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THROUGH WILDEST AFRICA

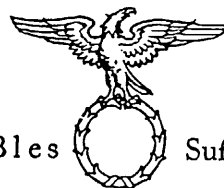
A STORY OF TRAVEL

By

F. RATCLIFFE HOLMES



A WOMAN OF THE WA-CHAGGA TRIBE, MOUNT KILIMANJARO.

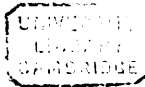


Geoffrey Bles Suffolk St., Pall Mall

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swamps, in one of which he would probably have ended his days but for being discovered by a prowling and noisy dog belonging to the farm. He, at any rate, travelled fairly fast. The main body, heavy laden, tired and dispirited, after a fearful day commenced to break and lose touch immediately darkness fell, and it was only by a combination of threats and entreaties coupled with a very real and reasonable fear of animals of the larger kinds and nocturnal habits which induced them to continue with many halts and much bewailing of their fate.

It was a totally moonless night, and the "path" was non-existent, and after several hours' wandering in what we fondly imagined to be the right direction it became obvious that we were well and truly lost, that the *safari* was beaten, and that the only thing to do was to lie down and wait for daylight. On the off chance that we might be heard, we fired a salvo with our revolvers. To our intense relief we were immediately answered by other shots, then Verrey lights soared into the air not half a mile distant. We crawled into the welcome haven of friend Hurst's farm presently and received that complete and almost overwhelming welcome which can only be encountered in the wilds. It was the end of one of those days which are burned into the tablets of memory.

CHAPTER XIV

THE great crater of Ngorongoro has been described as the most wonderful sight in Africa. This I think is rating it rather too highly, for it cannot fairly be said to compare as a spectacle either with the awe-inspiring majesty of the Victoria Falls or the towering grandeur of Kilimanjaro. As a geological extravagance and a natural game reserve, however, it is probably unique.

To describe it in such a manner as to convey anything like an adequate impression is a task which I fear. Imagine a great pit, certainly more than thirty miles in circumference, roughly circular in shape, its floor more than six thousand feet above sea-level, and appearing from the centre to be little more than a shallow depression by reason of its vast size. The walls, however, rise to a height of between fifteen hundred and two thousand feet, and whereas in some places they are sheer, at others they slope at such an angle that they may be ascended or descended with impunity. Whether this then is a true crater, or merely a subsidence, is a geological question on which this deponent is not competent to venture an opinion beyond saying that to the unscientific observer the latter view would appear to be the more probable.

coal-black smudge along his whitish flanks. He has a tail which is the nearest approach to perpetual motion of anything on earth, the speed of the whippet, and the capacity for laughing at an incredible quantity of lead unless hit in a vital spot.

These animals may be seen at any time, anywhere in the open pastures, but a close examination of the more secluded regions will disclose many others. Most numerous perhaps are the congoni, or hartebeeste, quite a large buck with what seem very inadequate horns, much more shy and fidgety than any of the others already mentioned, but possessing an insane curiosity which often leads to their undoing. With them a few eland may sometimes be found, but they are only occasional wanderers from the herds on the plains outside, where this enormous goat-like creature, weighing as much as three-quarters of a ton and almost the equal of beef when the feed is good, can be found with certainty.

In the forests there are bush-buck and water-buck, and sometimes a rhino or two which have come down from the thickly-wooded outer slopes. Practically every animal common to this part of Africa may be found in the crater at some time, attracted by the luscious feed. The fact that a large school of hippo divides its time between the fresh-water lake and the reed-grown swamps only becomes remarkable when one remembers that the nearest water capable of holding these monsters is many miles distant, and that the journey therefrom entails a good deal of not very

mild mountaineering. It is at any rate evidence that hippo are capable of migrating for considerable distances overland.

Of feathered life there is a vast variety. The wild ostrich abounds; there are giant bustards, crested cranes, birds of prey of every possible kind, duck, geese, and many other water-fowl in the lakes and swamps, bush-fowl in the thickets, and what appears at a distance to be a pink fringe to the soda lake resolves itself at close quarters into myriads of that curious bird the flamingo.

Such a paradise for game is naturally a Tom Tiddler's ground for the larger carnivora, and for many years the crater has been known to the few as a famous lion haunt. They were not quite as numerous as usual at the time of our visit, owing to the zeal of a party of "sportsmen" who, a little while before, had peppered males, females, and cubs alike, firing at all sorts of ranges, and, of course, wounding far more than they actually killed. We did, however, see a few, usually at a distance, and it was always worth while on these occasions to crawl to some vantage point from which the glasses could be used. To watch a great animal such as a fully-grown lion really is, slinking through grass in the attempt to get within striking distance of some unsuspecting buck, is to receive a supreme object lesson in the art of taking cover.

There were leopards and cheetahs, but not to be seen by day. The hyenas, of which there were thousands, were, on the other hand, always visible. I had previously thought, as most people

Investigation of the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro soon proved that we had been wise. Here were plenty of beautiful little streams, icy cold and crystal clear, devoid of chemical precipitates, and uninhabited by creatures which ate film. Thanks to the kind hospitality and sympathy of Mr. H. B. Smith, an English coffee-planter, whose long association with the mountain has earned him the sobriquet of "Kilimanjaro" Smith, we were soon installed at Marangu, in what had once been a small German hotel, some five thousand feet above sea-level and possessing a perfectly delightful atmosphere and temperature. Here we developed with complete success all the film made *en voyage*, and, before moving off into the wilds, saw a good deal of the mountain. But, on the principle of leaving the best to the last, I propose to postpone this part of the story.

Kilimanjaro is a mighty jewel, with a wondrous setting. It commences on the lower slopes at a height of six or seven thousand feet, with the native banana groves and gardens, continues with the European coffee and maize plantations, and extends to the plains in a broad semi-circular swath of cultivation stretching from east to west. Cheek by jowl with it is the bush, as it was in the beginning, unchecked and unharnessed by man.

Here and there the virgin forests and jungle touch the giant's feet. It is so at Kifufu, a little settlement on the western slopes. Here, at a height of four thousand feet, one looks across a sea of vegetation, broken in the middle distance by an occasional plain, but growing still more dense,

till, near the base of Meru, forty miles away, where swamps abound, it becomes a solid mass of greenery.

As we tarried awhile at Kifufu there came to our ears marvellous tales of the game to be found over towards Meru. The bush was alive with rhino, there were herds of buffalo, smaller animals in abundance, and in a string of lakes at the foot of Meru schools of hippo which gambolled tamely all the day long and which could be relied upon almost to pose for the camera. As a suitable headquarters there was the *shamba* of one Kranz, who had departed with the coming of the war. Now a *shamba* or farm suggests a house of sorts, maybe a ruined one under the circumstances, but a shelter.

Therefore did we decide forthwith to investigate this region of photographic treasure, taking with us only a small store of provisions, for it was but a day's journey and a job to be accomplished with ease and speed. We set off, four strong, with a native guide, who I swear had never passed that way before, the giver of the good tidings himself, whom we had engaged for the business, promising to join us later. He was a Dutch hunter with the reputation of knowing more about the big game of the district than was good for his popularity with the Game Department, this, however, being no bad recommendation in my eyes. I wondered at first why he should elect to make the journey alone, but long before we reached the haunt of the departed Kranz I knew. It was in order that we might not have the opportunity of cross-examining him, and as a result, turn back. Save for one astonished bush-

buck we saw no animal at all, nor sign of one, and when at last we discovered the *shamba*, the abiding place of Kranz was represented by two sheets of galvanized iron lying upon a tiny hillock, and surrounded by some of the most dense and terrifying thorn bush I have ever seen. I do not think Kranz could have been sorry to go.

There were rhino in plenty in the vicinity. During the last hour of the journey, whilst we pushed and scrambled through almost impenetrable jungle, we heard a great deal of them, and feared every moment that we should make a closer acquaintance than would be healthy for the laden porters. As for filming them, that was quite out of the question, though, when the Dutchman turned up, it was a matter of some difficulty to convince him that for a successful film one needs more than a noise, or even a glimpse of a huge body crashing through the bush. He said that if we needed rhino in the open he could certainly take us to them, but the place was many miles away, and on the other side of Kilimanjaro. However, there were still the hippo, and if we cared to investigate the lakes, which might take a day or two, and put up with a shortage of drinking-water, because those lakes were all brackish and quite unfit to drink, we should certainly have great success and might return by a route much more pleasing than the one by which we had come.

At this point it went against the grain to return without shooting a single foot of film, but to make the lake project possible it became necessary for two of the white men to return, leaving the whole

of the provisions for the use of the remainder. Off went the camera-man and I with the Dutchman to find the lakes. They were not quite as close as we had expected, but, as we found out afterwards, that good fellow's idea of distance was a trifle vague. We found them all right, ten or a dozen of them, but the journey was one which I shall never forget. For four days on end we waded through swamps, crept and crawled along rhino paths which were mere tunnels driven through almost solid vegetation, expecting every moment to stumble on two tons of bad temper, and praying that when we did the brute would decide to travel in the same direction as ourselves but at greater speed.

It was bad enough for us, but for the porters it was far worse, and how they managed to follow us with their heavy loads, and half doubled up most of the time, will always remain a mystery to me. But they did, and although they were very frightened there was never a grouse. Camping-grounds were made by clearing the bush from the crest of some tiny hillock, the only dry ground to be found, for water we had to put up with noisome stuff from the swamp pools, but by great good luck we managed to shoot a buck or two and so eke out our scanty rations.

The hippo? Oh yes, there were hippo—two of them apparently. We were always upon their tracks, and it seemed they too had decided upon a tour of the lakes and were carrying it out just in front of us. At any rate they had always been the night before at the lake at which we arrived in the morning. But we never saw them, and long before

tracks to be seen are those of rhino, giraffe, and that curious little long-necked buck the gerunuk, which seems to thrive in the desert and is only to be found in small and widely separated districts. We were fortunate enough to see these quaint little animals, but were never able to get sufficiently close to photograph them, or to obtain the trophy which every hunter covets.

Crossing the plain near Longido the amount of lion spoor to be seen was remarkable. It appeared that lions frequented the district in droves, but though the number of their tracks far exceeded those of game, due to the constant passage from one feeding ground to another of vast herds of Masai cattle, we did not see a single lion. We had been warned to take precautions at night, but we took no special measures to protect the camp, and were never molested.

The number of lions to be seen in the daytime, even in country infested by them, is surprisingly small. A distinguished hunter has said that people on *safari* would see more lions if they would only look behind them, which is only another way of saying that lions, when disturbed by the approach of human beings, generally crouch behind the nearest cover and stand up to gaze at the *safari* when it has passed. If a *safari* should happen to stumble directly upon them they invariably slink away, looking more like long dogs caught poaching than the king of beasts as portrayed in the advertisements.

Hours before we reached Longido we could see a broad white band, splitting the mountain, which



GRANT'S GAZELLE PHOTOGRAPHED AT TEN YARDS RANGE. [Kolak Film Negative.]



GRANT'S GAZELLE—DRINKING AT MIDDAY. (Note reflection in water.) [Kolak Film Negative.]

had every appearance of a tumbling river, and promised excellent water. At close quarters it resolved itself into a broad white channel, doubtless a watercourse in the rainy season, but it was an excellent point to march upon, for the only water in the district is immediately beneath it. It was a mere pool in a rocky cup, covered with filthy green slime, and at first sight extremely unprepossessing. But the cup overflowed, and investigation beneath the slime disclosed a bubbling spring, providing water beautifully sweet and cool. This is a common characteristic of African water-holes of the permanent kind, and the best way to gather the water is to plunge a corked bottle arm's length, and only uncork it beneath the influence of the deleterious matter on the surface.

The Longido district was the scene of a good deal of fighting during the war, and here, beneath the shade of a great umbrella tree, close to the foot of the mountain, stands what must surely be the most pathetically lonely war grave in the world. It had only been completed just before our visit by the War Graves Commission, a railed square, marking the last resting-place of many of the lads who lay originally in scattered graves, most of them members of the 25th Fusiliers, true, even in death, to their other and better-known title, the Legion of Frontiersmen.

Striking the Arusha-Nairobi track, we worked round the mountain to the point where, according to the map, there exists a permanent water-hole. We found it quite easily, and there was no particular reason to doubt its permanence. Its con-

tents, however, were not water in the strict sense of the word, but a thick filthy mixture in which cattle were standing flank-deep. There were several thousands of other cattle awaiting their turn, and when this herd departed another, grazing not far away, was ready to take its place. One glance was sufficient to prove that our chance of obtaining anything fit to drink from this source was non-existent, but just as we were beginning to curse the makers of maps and the habits of the Masai, some of the latter gentry arrived, and led us into the bush. There, in overgrown pits, we were shown several excellent little springs, similar in character to the one already described, but we were glad enough of them as we were told we should find no more water for two days and perhaps three.

Whilst camped here we had a rather curious experience. Two rhino had been wallowing in the mud caused by the overflow, fifty yards from the cattle pond, and hoping that they might return that afternoon we built a hide-up of bushes beneath the low branches of a convenient tree. Whilst the camera-man and I were seated in the hide-up a red-legged partridge, accustomed to gathering insects at that spot, started to feed within a few yards of us. We sat perfectly still, and, to our intense surprise, the bird not only entered the hide-up but actually walked about between us and within easy reach. So long as we were motionless it took no more notice of us than if we had been pieces of wood, affording incontestable proof that it possessed no sense of smell. A slight movement by the camera-man towards a hunting knife, that

partridge being plump and pleasing, sent it squawking away, but in a few minutes it was back, unable apparently to distinguish between two khaki clad figures and the fallen timber which lay around.

Consultation with the Masai elders who presently appeared was not particularly helpful. They knew of the existence of a great soda lake some days to the westward, but none of them had ever seen it, their wanderings being confined to that part of the Reserve in which they were then living. The fact that we intended to journey to the lake by that particular route caused them great surprise, and although they were quite respectful about it all, it was easy to see that they thought us not a little mad. But in that courteous and hospitable way which marks them as the gentlemen of Africa, they were willing to help us as far as they possibly could. In one day we might come, so they said, to another Masai village called Kurua, and, further on, to the one river existing between us and the Rift Valley.

This was pleasing information, but its veracity became somewhat clouded upon reference to the map. There, clearly enough, was a river, called, as they said Engare Nebal, but in an entirely different direction, and crossed many miles further by that very Arusha-Nairobi road we proposed now to leave at right angles.

Experience had taught us, however, that so far as water is concerned native information is far more to be relied upon than any map, and our friends were not only most insistent about the existence of their river, but prepared to guarantee