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DENATURED AFRICA

By

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Illustrated



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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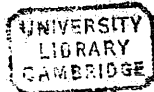
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*Norah—just a simple, whole-
some, outdoor girl.*



IN the freshness of the dawn we set out after rhino. The air was filled with the cooing of wild doves, and the persistent liquid notes of some feathered vocalist unknown to me. A penetrating coolness urged one to move briskly, and calculate with interest when the first rays of the sun might be expected to appear above the crest of the Kamasia Range. It was ridiculous, yet the cold at the bottom of this Rift Valley racked one. At noon the thermometer might register one hundred and ten degrees, then, towards dawn the mercury would become depraved and slink as low as fifty-five degrees in its criminal career. One lay in his Jaeger blankets and shivered. Visions of skiis and snowshoes mingled with the imagined sounds of sleigh bells when one woke to consciousness. Yet, within a few hours, the heat would once again become unbearable; the chills of the preceding night forgotten. It was a kaleidoscopic adventure in contraction and expansion.

We crossed the River Ndo—pronounced as though one had a hard cold—and entered the bush. A large, grey monkey sat on the limb of a tree, his back lazily propped against its trunk. One leg swung idly to and fro in a manner expressive of complete boredom. At intervals he scratched his head feebly. He was waiting to get thawed out by the sun.

Five minutes from camp, we crossed the trails of our first rhino—two of them—returning from the river to the thicker bush which skirted the mountains. The size of these impressions disturbed me. They were bigger than soup plates—a favorite unit of measurement among scientists—while the weight of the animals was evidenced by the fact that they were impressed three or four inches into the unresponsive ground. Moisture still oozed from them, while, in the depressions leaves and grasses were crushed flat enough for the memory book of the most fastidious.

Here Gregg left us. “You follow these blighters,” he said. “I’m going down the valley after buffalo.”

In and out among the clumps of bushes we stealthily followed the tracks. Then I was peering

across a little glade at two colossal grey bodies. It was all so matter-of-fact and casual it seemed preposterous. Above them fluttered some small birds. "Rhino birds," whispered Flint. The sun was just peeping over the mountains, transforming the steely light into warmer tones. The doves still hurled their soft challenge to the dawn.

My knees began to shake like a couple of aspens. Great wabby shivers ran up and down my spine. It was not precisely what I had expected. There was a sinister insolence about the huge bodies that filled me with foreboding.

"Shoot,—shoot," hissed Flint.

"Do you really think I ought to?" I whispered. Opening hostilities in this cold-blooded way seemed little short of courting death.

"Well, what-the-hell did you come down here for?" he whispered back.

I shot.

Afterwards I realized I had merely pulled the trigger, holding the gun in my hands like the nozzle of a hose. The rhinos relieved themselves of two very authentic snorts and vanished. They were just as frightened as I was. It was laughable.

"Sorry," I said to Flint.

"Carry on," he answered, "and next time don't use that rifle as though it was a bean-blower."

Through a series of small grassy glades we cautiously picked our way. Then Flint grabbed my arm, and pointed. There, on the opposite side of a small open space, stood another pair of these slab-sided angels. They seemed as plentiful as rabbits. In distance they were twenty-two yards from where we stood. Afterwards I measured it. Alert, noses in air, they posed, intent on locating the danger some instinct warned them was approaching.

"Now," whispered Flint.

"They're nothing but big bluffs," I murmured, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet struck one in the chest—I could see the spot—there was a spurt of blood. With a snort that sounded like a dozen Mikado engines exhausting steam, it whirled with the agility of a cat and charged straight at us. From that moment my actions were guided by forces over which I had no control. I threw down my gun and ran. The rhino appeared to be on top of me. In fact he was—right on top of me. Twenty-seven and a half inches of horn was thirsting for my blood. I ran. In three strides I was tangled inextricably in a

thorn-apple tree, abundantly decorated with needle-like thorns an inch and a half long. I heard Flint shoot. "What part of me will it enter first?" I wondered. "How will it feel?" Oh! Jephtha, Judge of Israel, how scared I was! For what seemed an age I floundered, leaving a very tender and defenseless portion of my anatomy exposed. Now I understood why the wart hogs had compromised with their dignity and entered their holes backward. Then Flint said: "He's gone. Badly wounded. Come on."

With difficulty I managed to unhook myself. Indicating my running away, Flint remarked: "The very worst thing you could do."

"It was natural and spontaneous, at any rate," I answered unashamed,—it seemed the better policy.

"Well," he said, "the next time it happens try not to be natural."

We followed the bloody spoor in and out among the bushes. Then, as we stood in the shadow of a thicket, the terrible explosive snort of the wounded rhino filled the air on its opposite side. Again, the impulse to run was well-nigh irresistible, but this time I controlled it. There was no place to run.

Cautiously we edged around the bush. The head and shoulders of the beast became visible through the leaves. It was a very sick rhino. Flint and I both shot. Without a sound, it sank to the ground—dead. To see a monumental animal full of vibrant life dashing about in a frenzy of rage one moment, and the next, abruptly sinking to the earth, an inert lifeless mass, is shocking. From a condition of pandemonium, the world became suddenly still with the dramatic stillness that follows a catastrophe.

From various dingles and copses the boys appeared full of delight at the thought of the sensual pleasure in store for them. Here were tons of meat, Simba, named for the lion, was the custodian of my kodak. It weighed fourteen pounds. At the moment the rhino snorted there had been a general scattering. Simba had vanished as though the earth had opened to receive him. Now we called to him. From above our heads, he answered faintly. He was perched on the top of a thorn-tree twenty feet from the ground, the kodak still gripped in one hand. That he had made it in one jump there could be no doubt, for there was not a scratch on him.

"He's named for a lion," I said to Flint, "and

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yet he's no braver than I am, and I'm not even named for a billy goat."

"It's the same here as anywhere else," Flint replied. "You can place but little reliance in names."

We turned our attention to the rhino. It was a female; an old, wrinkled, unprepossessing female, with a horn over twenty-seven inches long which gave her a decidedly shrewish look. Her body was stuccoed with a quarter of an inch of mud, to protect it from flies—African rouge. Her eyes were small and piggish and, but for the horny growth, her snout would certainly be termed porcine. Her length, from the tip of the nose to the root of the tail, a little over ten feet. At the withers, she stood four feet eight inches in her bare feet before she dropped for the last time. Who her father and mother were, I was unable to ascertain. This seemed unfortunate inasmuch as otherwise I was going into such intimate detail. Her skin was an inch and a quarter thick, and hung about her in loose and baggy folds. Although no uglier beast lives, we stood about and admired it for an hour, as though it was a new baby. At least it was no homelier. We sat on it, walked on it, pinched it, took all



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manner of liberties with it, while the grinning boys who formed our audience regarded us in silence. The huge corpse lay still, yielding pitifully to the liberties we took.

At length we tired of prying into its personal peculiarities. From stem to stern we had become thoroughly familiar with the "herbivorous perissodactyl." The boys were now turned loose on the cadaver. Like a group of first year medical students, they leapt upon it. One hour later, a huge framework of bones was the only visible evidence that the crime had ever been committed. The following morning a moist spot on the ground alone identified the scene of the murder. The hyenas, jackals, small furry things, beetles and lice had licked the platter clean. It was at once depressing yet reassuringly antiseptic.

As Flint and I sat in the shade watching that huge pile of meat melt away like red snow in the white sun, a boy burst through the bushes breathless and exhausted. The muscles of his legs were taut. His knee-caps trembled ridiculously. His mouth worked and grimaced uncontrollably. Clearly he had traveled fast, and the memory of something disturbing still lingered. He spoke to

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Flint haltingly, between gulps for air, in the most approved, melodramatic manner.

"Gregg is in a herd of elephants," said Flint. "He's out of hard-nose ammunition. Maybe we'll get a shot. Come on."

For an hour and a half, we marched through the blistering heat watching the legs of this black Paul Revere rise and fall mechanically. Then, suddenly rounding a bush, we came on Gregg sitting under a tree solemnly watching a very sick bull elephant rock slowly back and forth on trembling legs. Almost at once, it staggered and fell, burying a tusk deeply into the hard earth.

"There were twelve of them," said Gregg without emotion, as we came up. "They surrounded me as quietly as mice. Five minutes before I had met a rhino face to face on a narrow trail. He rushed past me so close the mud on his ribs was scraped off on my jacket. After he went everything was quiet. When I looked around again elephants were all over the place. This tusker was twelve yards away. There hadn't been a sound. The boys ran. I don't blame them. I tell you elephants were all over the place. I gave this one the brain shot, heart shot, tail shot and ran out of 'hard nose'—anyway, I

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couldn't remember any other places to shoot him. There he is. He's dead," and he regarded the huge carcass with an incredulous look.

There was no doubt of it,—dead he most certainly was. One could assert it without the least fear of exaggerating. Five tons of bone and meat lay limp on the ground with no further interest in antiquity or futurity. Regarded from a distance, it was only a rather revolting mountain of flesh already beginning to wage its losing battle with the sun's vertical rays. But, as we proceeded on a sightseeing tour over the huge corpse, we came to appreciate it in all its mechanical perfection.

The rhino, weighing nearly two tons, faded into insignificance, as we proceeded to explore this five-ton cadaver. It was a Gargantuan autopsy; a cosmic post-mortem, involving a knowledge of Swiss mountaineering, the Roman catacombs and the inner workings of Armour and Company.

And with what different emotions each of us seemed to regard this permanently relaxed hulk! In the eyes of Gregg, it was merely the corpse of an enemy slain in mortal combat. The keen eyes of Flint saw in it only a hundred pounds of ivory—

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fifteen hundred shillings, and his eyes found it a pleasing sight. To the rolling eyes of the vociferous swarm of Elgayo and Kamasia, that had appeared as if by magic as soon as the old bull had crashed to earth, it bulked as heaven-sent meat—red, bleeding meat—Mzuri! Lastly, my unsophisticated eyes regarded it with amazement—as the most curious animal left in the world today. I saw the huge proboscis attached to a massive head, in turn set firmly on a great, cylindrical body, from which projected legs like huge columns ending in flat, circular feet. I saw ears measuring ten feet from tip to tip, small short-sighted eyes and, as an inconsequential climax, a tiny tail that would have been a source of mortification to an anæmic rat. I saw a grey wrinkled skin, as loose as the morals of Sodom and Gomorrah, lying in such folds and puckers that one was quite willing to believe it had been slept in nightly for a hundred years. This baggy integument had plainly never known goose, mangle or pressing-iron. It was designed with a view to service and comfort.

The elephant is a big subject. One is tempted to linger over it—too long perhaps. But there's a middle ground—that section between the trunk

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and the tail, where Gregg, Flint and I sat, each thinking his own thoughts.

The sun blazed down cruelly. We slid off the corpse and made some measurements. It would have stood ten feet four at the shoulder—our specimen. Its feet were fifty inches in circumference, and it seemed to me that, if it had wanted to reach something down out of a tree, it surely could have poked the end of its nose about twenty-eight feet up into the branches. This is a lot of nose to stick into another person's business.

From the end of the tail we carefully garnered the only hairs on the barren hulk, great spines, the thickness of the G string on a zither. These hairs woven into bracelets and rings form very potent charms. They were plucked with due reverence. The poor thing's feet were dismembered to serve as umbrella-racks at some later day. The ears were removed for table tops. The trunk was unhinged for steaks. With a hatchet, carried for that purpose, the tusks were chopped out—white gold, at the moment slightly incarnadined. The marrow within them was withdrawn, and handed to a Kamasia Chief. Then Gregg blew a whistle, indicating to the hundred odd black men swarming