

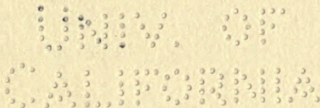
THE POOLS OF SILENCE

BY

H. DE VERE STACPOOLE

AUTHOR OF

"THE BLUE LAGOON," "THE CRIMSON AZALEAS,"
"GARRYOWEN," ETC.



NEW YORK
DUFFIELD & COMPANY
1910

CHAPTER IX

BIG GAME

JUST as going along the coast by Pondoland one sees English park scenery running down to the very sea edge, so the Congo has its surprises in strips of country that might, as far as appearance goes, have been cut out of Europe and planted here.

This glade which Félix had chosen for a camping place was strewn with rough grass and studded here and there with what at first sight seemed apple trees: they were in reality thorns.

The camp was pitched and the fires lit on the edge of the forest, and then Berselius proceeded to take tale of his people and found one missing. One of the cook boys had dropped behind and vanished. He had been lame shortly after the start. The soldiers had not seen him drop behind, but the porters had.

“How many miles away was it?” asked Berselius of the collected porters.

“Nkoto, nkoto (Very many, very many),” the answer came in a chorus, for a group of savages, if they have the same idea in common, will all shout together in response to an answer, like one man.

“Why had they not told?”

"We did not know," came the irrelevant answer in chorus.

Berselius knew quite well that they had not told simply from heedlessness and want of initiative. He would have flogged the whole lot soundly, but he wanted them fresh for the morrow's work. Cutting down their rations would but weaken them, and as for threatening to dock their pay, such a threat has no effect on a savage.

"Look!" said Berselius.

He had just dismissed the porters with a reprimand when his keen eye caught sight of something far up the glade. It wanted an hour of sunset.

Adams, following the direction in which Berselius was gazing, saw, a great distance off, to judge by the diminishing size of the thorn trees, a form that made his heart to leap in him.

Massive and motionless, a great creature stood humped in the level light; the twin horns back-curving and silhouetted against the sky told him at once what it was.

"Bull rhinoceros," said Berselius. "Been lying up in the thick stuff all day; come out to feed." He made a sign to Félix who, knowing exactly what was wanted, dived into the tent and came back with a .400 cordite rifle and Adams's elephant gun.

"Come," said Berselius, "the brute is evidently thinking. They stay like that for an hour sometimes. If we have any luck, we may get a shot sideways before he moves. There's not a breath of wind."

They started, Félix following with the guns.

"I would not bother about him," said Berselius,

“only the meat will be useful, and it will be an experience for you. You will take first shot, and, if he charges, aim just behind the shoulder—that ’s the spot for a rhino if you can reach it; for other animals aim at the neck, no matter what animal it is, or whether it is a lion or a buck; the neck shot is the knock-out blow. I have seen a lion shot through the heart travel fifty yards and kill a man; had he been struck in the neck he would have fallen in his tracks.”

“Cow,” said Félix from behind.

Out of the thick stuff on the edge of the forest another form had broken. She was scarcely smaller than the bull, but the horns were shorter; she was paler in colour, too, and showed up not nearly so well. Then she vanished into the thick stuff, but the bull remained standing, immovable as though he were made of cast iron, and the two awful horns, now more distinct, cut the background like scimitars.

The rhinoceros, like the aboriginal native of the Congo, has come straight down from pre-Adamite days almost without change. He is half blind now; he can scarcely see twenty yards, he is still moving in the night of the ancient world, and the smell of a man excites the wildest apprehension in his vestige of a mind. He scents you, flings his heavy head from side to side, and then to all appearances he charges you.

Nothing could appear more wicked, ferocious, and full of deadly intent than this charge; yet, in reality, the unfortunate brute is not seeking you at all, but running away from you; for the rhino when running away always

runs in the direction from which the wind is blowing. You are in that direction, else your scent could not reach him; as your scent grows stronger and stronger, the more alarmed does he become and the quicker he runs. Now he sights you, or you fire. If you miss, God help you, for he charges the flash with all his fright suddenly changed to fury.

They had got within four hundred yards from the brute when a faint puff of wind stirred the grass, and instantly the rhino shifted his position.

"He's got our scent," said Berselius, taking the cordite rifle from Félix, who handed his gun also to Adams. "He's got it strong. We will wait for him here."

The rhino, after a few uneasy movements, began to "run about." One could see that the brute was ill at ease; he went in a half-circle, and then, the wind increasing, and bringing the scent strong, he headed straight for Berselius and his companions, and charged.

The sound of him coming was like the sound of a great drum beaten by a lunatic.

"Don't fire till I give the word," cried Berselius, "and aim just behind the shoulder."

Adams, who was to the left of the charging beast, raised the rifle and looked down the sights. He knew that if he missed, the brute would charge the flash and be on him perhaps before he could give it the second barrel.

It was exactly like standing before an advancing express engine. An engine, moreover, that had the power of leaving the metals to chase you should you not derail it.

Would Berselius never speak! Berselius all the time was glancing from the rhino to Adams.

“Fire!”

The ear-blasting report of the elephant gun echoed from the forest, and the rhino, just as if he had been tripped by an invisible wire fence, fell, tearing up the ground and squealing like a pig.

“Good,” said Berselius.

Adams wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He had never gone through a moment of more deadly nerve tension.

He was moving toward his quarry, now stretched stiff and stark, when he was arrested by Félix.

“Cow,” said Félix again.

The cow had broken cover at the report of the gun and had got their wind.

Just as two automatic figures of the same make will, when wound up, and touched off, perform the same actions, the cow did exactly what the bull had done — ran about in a fierce and distressed manner and then charged right in the eye of the wind.

“Mine,” said Berselius, and he went forward twenty paces to meet her.

Berselius, chilling and aloof to the point of mysteriousness, had, since the very starting of the expedition, shown little of his true character to his companion. What he had shown up to this had not lowered Adams’s respect for him.

Self-restraint seemed the mainspring of that commanding force which this strange man exercised. His

reprimand to the porters for the loss of the boy, expressed in a few quiet words, had sent them shivering to their places, cowed and dumb. Animal instinct seemed to tell them of a terrible animal which the self-restraint of that quiet-looking little man, with the pointed beard, alone prevented from breaking upon them.

Berselius had allowed the bull to approach to a little over a hundred yards before letting Adams fire. He had gauged the American's nerve to a nicety and his power of self-restraint, and he knew that beyond the hundred-yard limit he dared not trust them; for no man born of woman who has not had a good experience of big game can stand up to a charging rhinoceros and take certain aim when the hundred-yard limit has been passed.

The thunderous drumming of the oncoming brute echoed from the forest. Had its head been a feather-pillow the impact of the three tons of solid flesh moving behind it would have been certain death; but the head was an instrument of destruction, devised when the megatherium walked the world, and the long raking horn would have ripped up an elephant as easily as a sharp penknife rips up a rabbit.

Before this thing, and to the right of it, rifle in hand, stood Berselius. He did not even lift the gun to his shoulder till the hundred-yard limit was passed, and then he hung on his aim so horribly that Adams felt the sweat-drops running on his face like ants, and even Félix swallowed like a man who is trying to choke down something nauseous. It was a

magnificent exhibition of daring and self-restraint and cool assurance.

At twenty-five yards or a little under, the cordite rang out. The brute seemed to trip, just as the other had done, over some invisible taut-stretched wire, and skidding with its own impetus, squealing, striking out and tearing up the grass, it came right up to Berselius's feet before stiffening in death. Like the great automaton it was, it had scented the human beings just as the bull had scented them, "fussed" just as he had fussed, charged as he had charged, and died as he had died.

And now from the camp rose a great outcry, "Nyama, nyama! (Meat, meat!)." From the soldiers, from the gun-bearers, from the porters it came. There were no longer soldiers, or gun-bearers, or porters; every distinction was forgotten; they were all savages, voicing the eternal cry of the jungle, "Nyama, nyama! (Meat, meat!)."

In the last rays of the sunset the two gigantic forms lay stretched forever in death. They lay as they had composed themselves after that long stiff stretch which every animal takes before settling itself for eternal sleep; and Adams stood looking at the great grinning masks tipped with the murderous horns, whilst Berselius, with his gun butt resting on his boot, stood watching with a brooding eye as the porters and gun-bearers swarmed like ants around the slain animals and proceeded, under his direction, to cut them up. Then the meat was brought into camp. The tails and the best parts of the carcasses, including the kidneys, were reserved for the white men,

and the rations from the rest of the meat were served out; but a dozen porters who had been last in the line, and who were accountable for letting the boy drop behind, got nothing.

It was pitiable to see their faces. But they deserved their punishment, notwithstanding the fact that in the middle of the meat distribution the missing boy limped into camp. He had a thorn half an inch long in his foot, which Adams extracted. Then the camp went to bed.

Adams in his tent under the mosquito net slept soundly and heard and knew nothing of the incidents of the night. Berselius was also sleeping soundly when, at about one o'clock in the morning, Félix aroused him.

One of the porters had been caught stealing some of the meat left over from the distribution of the night before.

The extraordinary thing was that he had fed well, not being one of the proscribed. He had stolen from pure greed.

He was an undersized man, a weakling, and likely to break down and give trouble anyway. His crime was great.

Berselius sent Félix to his tent for a Mauser pistol. Then the body was flung into the forest where the roaring, rasping cry of a leopard was splitting the dark.

CHAPTER XVIII

FAR INTO ELEPHANT LAND

THEY sighted a small herd of giraffe two days later, but so far off as to be beyond pursuit; but before evening, just as they were about to camp by some pools, they came across rhino.

Berselius's quick eye spotted the beasts, a bull and a cow. They were in the open, under shelter of some thick grass; the bull was half sitting up, and his head and horn in the evening light might have been taken for the stump of a broken tree. The cow was not visible at first, but almost immediately after they sighted the bull, she heaved herself up and stood a silhouette against the sky.

The wind was blowing from the beasts, so it was quite possible to get close up to them. The meat would be useful, so Berselius and his companion started, with Félix carrying the guns.

As they drew close Adams noticed that the back of the great cow seemed alive and in motion. Half a dozen rhinoceros birds, in fact, were upon it, and almost immediately, sighting the hunters, they rose chattering and fluttering in the air.

These birds are the guardians of the half-blind rhinoceros. They live on the parasites that infest his skin.

It is a partnership. The birds warn the rhinoceros of danger, and he, vicariously, feeds the birds. Scarcely had the birds given warning than the bull heaved himself up. Berselius's rifle rang out, but the light was uncertain, and the brute wounded, but not mortally, charged forward took a half circle, swung his head from side to side in search of his assailant, and sighted the cow. Instantly, horn down and squealing, he charged her. She met him horn to horn, and the smash could be heard at the camp where the porters and the soldiers stood gazing open-mouthed at the battle between the two great brutes charging each other in the low evening light, fighting with the ferocity of tigers and the agility of cats.

Adams, close up as he was, had a better view, and unless he had seen with his own eyes, he could not have believed that two animals so heavy and unwieldy could display such nimbleness and such quickness of ferocity.

It was the wickedest sight, and it was brought to an end at last by the rifle of Berselius.

Curiously enough, neither brute had injured the other very much. The horns which, had they been of ivory, must have been shivered, were intact, for the horn of a rhinoceros is flexible; it is built up of a conglomeration of hairs, and though, perhaps, the most unbreakable thing in the universe, it bends up to a certain point just as a rapier does.

Next morning, two hours after daybreak, Félix, who was scouting just ahead of the column, came running back with news he had struck elephant spoor. Every

tooth in his head told the tale. Not only spoor, but the spoor of a vast herd cutting right across the line of march.

Berselius came forward to examine, and Adams came with him.

The dry ground and wire grass was not the best medium for taking the track of the beasts, but to the experienced eyes of Berselius and the Zappo Zap everything was clear. A herd of elephant had passed not long ago, and they were undisturbed and unsuspecting. When elephants are suspicious they march in lines, single file, one stepping in the tracks of another. This herd was spread wide and going easy of mind, but at what pace it would be impossible to say.

The long boat-shaped back feet of the bulls leave a print unmistakable in the rainy season when the ground is soft, but still discernible to the trained eye in the dry season. Félix declared that there were at least twenty bulls in the herd, and some of huge size.

"How long is it since they passed here?" asked Berselius.

Félix held up the fingers of one hand. From certain indications he came to the conclusion they had passed late in the night, three hours or so before daybreak. They numbered forty or fifty, leaving aside the calves that might be with them. He delivered these opinions, speaking in the native, and Berselius instantly gave the order, "Left wheel!" to the crowd of porters; and at the word the long column turned at right angles to the line of march and struck due west, treading the track of the herd.

Nothing is more exciting than this following in the

track of a mammoth army whose tactics you cannot foresee. This herd might be simply moving a few miles in search of a new feeding ground, or it might be making one of those great sweeping marches covering hundreds of miles that the mysterious elephant people make at the dictates of their mysterious instinct. It might be moving at a gentle pace, or swifter than a man could run. A mile on the new route they came on a broken tree, a great tree broken down as if by a storm; the fractures were quite recent. The elephant folk had done this. They came across another tree whose sides, facing north and south, had been clearly barked, and the pieces of the bark, farther on, that had been chewed and flung away.

With one stroke of a tusk passing a tree, and without stopping, an elephant will tear off a strip of bark; and it was curious to see how the bark of this tree to east and west was intact. The moving herd had not stopped. Just in passing, an elephant on either side of the tree had taken his slice of bark, chewed it and flung it away. There were also small trees trodden down mercilessly under foot. Thus the great track of the herd lay before the hunters, but not a sign in all the sunlit, silent country before them of the herd itself.

It was Berselius's aim to crowd up his men as quickly as a forced march could do it, camp and then pursue the herd with a few swift followers, the barest possible amount of stores and one tent.

The calabashes and the water bottles had been filled at the last halt, but it was desirable to find water for the evening's camping place.

It was now that Berselius showed his capacity as a driver and his own enormous store of energy.

He took the tail of the column, and woe to the porters who lagged behind! Félix was with him, and Adams, who was heading the column, could hear the shouts of the Zappo Zap. The men with their loads went at a quick walk, sometimes breaking into a trot, urged forward by the gun-butt of Félix.

The heat was sweltering, but there was no rest. On, on, on, ever on through a country that changed not at all; the same breaks and ridges, the same limitless plains of waving grass, the same scant trees, the same heat-shaken horizon toward which the elephant road led straight, unwavering, endless.

The brain reeled with the heat and the dazzle, but the column halted not nor stayed. The energy of Berselius drove it forward as the energy of steam drives an engine. His voice, his very presence, put life into flagging legs and sight into dazzled eyes. He spared neither himself nor others; the game was ahead, the spoor was hot, and the panther in his soul drove him forward.

Toward noon they halted for two hours where some bushes spread their shade. The porters lay down on their bellies, with arms outspread, having taken a draught of water and a bite of food; they lay in absolute and profound slumber. Adams, nearly as exhausted, lay on his back. Even Félix showed signs of the journey, but Berselius sat right back into the bushes, with his knees drawn up and, with eyes fixed on the eastern distance, brooded.

He was always like this on a great hunt, when the game was near. Silent and brooding, and morose to the point of savagery.

One might almost have fancied that in far distant days this man had been a tiger, and that the tiger still lived slumbering in his soul, triumphant over death, driving him forth at intervals from civilization to wander in the wild places of the earth and slay.

Two hours past noon they resumed their journey: on, on, on, treading the elephant track which still went due east straight as an arrow to the blue horizon. The frightful tiredness they had felt before the noonday halt had passed, giving place to a dull, dreamy feeling, such as comes after taking opium. The column marched mechanically and without thought, knowing only two things, the feel of the hard ground and grass beneath their feet, and the smiting of the sun on their backs.

Thus the galley slaves of old laboured at their oars and the builders of the pyramids beneath their loads, all moving like one man. But here was no tune of flutes to set the pace, or monotonous song to help the lifting; only the voice of Berselius like a whip-lash, and the gun-butt of Félix drumming on the ribs of laggards.

A light, hot wind was blowing in their faces. Adams, still at the head of the column, had suffered severely during the morning march, and the re-start after the noon rest was painful to him as a beating; but the reserve forces of a powerful constitution that had never been tampered with were now coming into play, and, after a time, he felt little discomfort. His body, like a wound-up mechanism,

did all the work; his mind became divorced from it; he experienced a curious exaltation, like that which comes from drink, only finer far and more ethereal. The column seemed marching far swifter than it was marching in reality, the vast sunlit land seemed vaster even than it was; the wind-blown grass, the far distant trees, the circling skyline, all spoke of freedom unknown to man: the freedom of the herd they were pursuing; the freedom of the bird flying overhead; the freedom of the wind blowing in the grass; the freedom of the limitless, endless, sunlit country. Meridians of silence, and light, and plains, and trees, and mountains, and forests. Parallels of virgin land.

He was feeling what the bird knows and feels when it beats up the mountains or glides down the vales of air; what the elephant herd knows and feels when it moves over mountains and across plains; what the antelopes know when distance calls them.

A shout from Félix, and the Zappo Zap came running up the line; his head was flung up and he was sniffing the air. Then, walking beside Adams, he stared ahead right away over the country before them to the far skyline.

"Elephant smell," he replied, when Adams asked him what was the matter; then, turning, he shouted some words in the native back to Berselius, and tramped on beside Adams, his nose raised to the wind, of which each puff brought the scent stronger.

Adams could smell nothing, but the savage could tell that right ahead there were elephants; close up, too, yet not a sign of them could be seen.

This puzzled him, and what puzzles a savage frightens him.

His nose told him that here were elephants in sight of his eyes; his eyes told him that there were none.

All at once the column came to a dead halt. Porters flung down their loads and cried out in fright. Even Berselius stood stock-still in astonishment.

From the air, blown on the wind from no visible source, came the shrill trumpeting of an elephant.

There, in broad daylight, close up to them, the sound came with the shock of the supernatural. Nothing stirred in all the land but the grass bending to the wind. There was not even a bird in the air; yet close to them an elephant was trumpeting shrilly and fiercely as elephants trumpet when they charge.

Again came the sound, and once again, but this time it broke lamentably to a complaint that died away to silence.

Instantly the Zappo Zap came to himself. He knew that sound. An elephant was dying somewhere near by, caught in a trap possibly. He rushed down the line, gun-butting the porters back to their places, shouting to Berselius, helping loads up on the heads of the men who had dropped them, so that in a minute the column was in motion again and going swiftly to make up for lost time.

Five minutes brought them to a slight rise in the ground, beyond which, deep-cut, rock-strewn and skeleton-dry, lay the bed of a river.

In the rains this would be scarcely fordable, but now not even a trickle of water could be seen. On the floor

of this river-bed, like a huge dark rock, lay the body of an elephant.

An African elephant is the biggest creature on earth, far bigger than his Indian cousin, and far more formidable looking. Adams could scarcely believe that the thing before him was the body of an animal, as he contrasted its size with Félix, who had raced down the slope and was examining the carcass.

"Dead!" cried Félix, and the porters, taking heart, descended, but not without groaning and lamentations, for it is well-known to the natives that whoever comes across an elephant lying down must die, speedily and by violent means; and this elephant was lying down in very truth, his tusks humbly lowered to the ground, his great ears motionless, just as death had left him.

It was a bull and surely, from his size, the father of the herd. Berselius considered the beast to be of great age. One tusk was decayed badly and the other was chipped and broken, and on the skin of the side were several of those circular sores one almost always finds on the body of a rhinoceros, "dundos," as the natives call them; old scars and wounds told their tale of old battles and the wanderings of many years.

It might have been eighty or a hundred years since the creature had first seen the light and started on its wonderful journey over mountains and plains through jungle and forest, lying down maybe only twenty times in all those years, wandering hither and thither, and knowing not that every step of its journey was a step closer to here.

Just this little piece of ground on which it lay had been plotted out for it a hundred years ago, and it had come to it by a million mazy paths, but not less surely than had it followed the leading of a faultlessly directed arrow.

The herd had left it here to die. Berselius, examining the body closely, could find no wound. He concluded that it had come to its end just as old men come to their end at last — the mechanism had failed, hindered, perhaps, by some internal disease, and it had lain down to wait for death.

The tusks were not worth taking, and the party pursued its way up the eastern bank of the river, where the herd had also evidently pursued its way, and then on, on, across the country due east, in the track they had followed since morning.

As they left the river-bed a tiny dot in the sky above, which they had not noticed, enlarged, and like a stone from the blue fell a vulture. It lit on the carcass; then came a kite slanting down to the feast, and then from the blue, like stones dropped from the careless hand of a giant, vulture after vulture.