilful hands.

The Hebrews believed that Tubal Cain made the first sword, and that when Lamech seized it and swung it, and felt the mastery over the world that it gave him, he burst into a fierce song. There must be a Galla song of the knife: the knife that makes man master; the knife that makes him feared; the knife that fills his hands with death. He who is master of the knife is master of the world. There must be such a Galla song, though I have never heard it.

Stirring as tales of gold finding are to the digger camp, or as the promise of prize money was to Nelson's seamen, is the news to a Galla town that great herds of game are moving through the bush. The place hums with excitement like a hive before a swarm. Weapons are selected and sharpened, plans are made, songs are sung, and soon a hunting party sets out to try its luck. As they go on they are joined by others from neighbouring villages, until quite a little army of men is roving through bush and scrub, swamp and forest, looking for game. This to the Galla is the crown of life; it is for this he has trained and disciplined himself, indurated his body, and learned to bear hardships with stoical calm. The quarry is often far to seek, and the slender stock of food gives out, and the hunter has to live by his wits. Days may pass, when his only comfort is found in the coil of tobacco which he wears like a length of rope around his neck.



Hunting big game is a dangerous business, and it is amazing that the Gallas will attack herds of elephants and kill them with their spears. Of these weapons, each man carries two, one long, and the other short. A white man, armed with an elephant rifle, needs a cool head and a steady hand, and inflexible courage to face a charging elephant. The beast will probably give him but one chance, and if the first bullet does not find a vital spot, before another can be fired, the huge mass will be upon him. If he turns to a tree for safety, the elephant will probably bring the tree down; if he runs into the grass, the monster will trample it flat; if he climbs a tree too large to be uprooted, the maddened beast will wait below hour after hour, and, it is said, day after day, for his revenge.

And yet the Galla warriors will attack elephants, closing in on the angry creatures and thrusting spears, and then avoiding their mad rushes. The game is one only the most daring and skilful can play with safety. A slip, the catching of a foot in a root, and the tribe will have one warrior less. In nearly every village you see maimed men who met their injuries in the bush or forest.

Much depends on the success of these great hunts. They may be likened to the voyages of the Elizabethan captains who went out to the Spanish seas in search of laden galleons, hoping to bring home wealth that would keep them in comfort to the end of their days. The Galla has great hopes of his expeditions. He looks for ivory, fights for it, maybe dies for it;

ivory is wealth, and with it he may buy the herd of cattle which will make him a man of substance and of influence.

I once saw a hunting party set out from a village. Months afterwards, the story of their fortunes was told to me. They found elephants and took much ivory and, as their custom is, buried it for a time and came home exulting. This burial of the ivory is a strange business, and I do not altogether understand it; but the wonderful thing is with what certainty they will return to the place where it lies underground. To the white man's eye there is nothing to guide the searchers—no path, no blazed trees, no sign of trail or track, nothing but the tangled forest; but the Galla will look at the tree-tops and go on with assurance and, without casting about, arrive at the very place he seeks.

When this party had come back from the forest to the bushland, and was not far from home, they saw near a stunted tree a huge, lonely rhinoceros, which was feeding on the herbage that grew in the shadow of the bushes.

In the little band there was one man who had a great reputation as a hunter. He was 6ft. 3in. high, slight and sinewy. On his right arm he carried hide sandals for use on hot, sun-baked ground or thorny patches. He carried no shield, but was armed with his knife and two spears. He was thirty years old, and was a great jumper and runner.

When he saw the rhino, it came to his mind that here was his opportunity of crowning a successful

hunt with a heroic deed, whose echoes would ring in every village throughout Galla land, and be the great episode of an epic, surrounding the ivory with the lustre of poetry and romance. He told his companions to stand while he went alone to fight the great beast and slay it.

His knife was his only weapon, and holding this in his hand, he went swiftly and quietly to the bush and confronted his adversary. The beast gave a grunt of surprise, and for a moment the antagonists eyed each other. Then the rhino bent his head, and with horns pressed forward, came charging down upon the man. The great tusks were within a yard of his breast when the Galla leapt aside and, as the brute thundered by, he plunged his knife behind its shoulder.

In a flash the great beast, made agile by pain, wheeled round, but more swiftly still the warrior leaped and plunged his knife again. Angry with pain, feeling the presence of his foe, but only seeing him in glimpses, the rhino dashed to and fro, trying to overwhelm the man with its bulk, but in nearly every rush it felt the fire of that terrible blade pierce its body.

The rhino weakening, changed his tactics. Instead of running, he put his nose to the ground and brought his body round and round in a circle. In a swift passage the knife must have stuck, for the man went down, and the great foot of the beast was on his leg. The bone snapped; in another moment, had the strength of the creature held out, the warrior would

have been crushed to death, but the beast rolled over, away from his foe, and lay dead.

The hunters rushed in to help their friend, they bound up his leg and, having made a rude stretcher, they lifted him and bore him on their shoulders toward home. What agony he suffered through the rude handling and jolting is past our power to imagine. Day and night they pressed on, while "poor flesh, like thine, and mine, and every man's" lay a prey to hell fire.

A runner was sent ahead to Golbanti to fetch me, and although my medical knowledge was but sketchy and my surgical skill even less, I set out to meet them, resolved to do my best. I found the warrior in agony, and swollen beyond recognition. One look at him filled me with misgiving, for I knew the task of mending him was beyond my power. Yet these Gallas believed in me and looked to me with childish expectation. They were sure that I could mend men, and here was a broken man; the more broken the greater my opportunity. Had I told them that nothing was needed but alum and glue, they would have nodded their heads gravely and agreed.

In a rough fashion I straightened and set the limb; then I made the sufferer's litter easier, and at last the bearers brought him home. Copious applications of hot water reduced the swelling and the pain. Day by day I watched him, nursed him, and gave him what attention I could, till at last his vigorous constitution asserted itself and, more by luck than good management, his leg knit up. It turned out to be a

good job, the limb was strong, and he could hunt again.

So now I have some share in the tales of heroes that are told to Galla boys. The great warrior slew the rhino single-handed; step by step the tale is told and acted. Then comes the fall of the champion, the rhino's timely death. But that is not the end of the saga, for the magical white man appears and mends the broken warrior with subtle medicine. It is something to have joined the Olympians; something to be sung of by minstrels by camp fires; life is not all loss.

But more, far more, was it to gain a loyal friend, to rouse the gratitude of a people and to make a way into their hearts and minds for the story of the great Father, under the covert of whose mercy all souls live, and of the Holy Son who Himself ministered unto man as the Good Physician.

I treasure still the horns of a rhino given me by the hero hunter, in thankful memory of the service I rendered him.



CHAPTER XI.

Crocodiles.

"I weep for you, the Walrus said;
I deeply sympathise."

IN the Tana Valley we got used to crocodiles. They were part of our daily life. Of course, we did not ignore them; watchfulness became a habit, so that it continued even when we were not conscious of it; you may say in psychological jargon, that our crocodile complex was always active. A log was a log and a possibility; a mud bank just above water, was mud bank and perhaps something more; a tangle of marsh grass was itself and what it concealed. We lived wary lives. A man learns to see quickly, move quickly, and think quickly when the integrity of his limbs depends on his speed.

We had the crocodiles always with us, but sometimes they closed in upon us and unaccountably multiplied. After the floods we found them nearly everywhere, and it looked as if our area had become the gathering ground for all those saurians. Some of them were a span long, and some nearly thirty feet. The little ones were only amusing, but the big ones were dangerous. They lay near the landing stages in the river, where the water is muddy and confused, looking very like small canoes or logs; only now and then one would open his huge jaws in a slow, sleepy yawn. Unwary natives were sometimes caught