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TALES AT THE OUTSPAN,

OR

ADVENTURES

IN THE

WILD REGIONS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA.

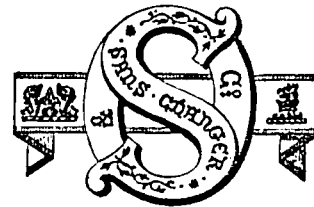
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS.

BY

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LONDON:

SAUNDERS, OTLEY, AND CO.,

66, BROOK STREET, HANOVER SQUARE.

1862.

scores when we discharged our weapons amongst them.

I was mixed up with many more affairs with the Matabili, and had a share in some of the fights against Dingaans Tulus, but I never remember having to fight so hard for life as I had at the waggons when, as I have told you, the Matabili attacked us.

THE PROFESSOR'S SEARCH FOR THE UNICORN.

You are aware, gentlemen, that the principal object that I have in view in accompanying you on your present hunting trip is to collect rare birds and beasts, to preserve these in such a manner as to render them valuable specimens for the various museums to which I contribute, and thus whilst enjoying the beauty of this grand country, and being able to study the habits of many singular creatures, I am also able to contribute to the means by which science is diffused in the most populated countries of Europe.

Although not a thorough sportsman, at least in the sense in which my Dutch friends there estimate one, I am yet sufficiently acquainted with the habits and methods of hunting the vertebrata in South Africa to be able to live by the aid of my gun alone, and I flatter myself that from my knowledge of the peculiarities of several quadrupeds and birds, I might possibly be able to find game in a country where even the best sportsman would overlook it. This arises from the knowledge I have gained connected with

the nature of the creatures, their likes and dislikes, and the peculiar description of food to which each is most partial.

You who merely hunt for the sake of procuring food, or to obtain ivory, can scarcely understand the great desire there is on the part of a naturalist to become acquainted with a new or original species. To discover and describe some entirely new animal is to almost immortalize one's self, and thus, as you saw a few days ago, I set off on a long journey, passed three nights in the desert, and encountered great hardships, merely to endeavour to obtain a specimen of the striped eland, which is a somewhat rare animal.

Having explained, then, how great is the interest in connection with anything new in natural history, and how willingly hardships are borne when there appears a chance, however remote, of obtaining a very rare or new specimen, you will fully understand how great a temptation was offered to me and a companion of similar tastes and pursuits, when we were fortunate enough to pass several days with a most intelligent traveller who had lately journeyed over the greater part of the continent which lies between Delagoa Bay and the district of Natal, and who gave us an account of many curious creatures which there abounded, and of some others of which he had received so accurate a description as to leave scarcely any doubt on his mind as to their actual existence.

The most important information that we gathered

from this traveller was, that what he had heard from several of the natives induced him to believe that the singular animal that figures on the arms of England, and called the unicorn, was really not a creation of imagination only, but was alive, and to be found amongst some of the mountains in the wildest part of Africa.

It is probable that you will all laugh at me, and think that I am very ready to believe anything that is told me however absurd it may be, but I am not really so very credulous, for there were several reasons why it was quite possible for the unicorn to have an existence. I was particularly disposed at that time to credit any rather singular tale connected with animals, in consequence of the remains having been found of that enormous bird which once (if it does not now) inhabited the plains of Madagascar. This bird is nearly twice the height of the ostrich, and is large in proportion, yet not the slightest doubt remains that it was once to be found in that island. I had, just previous to hearing of the unicorn, received a paper containing the history of the discovery of this bird, and some account of the scepticism displayed by some earlier travellers, and which had prevented them from making any search, and therefore any discovery. I was therefore fully determined that every endeavour should be made by me to discover the unicorn, if it existed, and that I would not throw away a chance of immortalizing myself as a naturalist.

Having considered for some time as to the best method of proceeding, I determined to communicate by letter with an English merchant at Natal, and to get him to make inquiries amongst hunters and natives, and to let me know immediately he heard any reports likely to guide me. I did not intend to wait for reliable information, for I knew when this arrived I should be too late in the field to be able to claim the discovery.

Several months passed without any information being forwarded to me; but at length the Natal mail arrived, and brought me a letter from the merchant. In this it was stated that an English hunter, who had lately returned from a hunting expedition into the interior, said he had heard from an old Kaffir sportsman that there was a solitary animal very like a horse, and with only one horn, and that the Kaffir had actually seen the creature.

Here then was information which was almost reliable, and I feared that, even make what haste I could, still I might be too late in the field; some other naturalist, or perhaps an intelligent sportsman, might hear of the rare animal, and would be before me. To lose such a chance would have been absurd, so I quickly made up my mind to visit the district, and, if possible, bring the trophy from its natural haunts with my own hands.

Fortunately I possessed a friend who was equally as enthusiastic as I was in all matters of scientific

Zoology, and to him I communicated all my hopes and fears, and I was delighted to find he shared with me the interest, and agreed without hesitation to accompany me during my search. Our preparations were soon made, and we took passage in the first vessel bound to Natal.

Oh the horrors of that voyage,—sea-sickness and cockroaches, bilge water and fat pork, dreary pitching, and continued rain for a month, and we then entered Natal Bay; but I bore up under all the disagreeables, for what were they in comparison with the delight of making known to science an animal so long supposed to be fabulous as had the unicorn?

Upon landing at Natal we walked up to the village of D'Urban, and called upon the merchant who had sent me the account of the one-horned animal. He could give me no further information than that sent me by letter. The hunter had gone up the country to trade, so I could not see him, but I found that the region where this strange creature was to be heard of was near the sources of the Tugela river.

Preparations were now made for a journey inland, for I determined to start at once for the locality indicated, and, in order to be as independent as possible, I provided myself with a dictionary of the Zulu language, by the aid of which and a vocabulary I could make myself understood. A Hottentot driver for the waggon was also engaged, who spoke the Kaffir

language very fairly, so I had no fear of failing to make myself understood.

The nearer I approached the looked-for locality the more probable did it appear to me that a strange animal might have existed there, and yet not have been discovered by any person competent to judge of its rarity; for the country was wild in the extreme, very thinly inhabited, and covered in many places by forests too dense to admit of any passage save over the paths made by wild animals. There a herd of unicorns might have found shelter, and have avoided detection for years, had any person even looked for them; but it appeared as though no traveller ever passed over this portion of the country, game being rather rare, and the natives too thinly scattered to admit of trade being carried on.

It was our object to find an old Kaffir called Baba, who was the man who had seen the unicorn; for I was almost sanguine enough to believe that unicorn it must be.

Upon reaching a Kaffir kraal, situated in a retired kloof, we were surrounded by curious natives, who inspected us, our horses, waggon, and oxen, as though we were people come from another world. With great difficulty we made ourselves understood, and at length succeeded in obtaining the information that Baba resided at a kraal half a day's journey nearer the rising sun.

The country was so difficult for the transit of a

waggon, that we determined to leave ours near this kraal, and to go on with our horses only; the weather being so fine that we could sleep very comfortably out of doors, wrapped up only in our blankets, which we carried in front of the saddle. Our Hottentot we left to look after the cattle and waggon, and providing ourselves with ammunition and guns, some arsenical soap and corrosive sublimate for preserving the skin of our rare animal (when caught), we set off to search for the residence of the Kaffir Baba.

We were unfortunate on that day, for we mistook the road, or did not understand the directions given, for we lost ourselves, and had to pass the night amongst a low stunted brushwood, without any regular supper save what we had brought with us. Of this however we made light,—to discover a live unicorn would be more than enough to repay us for this and a score of other hardships.

“Oh,” I said to my friend, just before I went to sleep under the shelter of some Tambookie grass, “I trust I may not be too nervous to aim when I do come close to the unicorn; to miss him after all would be a terrible business.” “Yes,” he answered, “we must be sure not to miss him, and to insure success we must not fire too soon, or when he is too far from us.”

I speculated upon the probable locality in which we should find the unicorn, and I believed we should see him amidst rocky ground, where a bushy retreat was near; this I anticipated from the supposed shape

of the animal. There was a very fierce argument between my friend and myself as to the hoof possessed by the unicorn, he believing that the hoof must be like that of a horse, whilst I decided that the cloven foot was the more probable form. At length, however, we went to sleep, determined to rise with the sun and pursue our journey.

We could not have slept longer than an hour when we were awoke by feeling a regular avalanche of water pouring on us. We soon found that the rain was falling in torrents, and the tree under which we had sought shelter failed to give us the slightest protection. To sleep was impossible, and we sat huddled up vainly trying to escape from the storm, but the water pitilessly ran down our backs, and poured out of our sleeves, causing our clothes to stick to us like a second skin. Truly this was pursuing science under difficulties. It was a long, dreary night, and we regretted the absence of our tent and waggon; but if we only procured the specimen of the unicorn after all, then we should look back with a feeling of pleasure to these disagreeables.

Morning at length came, and we got on to our wet saddles and pursued our journey, the rain still pouring down, but now we were indifferent to it, as we could not be more wet than we were, but we began to want something to eat, for our biscuit was very wet and almost spoiled, and meat we hoped to procure by the aid of our guns, so had brought none with us.

After about three hours' riding we caught sight of a Kaffir kraal, and soon reached it; this was the residence of Baba, whose acquaintance we soon made. A separate kraal was allotted to us, and by the aid of a blazing wood fire we dried our clothes, procured some Indian corn, which we roasted, and made a very fair meal.

Our next step was to inquire of Baba about the unicorn. Of course there was no Kaffir name for a unicorn, so I had to make him understand by a drawing, and by the aid of my vocabulary.

I first told him that I had heard at Natal that he was a great hunter, and had seen an animal like a horse, and with one horn.

To the first portion of my remark he assented, and to the second he replied by informing me that there was an animal, "*fana ihashi, impondo munye*" (like a horse, with one horn). He told us much more about the animal, but I could not understand all he said. I however found that it would be necessary to start by daybreak on the following morning, and to ride hard nearly all day, in order to reach the ground on which was this singular creature. With only one horn and like a horse was so clear a description of the unicorn that I could scarcely doubt that we were on the brink of a great discovery, particularly when the sketch of a unicorn was shown to Baba, and the single horn from the centre of the forehead was particularly pointed out to him; for having examined the sketch upside

down and in every way but the right, he at length proclaimed that the sketch was *fana yena* (like him).

Full of hope, we eagerly looked forward to the morrow, and passed the night restlessly, dreaming of the prize which we trusted would soon fall to our lot. There could not, we now believed, be any mistake, for as the creature was like a horse, and had only one horn projecting in front, it was unlike any other animal. It was true there were zebras and quaggas, but neither possessed horns; then there was the wildebeest, not unlike a horse, but he had two horns, so we felt tolerably certain that a genuine unicorn was merely waiting in the wilderness for our rifles to bring it under the notice of the savants of Europe.

"I feel tolerably certain," said my companion, "that our paper on the unicorn, his habits and peculiarities, will cause us to be elected fellows of the Royal Society, and the chances are, we shall make an admirable thing of it by lecturing in the country when we return to England."

I must own that I partly agreed with my companion, for I was then twenty years younger than now, and probably ten times as sanguine.

We started on the following morning, having first engaged to give Baba a cow if he brought us up within rifle-shot of the unicorn, and traversed a very wild undulating country, Baba pointing out to us some distant hills near which the animal "like a horse with one horn" was usually seen.

Our eagerness to behold the rare quadruped was increased when Baba informed us that there were several animals very like this one farther up the country, but that they had not one horn. These I had no doubt were zebras or quaggas, of which Baba must have heard, and the fact of the one horn assured me that the unicorn must exist in these regions.

It was past midday when Baba informed us that the ridge before us was a very likely one from which to see the animal, and that he would creep up and examine the ground and signal to us if he saw anything. We waited most anxiously whilst the old Kaffir stalked up to the ridge. Our long journey, our wet night, and the sufferings we had endured on board ship and from hunger were all to be compensated now, whilst in a very short time we should become the leading men amongst naturalists, so we watched eagerly the movements of our guide, for much depended upon him.

Baba crawled along the ground when he reached near the top of the ridge, and raised himself very slowly so as to obtain a view of the opposite side; he evidently saw something, for he slowly lowered his head and slipped back several yards, until quite protected from the view of anything on the further side of the ridge. He then beckoned to us eagerly, and made a sign that we should come cautiously.

We required no further hint, as regarded caution, but having left our horses we crawled along the

ground in the most approved fashion, and came close to Baba, who whispered to us that "The game was there, close," and reminded us that "The cow was now his."

We were too excited to wait for further directions, but with quickly-beating hearts crawled forward to the ridge. We almost feared to raise our heads lest the unicorn should see us and escape, when we should probably have been only laughed at by naturalists if we described the animal, just as those sailors have been who have seen the great sea-serpent, so we moved like two chameleons, and raised our hatless heads very slowly.

"There he is," eagerly whispered my companion, who first caught sight of the prize; instantly I also viewed him, and we were both sufficiently acquainted with African animals to recognize in the creature before us *a common wildebeest*.

As we looked at him he turned, and sure enough he had only *one* horn, the other having been broken off close to his skull, probably in fighting. To say that we were merely disappointed would be saying too little, we were actually enraged and disgusted. There stood the wildebeest as calmly as though the fact of his having lost a horn had not caused two enthusiastic naturalists to travel 1200 miles by sea and more than 150 by land, besides giving an old Kaffir a cow for showing him. It was too bad, so we both fired, and the poor brute fell.

Baba was contented, he had fulfilled his bargain, shown us an animal like a horse and with one horn, and, what was more, had feasted upon his flesh, and had been paid a cow for doing so; whilst we said no more about the unicorn, but joined some Dutchmen, and hunted elephants in the Zulu country, which proved more profitable than our search for the unicorn.