

THE ROMANCE

OF

NATURAL HISTORY.

BY

PHILIP HENRY GOSSE, F.R.S.

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X.

THE TERRIBLE.

MAN'S connexion with the creation around him occasionally brings him into circumstances of more serious result than a temporary excitement of the imagination, and a thrilling of the nerves, which might be on the whole rather pleasant than otherwise. He was indeed invested with lordship over the inferior creatures, and in general they own his dominion ; but many of them are endowed with powers for evil, to which he can oppose no effectual resistance ; at least, none so invariably effectual, but that occasions occur in which the mastery is reversed. Some are furnished with enormous weight and strength, able to crush him with mere brute momentum ; others carry formidable weapons, horns and hoofs, claws and teeth, tusks and fangs, wielded with consummate skill, and made more effective by the aid of muscular strength, fleetness of pace, agility, instinct of combination, or cunning strategy. Others, small and apparently contemptible, are yet armed with implements so terribly lethal, that the slightest puncture of the skin by one of them, darted too with lightning-like rapidity and almost unerring precision, is inevitably and immediately followed by the most horrid form of death.

the trapper, who was just getting up; but before he had well drawn his long knife, the bear's claws were on his left arm and shoulder. His right arm he could still move freely, and he inflicted stab after stab in the neck of his fierce enemy, which did not on that account relax her gripe, but tried to catch the knife with her teeth. At every movement he made, she seemed to dig deeper into his shoulder and loins.

The struggle had not lasted a minute, when the sandy bank suddenly gave way, and down the combatants went into the water. Fortunately for Villandrie, the sudden cold bath made the bear loose her hold: she returned to her cubs, and left her mangled antagonist to get away as well as he could. The next day he reached a Sioux village, very much exhausted from loss of blood; but he got his wounds tolerably healed, and still maintained his character of the best white trapper on the Yellowstone.*

Recent travellers in Africa have made us somewhat familiar with the mighty and ferocious brutes of that arid continent, the very metropolis of bestial power. Not only have the missionary, the colonist, and the soldier encountered the lordly animals in their progress into the wilderness, but hunters, either for sport or profit, have gone in search of them, bearded the lion by his midnight fountain, and provoked the elephant to single combat in his forest fastnesses. Fearful adventures have hence ensued, the records of which have thrilled us dwellers at

* Möllhausen's *Journey to the Pacific*, i., p. 103.

home by our winter firesides. One or two of these I may select for illustration of the terrible in natural history.

Nothing is more appalling in the way of animal voices than the scream, or "trumpeting," as it is called, of an enraged elephant. The hunting of this animal in South Africa is awful work. To stand in front of a creature twelve feet high, infuriated to the utmost, to hear his shriek of rage, to see him come crashing on with an impetus that throws the very trees out of the ground, needs all the nerve and all the courage that man can bring to the conflict. Livingstone says that the terrible "trumpet" is more like what the shriek of a French steam-whistle would be to a man standing on a railway, than any other earthly sound. So confounding is it, that a horse unused to the chase will sometimes stand shivering, and unable to move, instead of galloping from the peril. Gordon Cumming has depicted a stirring scene, in which, having dismounted to fire at an elephant, he was immediately charged by another; his horse, terrified by being thus placed between two enraged monsters, refused to be mounted; and it was only when he expected to feel a trunk clasping his body, that he managed to spring into the saddle.

Even when mounted, the legs of the steed will sometimes fail from terror, and he falls with his rider; or, from the character of the forest, the latter may be dragged from his seat during the flight, and thus be left helpless before the furious beast, exposed to be impaled by the long tusks, or crushed into a mummy by the enormous feet.

An adventure of this sort with an elephant befel one who has had more narrow escapes than any man living, but whose modesty has always prevented him from publishing anything about himself. On the banks of the Zouga, in 1850, Mr Oswell pursued one of these animals into the dense, thick, thorny bushes met with on the margin of that river, and to which the elephant usually flees for safety. He followed through a narrow pathway, by lifting up some of the branches and forcing his way through the rest; but when he had just got over this difficulty, he saw the elephant, whose tail he had got glimpses of before, now rushing towards him. There was then no time to lift up branches, so he tried to force the horse through them. He could not effect a passage; and, as there was but an instant between the attempt and failure, the hunter tried to dismount; but, in doing this, one foot was caught by a branch, and the spur drawn along the animal's flank; this made him spring away and throw the rider on the ground, with his face to the elephant, which being in full chase, still went on. Mr Oswell saw the huge fore-foot about to descend on his legs, parted them, and drew in his breath as if to resist the pressure of the other foot, which he expected would next descend on his body. He saw the whole length of the under part of the enormous brute pass over him; the horse got away safely. Dr Livingstone, who records the anecdote, has heard but of one other authentic instance in which an elephant went over a man without injury; and, for any one who knows the nature of the bush in

which this occurred, the very thought of an encounter in it with such a foe is appalling. As the thorns are placed in pairs on opposite sides of the branches, and these turn round on being pressed against, one pair brings the other exactly into the position in which it must pierce the intruder. They cut like knives. Horses dread this bush extremely; indeed, most of them refuse to face its thorns.*

Occasionally, however, the elephant-hunter falls a victim to his daring. A young and successful ivory-hunter, named Thackwray, after numberless hair-breadth escapes, at length lost his life in the pursuit. On one occasion, a herd pursued him to the edge of a frightful precipice, where his only chance of safety consisted in dropping down to a ledge of rock at some distance below. Scarcely was he down before one of the elephants was seen above, endeavouring to reach him with its trunk. The hunter could easily have shot the brute while thus engaged, but was deterred by the fear of the huge carcase falling down on him, which would have been certain destruction. He escaped this danger, but soon afterwards, almost at the very same spot, he met the fatal rencontre. With one attendant Hottentot, Thackwray had engaged a herd of elephants, one of which he had wounded. The Hottentot, seeing it fall, supposed that it was dead, and approached it, when the animal rose and charged furiously. The lad threw himself upon the ground, and the infuriated beast passed without noticing him, tearing up the trees and scattering them in its blind rage; but, rushing into

* Livingstone's *South Africa*, p. 580.

a thicket where Thackwray was reloading his rifle, it caught sight of him, and in an instant hurled him to the earth, thrusting one of its tusks through his thigh. It then caught the wretched man in its trunk, and elevating him in the air, dashed him with great force upon the ground, kneeling and trampling upon him, and as it were kneading his crushed and flattened corpse into the dust, with an implacable fury. The remains, when discovered, presented a most appalling spectacle." * More recently, another ivory-hunter, named Wahlberg, met a fate almost precisely parallel.

Little inferior to the elephant in strength, though by no means approaching it in sagacity, the different species of African rhinoceros manifest an irascibility against man which waits not for provocation; or rather the sight of a man is itself a sufficient provocation to excite a paroxysm of restless fury. Steedman † mentions a Hottentot who had acquired a reputation as a bold elephant-hunter, who on one occasion had had his horse killed under him by a rhinoceros. Before he could raise his gun, the enormous beast rushed upon him, thrust its sharp-pointed horn into the horse's chest, and threw him bodily, rider and all, over its back. The savage animal then, as if satisfied, went off, without following up its victory, and before the Hottentot could recover himself sufficiently for an avenging shot.

Mr Oswell met with a similar rencontre. He was once stalking two of these beasts, and, as they came slowly to

* Steedman's *Wanderings*, p. 74.

† *Ibid.*, i., p. 69.



ENCOUNTER WITH A RHINOCEROS.

him, he, knowing that there is but little chance of hitting the small brain of this animal by a shot in the head, lay, expecting one of them to give his shoulder, till he was within a few yards. The hunter then thought that by making a rush to his side he might succeed in escaping; but the rhinoceros, too quick for that, turned upon him, and though he discharged his gun close to the animal's head he was tossed in the air. "My friend," adds Dr Livingstone, who gives the account, "was insensible for some time, and on recovering found large wounds on the thigh and body. I saw that on the former part, still open, and five inches long." The white species, though less savage than the black, is not always quite safe, for one, even after it was mortally wounded, attacked Mr Oswell's horse, and thrust the horn through to the saddle, tossing at the same time both horse and rider.*

The buffalo of the same regions is another animal of remarkable savageness of disposition, making an encounter with him a formidable affair. The eminent Swedish botanist, Thunberg, was collecting plants in a wood with two companions, when a buffalo bull rushed on the party with a deafening roar. The men just saved their lives by springing into the trees, while two horses were speedily pierced through by the powerful horns, and killed.

Captain Methuen has given us the following graphic account of an encounter with this most vicious herbivore, which the Cape colonists consider a more dangerous foe than the lion himself. The gallant captain and his party

* Livingstone's *Travels in Africa*, p. 611.

had discovered a herd of buffaloes, and had wounded some, but they had escaped to cover. He had climbed on the low boughs of a small *wait-a-bit* thorn, whence he struck another bull. The wounded animal "ran towards the report, his ears outstretched, his eyes moving in all directions, and his nose carried in a right line with the head, evidently bent on revenge;—he passed within thirty yards of me, and was lost in the bush. Descending from my frail perch, Frolic [the Hottentot attendant] again discovered this buffalo standing amongst some small thick bushes, which nearly hid him from view; his head was lowered, not a muscle of his body moved, and he was without doubt listening intently. We crept noiselessly to a bush, and I again fired. The huge brute ran forwards up the wind, fortunately not in our direction, and stood still again. No good screen being near, and his nose facing our way, prudence bade us wait patiently for a change in the state of affairs. Presently he lay gently down, and knowing that buffaloes are exceedingly cunning, and will adopt this plan merely to escape notice and entrap their persecutors, we drew near with great caution. I again fired through his shoulder, and concluding from his not attempting to rise, that he was helpless, we walked close up to him; and never can the scene which followed be erased from my memory. Turning his ponderous head round, his eye caught our figures; I fired the second barrel of my rifle behind his horns, but it did not reach the brain. His wounds gave him some difficulty in getting up, which just afforded Moneyppenny and myself time to

ensconce ourselves behind the slender shrubs that grew round the spot, while Frolic unwisely took to his heels. The buffalo saw him, and uttering a continued unearthly noise, between a grunt and a bellow, advanced at a pace at which these unwieldy creatures are rarely seen to run, unless stirred by revenge.

“Crashing through the low bushes, as if they were stubble, he passed me, but charged quite over Money-penny’s lurking-place, who aimed at him as he came on, and lodged the ball in the rocky mass of horn above his head: the buffalo was so near at the time of his firing, that the horn struck the gun-barrels at the next instant; but whether the noise and smoke confused the animal, or he was partially stunned by the bullet, he missed my friend, and continued his pursuit of Frolic.

“The Hottentot dodged the enraged and terrific-looking brute round the bushes, but through these slight obstacles he dashed with ease, and gained ground rapidly. Speechless, we watched the chase, and, in the awful moment, regardless of concealment, stood up, and saw the buffalo overtake his victim and knock him down. At this crisis, my friend fired his second barrel into the beast, which gave Frolic one or two blows with his fore-feet, and pushing his nose under, endeavoured to toss him; but the Hottentot, aware of this, lay with much presence of mind perfectly still.

“Money-penny now shouted to me, ‘The buffalo is coming;’ and, in darting round a bush, I stumbled on my rifle, cutting my knee very badly. This proved a false alarm;

and directly after the buffalo fell dead by Frolic, who then rose and limped towards us. He was much hurt, and a powder-flask which lay in his game-bag was stamped flat. The buffalo was too weak to use his full strength upon him, having probably exhausted all his remaining energy in the chase: otherwise the Hottentot would undoubtedly have been killed, since a man is safer under the paws of a wounded lion, than under the head of an infuriated buffalo. Never did I feel more grateful to a protecting Providence, than when this poor fellow came to us; for his escape without material injury was little short of miraculous.*

Who, that has looked on the meek, deer-like face of a kangaroo, would imagine that any danger could attend a combat with so gentle a creature? Yet it is well known that strong dogs are often killed by it, the kangaroo seizing and hugging the dog with its fore-paws, while with one kick of its muscular hind-leg, it rips up its antagonist, and tears out its bowels. Even to man there is peril, as appears from the following narrative. One of the hunter's dogs had been thus despatched, and he thus proceeds:—

“Exasperated by the irreparable loss of my poor dog, and excited by the then unusual scene before me, I hastened to revenge; nothing doubting, that, with one fell swoop of my formidable club, my enemy would be prostrate at my feet. Alas! the fates, and the still more remorseless white ants, frustrated my murderous intentions, and all but left me a victim to my strange and

* *Life in the Wilderness*, p. 173.

active foe. No sooner had the heavy blow I aimed descended on his head, than my weapon shivered into a thousand pieces,* and I found myself in the giant embrace of my antagonist, who was hugging me with rather too warm a demonstration of friendship, and ripping at me in a way by no means pleasant. My only remaining dog, too, now thoroughly exhausted by wounds and loss of blood, and apparently quite satisfied of her master's superiority, remained a mute and motionless spectator of the new and unequal contest.

“Notwithstanding my utmost efforts to release myself from the grasp of the brute, they were unavailing; and I found my strength gradually diminishing, whilst, at the same time, my sight was obscured by the blood which now flowed freely from a deep wound, extending from the back part of my head over the whole length of my face. I was, in fact, becoming an easy prey to the kangaroo, who continued to insert, with renewed vigour, his talons into my breast, luckily, however, protected by a loose coarse canvas frock, which, in colonial phrase, is called a ‘jumper,’ and but for which I must inevitably have shared the fate of poor Trip. As it was, I had almost given myself up for lost; my head was pressed, with surpassing strength, beneath my adversary's breast, and a faintness was gradually stealing over me, when I heard a long and heart-stirring shout. Was I to be saved? The thought gave me new life: with increased power I grappled and succeeded in casting from me my determined foe; and,

* The reader will find an explanation of this fact at page 106, *supra*.

seeing a tree close at hand, I made a desperate leap to procure its shelter and protection. I reached, and clung to it for support; when the sharp report of a rifle was heard in my ear, and the bark, about three inches above my head, was penetrated by the ball. Another shot followed, with a more sure aim, and the exasperated animal (now once more within reach of me) rolled heavily over on its side. On the parties nearing, I found them to be my brother and a friend, who had at first mistaken me for the kangaroo, and had very nearly consummated what had been so strangely begun. However, a miss is always as good as a mile; and having recruited my spirits and strength with a draught from the never-failing brandy-flask, and sung a requiem over poor old Trip, my companions shouldered the fallen foe, by means of a large stake, one carrying each end, while I followed with weak and tottering steps. You may imagine that the little beauty I ever had is not much improved by the wound on my face, which still remains, and ever will. I am now an older hand at kangaroo-hunting, and never venture to attack so formidable an antagonist with an ant-eaten club; my dogs, also, have grown too wary to rush heedlessly within reach of his deadly rips. We have killed many since, but rarely so fine a one as that which first tried our mettle on the plains of New Holland."*

The equatorial coast of Africa has recently yielded to European science a gigantic kind of man-like ape, which affords a curious confirmation of an old classic story. Somewhere about the sixth century before the Christian

* *Sporting Review*, ii., p. 343.

era, one Hanno is reported to have sailed from Carthage, through the Pillars of Hercules, on a voyage of exploration along the coast of Africa. In the record of this voyage there occurs the following passage :—“ Passing the Streams of Fire, we came to a bay called the Horn of the South. In the recess there was an island like the first, having a lake, and in this there was another island full of wild men. But much the greater part of them were women, with hairy bodies, whom the interpreters called ‘Gorillas.’ But pursuing them, we were not able to take the men ; they all escaped, being able to climb the precipices ; and defended themselves with pieces of rock. But three women, who bit and scratched those who led them, were not willing to follow. However, having killed them, we flayed them, and conveyed the skins to Carthage ; for we did not sail any further, as provisions began to fail.”*

The “wild men” of the ancient navigator were doubtless identical with the great anthropoid ape lately re-discovered, to which, in allusion to the old story, the name of Gorilla has been given. The region in question is a richly wooded country, extending about a thousand miles along the coast from the Gulf of Guinea southward ; and as the gorilla is not found beyond these limits, so we may pretty conclusively infer that the extreme point of Hanno was somewhere in this region.

This great ape makes the nearest approach of any brute-animal to the human form ; it is fully equal to man in

* *Periplus.*