

LIFE IN ABYSSINIA:

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BEING NOTES COLLECTED DURING

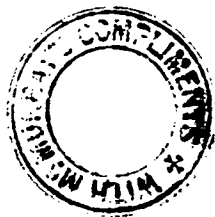
THREE YEARS' RESIDENCE AND TRAVELS

IN THAT COUNTRY.

BY MANSFIELD PARKYNS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

WITH MAP AND ILLUSTRATIONS.



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the swords used are made in Europe, and are such as would be carried by the light cavalry, though lighter than ours. Being, however, cheap, showy articles, they are apt to break, and therefore the Abyssinians are getting tired of them, preferring those made of soft iron in their own country. These they make also with the faible considerably broader than the forte, to give force to the blow. Of course they bend on the least stress; but, in defence of this failing, their owners say that, if a sword breaks, who is to mend it?—while, if it bends, you have only to sit on it and it gets straight again. The handles of both this and the “shotel” are made of the horn of the rhinoceros. They are cut out of the horn at great loss of material, and hence they fetch a good price. It should be remembered that the heart of the horn is black, outside of which is a coating, not quite an inch thick, of a semi-transparent white colour. To make a sword-handle, a piece of horn of the requisite length is first sawn off. This is then re-sawn longitudinally into three pieces, of which the inner one only is eligible for handles. This piece is about an inch and a half thick, four or five inches broad at the broader extremity, and three at the narrower. As it lies sawn flat before us we can distinctly see the black stripe in the centre, with the white on each side. Next, a nearly semicircular piece is cut out at each side, leaving only four points of the white as four corners, and the grasp black. The handle is then finished, bored for the shank of the blade, and polished. The shank is usually clinched over a half-dollar beaten convex: a *fil-et-grain* boss, called

“timbora,” is, however, sometimes substituted. A sword-hilt thus made is obviously a very clumsy one to handle, as the points are parallel to the edge, and those farthest from the blade are longest. I should scarcely mind a blow from a sword thus mounted, as, were the striker to give his wrist any play, in order to make his cut at all effective, he could not fail sending one of these highly ornamental but very useless points into his own wrist. A handsome hilt, such as we have described, without the “timbora,” might cost about ten dollars, or 2*l.*, and from that down to 2*s.* The coating of some horns, instead of being white, is occasionally found to be of a bright blood-red, often marked in stripes. This, they say, is occasioned by the animal’s having received a blow there. However it be, such horns are in Abyssinia considered valueless, while a Turk would give any price for them.

The sword is nearly always buckled on to the right side (according to European notions, the wrong one), some few gunners only wearing it on the left. The reason of this is, that in battle, when a man has thrown, or otherwise lost his lance, he would be obliged to uncover himself considerably in drawing his sword from across his body; whereas, by buckling it on the right side, he can avail himself of it without disturbing the position of his shield. Another reason is, that, when travelling, the left arm must, from the weight of the shield, keep swinging to and fro, and would thus be liable to meet the sharp points of the sword-hilt.

The spears used by most of the tribes inhabiting Eastern Africa are of rough construction: those of the

Elephants and buffaloes are to be found, at certain seasons, in the valleys of the Mareb, Taccazy, and other rivers, and in the adjoining plains; they ascend and descend the streams according to the supply of grass and water. Both of these animals are so well known as to need little description of their habits. The Abyssinians, some centuries ago, are said to have used the elephant for riding and carrying loads, as now in India: this custom is, however, entirely abandoned. The buffalo is more dangerous than the elephant, which seldom attacks a man unprovoked, unless it be a single male separated from the herd; while travellers who have had the ill luck to stumble on a herd of buffaloes have seldom escaped to tell the story. While I was at Rohabaita, two men, crossing the Mareb, came upon a herd; they were charged immediately; one, by good luck, got away among some bushes and ultimately escaped, and brought us news that his comrade was killed. We set off in search of the body, which we, with some difficulty, found in the jungle, bruised and broken to an almost undistinguishable mass by the horns and hoofs of the buffaloes.

The giraffe and rhinoceros are not common in Tigre, though occasionally found in the plains to the northward. The skin of the former is used by the Arabs for shields, but I am not aware of any purpose to which it is applied in Abyssinia—probably on account of its rarity. I have seen it stated (I believe by Bruce) that the hair of its tail is used for whips to drive away flies. This is quite true in Darfour and Kordofan, and may have

been so formerly in Abyssinia; but now in Tigrè, from the scarcity of the giraffe, horse-hair is more in vogue. The priests and gentlemen almost always carry a whip of this kind, mostly made of white horse-hair stained red with henna. I have mentioned that the horns of the rhinoceros are used for sword-hilts.

The hippopotamus is found in the Taccazy, but I believe nowhere else in Tigrè. The lake Tzana and other waters of the Amhàra country are plentifully stocked with this animal; there is a tribe called "Commaunt" that subsists entirely on fish and the flesh of the hippopotamus; the hide is used for making whips. The Abyssinians make their "harlingas" with a hippopotamus-hide stock, and a plain shred of leather for a thong; while the "sote" or courbatch of the White Nile and Sennár is a single piece of the solid skin, cut round and tapering to a point, so as to resemble our ordinary straight riding-whips.

There are two varieties of Cynocephali, or dog-faced baboons; a small greenish-grey monkey, with a black face and white whiskers; and the "goreyza." This last is, I should think, one of the most beautiful of the monkey tribe; its back and head are covered with short, jet-black, glossy fur, while its sides and cheeks are furnished with silky hair of the purest white; its tail is very long, and with a bush of white hair at the end; this and the hair of the sides is several inches in length. The goreyza is to be found in some parts of Tsajaddy and Walkait, not (properly speaking) in Tigrè. I obtained several specimens, many very fine

ones, which, however, were ruined at Aden. They frequent the high trees about churches, and on this account the people made some difficulty about their being killed; they are very active, and, when springing from bough to bough, the silvery fringe of their sides flapping out gives them almost the appearance of being winged.

There are many varieties of antelopes: the largest is the "agazin" (koodoo?); it is nearly the size of a small cow, of a dun colour, with narrow white stripes down the sides, and long spiral horns; "tora" (hartebeeste?), "waddemby" (gnu), "bohor," "callbadou," "medauqua" or "meyda," "sassha," "anshon," and several others. The "sassha" is found almost entirely on the rocky mountains; it is of the size of a goat, with straight horns about four inches long, and its hair is of a greyish colour and resembles the quills of a hedgehog in stiffness. I am not sure whether "anshou" is the *Tigrè* name for the little gazelle which I have, in the first part of the work, called by its Arabic name of "ghannam Ben' Israël."

I found two kinds of hares; they are lighter coloured and smaller than the English one, and their ears are broader and longer; in appearance they partake so much of the hare and rabbit that I should be at a loss to decide which of the two they really were. The cony, "ashkoko," abounds in the rocks of the northern "quollas." The porcupine, hedgehog, a sort of squirrel, the ichneumon, and most of the other varieties of the rat tribe usual in these latitudes, are to be met with.

There is an animal called "saheyra," which I could not obtain, of which the Abyssinians have some curious ideas; it lives in holes in the ground, and is said to feed on dead bodies, &c., coming out only at night. From one part of the description, that its hide is impenetrable to lance or bullet, I should judge it to be of the armadillo species.

The birds of these countries, though inferior in brilliancy of plumage to those of South America or Australia, and perhaps in song to our European warblers, are, nevertheless, probably as interesting as any to the ornithologist, from being in great variety, of striking character, and less known than those of the other quarters of the world. I collected above three hundred varieties, a good proportion of which I succeeded in bringing home with me. The ostrich and bustard are found to the north of Abyssinia and in the wilder districts of that country. I have four varieties of vulture; the largest measures nearly eleven feet from tip to tip of his extended wings; he is brown, except his thighs and the under feathers of his breast, which are white; his neck and head are naked, except a sort of bristly beard under his chin. Another smaller sort has a white tuft on the head and neck. The others are the "secretary," "farras seytan," and the "rakhamah," or white Egyptian vulture.

The eagles are very beautiful; one, the largest, is all jet black, with the exception of his back, which is pure white; another is rufous, or reddish brown, excepting his head, neck, and tail, which are white, and the upper

feathers of his wings, which are of a dark chocolate-brown, almost black; a third, smaller one, is all black, with a crest of feathers on his head. I have, in all, ten or twelve sorts of eagles. There are about twenty-four sorts of hawks and falcons, many of them very interesting; four owls, a great-horned, lesser ditto, one resembling the common screech-owl, and a very small one, not larger than a small thrush. In my collection are a great number of storks, herons, ibises, cranes, and others of the grallatorial order, among which I might mention the *Balaeniceps rex*, or king stork, an entirely new species, of which I have the only pair hitherto known in Europe; the royal crane (or crested), purple heron, sacred ibis, &c. &c. I have several kinds of plovers, six of grouse and partridge, the guinea-fowl, and florican; two very handsome geese, and five sorts of ducks. Of the hornbills I have already described the abba goumba; there are besides three other sorts, and the common hoopoe. There are ten or eleven sorts of cuckoo, one of which, the emerald cuckoo, though nearly the smallest, may be reckoned the most beautiful bird in this part of Africa, from the brilliant green of its back, contrasted with the bright canary yellow of its breast. The parrots and parroquets are few; I have only one sort of long-tailed green parroquet, a small grey, yellow, and green parrot, and the love-birds. I found three or four varieties of the night-jar, and as many of the woodpeckers, bee-eaters, fly-catchers, swallows, &c. &c. There is a great variety of pigeons and doves in Abyssinia and the neighbouring countries; of

after it was repeated, but much plainer. I deliberated a while whether or no to rouse my neighbour, and was just determining that I would not do so till there was more cause, when a tremendous roar, quite close to us, saved me the trouble by waking Gàddar, who, with one of his companions, got up immediately. The mules were in a desperate state of alarm, so we tied them and the camels close to the fire. The watch following ought to have been kept by the Tokrouri, but we decided in not trusting to such a sleepy fellow, so the Arab volunteered, and we both sat with him. The lion kept us on the alert till near morning, but though, what with his roar and the snorting and plunging of the animals, there was noise enough to awaken a log of wood, none of our sleepy-headed ones ever moved from their places, and the two snorers played their duet with wonderful perseverance. Gàddar amused us much by mimicking them and making fun of them as they slept, calling them by all sorts of facetious epithets, and otherwise insulting them. He said that it was a good thing to have one or two such men in a camp, for, if a lion should take any one, he would be sure to pick out the man that snored loudest. In these countries they have a great dislike to this habit; it diminishes the value of a slave, and in some places a person purchasing one without being warned of this defect would be perfectly justified in returning him to the seller as soon as he discovered it. We had not a very comfortable night of it, nor a good breakfast next morning, for, excepting about a quart of muddy water in a skin, we had nothing

to drink or to wash in, not having found any since the afternoon of the day before. We had expected to find a puddle in a hollow near to the trees where we camped, but the buffaloes had drunk it all up. Washing is a luxury which in Africa one has frequently to dispense with, but men require to drink, perhaps more there than anywhere else. In deserts, where you have to drink stagnant rain-water, you often are glad to get a "suck" of a fluid matter that I am convinced many of my readers would not believe to be drinkable. I use the word "suck" advisedly, for, when I speak of muddy water, I mean such stuff that we were obliged to drink it out of a horn with a doubled cloth over the mouth, through which we literally "sucked" the water, being obliged to take off the strainer after every three or four mouthfuls in order to clear it of the coating of mud which adhered to it. Nor was it only on this occasion that I had recourse to this mode of filtration; I think I may safely say that I have done so hundreds of times in various countries.

Next day we saw several giraffes and ostriches in the distance, and the guide pointed out to me a rhinoceros, but too far off for ordinary eyes to see anything at all. About noon we arrived at a small pool; our four-footed friends, the giraffes and buffaloes, had apparently been there not long before us, and had made it, by trampling and polluting it, a most striking example of the rich sort of beverage of which I have spoken above. Notwithstanding, such is the force of habit and necessity, that its appearance afforded us as much pleasure, and

its contents seemed quite as palatable, as if it had been the purest spring in the world. Further on an object in the grass caught my eye, but I did not distinguish it till I had ridden past. It was a large wild cat, lying coiled up in the grass as snug as possible, and evidently fast asleep, although within a few feet of us. I called to my Abyssinian, who happened to be next to me, and, showing her to him, he crept up and hit at her with his club, but missed her; up she got, and away she went in splendid style. The Abyssinian and Abd Allah gave chase, while I, Gaddar, and the rest encouraged them on with "Go it, ye snorers," &c. &c. The Abyssinian soon gave up the hunt, but the nigger kept on for a long time, incited to perseverance probably by a strong inclination to taste her flesh. Many negroes are particularly partial to cat's-meat, esteeming it above all other game, and in reality it is very good. While Abd Allah was away, his comrade Saleh amused us with a story showing how fond they are of this delicacy, the slaves more so perhaps than their masters. He denied that he himself liked it, or that it was a *general* taste in Darfour. His story was as follows:—A slave, one day finding a litter of wild kittens in a tree, clambered up, and, with the greatest delight, secured them in his bosom, but, one hand being occupied in holding them, he lost his footing when descending, and fell to the ground, breaking a leg and two ribs. His wife, who was with him, unable to do anything for him alone, ran off for assistance, and quickly returned with one or two neighbours. They found the man lying on the ground

carefully examining his kittens to see if they were hurt, and cleaning them from the dust and sand they had collected by the fall. On his neighbours offering to carry him home, he groaned out, "Let me alone; don't you see that one of the kittens has still got some sand in its eye?" Here again is an example of a good story translated into nothing at all, for, on reading it in English, I find that its great merit consisted in the way in which it was told me. Sâleh, mimicking the broken dialect and peculiar enunciation of the slave, made us all laugh; but I'm afraid that, in the absence of these embellishments, it reads but poorly. The man's object, by the way, was to bring up his kittens some for fat stock and some for breeding.

Talking of peculiar food, not very long after the cat-hunt we came upon a "warran," a large lizard of the Iguano species: we not only caught it, but killed and ate it. None of us being particularly hungry, we only tasted it, but our friend Abd Allah, though perhaps he had already eaten twice as much as any of us, was unsparing of it. He said it was of all things his favourite food, but I verily believe that I have heard him say the same of almost every sort of fish, flesh, or fowl. During the day we passed several remains of enclosures used by the neighbouring tribes in former years for penning their cattle. Gâddar, with a chuckle, pointed out one or two, the contents of which he acknowledged having himself carried off. At about one o'clock we reached the river Seytit, the Taccazy of Abyssinia, and in this neighbourhood sometimes called Bahr el Hamran (the river of

the Hamran), from a tribe of Arabs that inhabit its shores. We followed its course for a considerable distance, and then, leaving it, cut across the angle formed by its junction with the Atbara, and halted on the bank of that river, just opposite to the village of Soufi, otherwise called "Hellet el Fouckha" (or Village of the Priests). After their junction, the united streams retain the name of Atbara, and are so called till they join the Nile near Berber, this river being the most important of the two; it is here of great breadth, and, as we saw it in the rainy season, of considerable depth also. Before arriving at Soufi it receives the waters of the Bahr Salama and Angrab. After shouting for a long time and making signals of distress, we perceived that the inhabitants of the opposite shore were aware of our position, and of our wish to be ferried over. Gaddar told us that we should have to wait where we were till morning, as they would require time to prepare a raft, so we lighted our fire and bivouacked as usual. We were, also *as usual*, kept on the *qui vive* by the lions and hyænas, who seemed to have much inclination to taste the flesh of our mules; and as if to make our last moments in Abyssinia as commonplace as possible, Gabrou and Abd Allah slept and snored *as usual*. Next morning we rose early, anxious to get into the new country, but the ferrymen did not seem to hurry their preparations, for it was nearly 9 o'clock before any of them took the water. So we had plenty of time to pack our traps for the swim, and to contemplate the river to our hearts' content. I passed the spare time thus