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Hunting the Hippo

Except once or twice in the Zoo, I never had seen a hippopotamus, and I was most anxious, before I left the Congo, to meet one. I wanted to look at him when he was free, and his own master, without iron bars or keepers; when he believed he was quite alone, and was enjoying his bath in peace and confidence. I also wanted to shoot him, and to hang in my ancestral halls his enormous head with the great jaws open and the inside of them painted pink and the small tusks hungrily protruding. I had this desire, in spite of the fact that for every hippo except the particular one whose head I coveted, I entertained the utmost good feeling.

As a lad, among other beasts the hippopotamus had appealed to my imagination. Collectively, I had always looked upon them as most charming people. They come of an ancient family. Two thousand four hundred years ago they were mentioned by Herodotus. And Herodotus to the animal kingdom is what Domesday Book is to the landed gentry. To exist beautifully for twenty-four hundred years without a single mésalliance, without having once stooped to trade, is certainly a strong title to nobility. Other animals by contact with man have become degraded. The lion, the "King of Beasts," now rides a bicycle, and growls, as previously rehearsed, at the young woman in spangles, of whom he is secretly afraid. And the elephant, the monarch of the jungle, and of a family as ancient and noble as that of the hippopotamus, the monarch of the river, has become a beast of burden and works for his living. You can see him in Phoenix Park dragging a road-roller, in Siam and India carrying logs, and at Coney Island he bends the knee to little girls from Brooklyn. The royal proboscis, that once uprooted trees, now begs for peanuts.

But, you never see a hippopotamus chained to a road-roller, or riding a bicycle. He is still the gentleman, the man of elegant leisure, the aristocrat of aristocrats, harming no one, and, in his ancestral river, living the simple life.

And yet, I sought to kill him. At least, one of him, but only one. And, that I did not kill even one, while a bitter disappointment, is still a source of satisfaction.

In the Congo River we saw only two hippos, and both of them were dead. They had been shot from a steamer. If the hippo is killed in the water, it is impossible to recover the body at once. It sinks and does not rise, some say, for an hour, others say for seven hours. As in an hour the current may have carried the body four miles below where it sank, the steamer does not wait, and the destruction of the big beast is simple murder. There should be a law in the Congo to prevent their destruction, and, no doubt, if the State thought it could make a few francs out of protecting the hippo, as it makes many million francs by preserving the elephant, which it does for the ivory, such a law would exist. We soon saw many hippos, but although we could not persuade the only other passenger not to fire at them, there are a few hippos still alive in the Congo. For, the only time the Captain and I were positive he hit anything, was when he fired over our heads and blew off the roof of the bridge.

When first we saw the two dead hippos, one of them was turning and twisting so violently that we thought he was alive. But, as we drew near, we saw the strange convulsions were due to two enormous and ugly crocodiles, who were fiercely pulling at the body. Crocodiles being man-eaters, we had no feelings about shooting them, either in the water or up a tree; and I hope we hit them. In any event, after we fired the body drifted on in peace.

On my return trip, going with the stream, when the boat covers about four times the distance she makes when steaming against it, I saw many hippos. In one day I counted sixty-nine. But on our way up the Congo, until we turned into the Kasai River, we saw none.

So, on the first night we camped in the Kasai I had begun to think I never would see one, and I went ashore both skeptical and discouraged. We had stopped, not at a wood post, but at a place on the river's bank previously untouched by man, where there was a stretch of beach, and then a higher level with trees and tall grasses. Driven deep in this beach were the footprints of a large elephant. They looked as though some one had amused himself by sinking a bucket in the mud, and then pulling it out. For sixty yards I followed the holes and finally lost them in a confusion of other tracks. The place had been so trampled upon that it was beaten into a basin. It looked as though every animal in the Kasai had met there to hold a dance. There were the deep imprints of the hippos and the round foot of the elephant, with the marks of the big toes showing as clearly as though they had been scooped out of the mud with a trowel, the hoofs of buffalo as large as the shoe of a cart horse, and the arrow-like marks of the antelope, some in dainty little Vs, others measuring three inches across, and three inches from the base to the point. They came from every direction, down the bank and out of the river; and crossed and recrossed, and beneath the fresh prints that had been made that morning at sunrise, were those of days before rising up sharply out of the sun-dried clay, like bas-reliefs in stucco.

I had gone ashore in a state of mind so skeptical that I was as surprised as Crusoe at the sight of footprints. It was as though the boy who did not believe in fairies suddenly stumbled upon them sliding down the moonbeams. One felt distinctly apologetic—as though uninvited he had pushed himself into a family gathering. At the same time there was the excitement of meeting in their own homes the strange peoples I had seen only in the springtime, when the circus comes to New York, in the basement of Madison Square Garden, where they are our pitiful prisoners, bruising their shoulders against bars. Here they were monarchs of all they surveyed. I was the intruder; and, looking down at the marks of the great paws and delicate hoofs, I felt as much out of place as would a grizzly bear in a Fifth Avenue club. And I behaved much as would the grizzly bear. I rushed back for my rifle intent on killing something.

The sun had just set; the moon was shining faintly: it was the moment the beasts of the jungle came to the river to drink. Anfossi, although he had spent three years in the Congo and had three years' contract still to work out, was as determined to kill something as was the tenderfoot from New York.

Sixty yards from the stern of the *Deliverance* was the basin I had discovered; at an equal distance from her bow, a stream plunged into the river. Anfossi argued the hippos would prefer to drink the clear water of the stream, to the muddy water of the basin, and elected to watch at the stream. I carried a deck chair to the edge of my basin and placed it in the shadow of the trees. Anfossi went into our cabin for his rifle. At that exact moment a hippopotamus climbed leisurely out of the river and plunged into the stream. One of the soldiers on shore saw him and rushed for the boat. Anfossi sent my boy on the jump for me and, like a gentleman, waited until I had raced the sixty yards. But when we reached the stream there was nothing visible but the trampled grass and great holes in the mud and near us in the misty moonlight river something that puffed and

blew slowly and luxuriously, as would any fat gentleman who had been forced to run for it. Had I followed Anfossi's judgment and gone along the bank sixty yards ahead, instead of sixty yards astern of the *Deliverance*, at the exact moment at which I sank into my deck chair, the hippo would have emerged at my feet. It is even betting as to which of us would have been the more scared.

The next day, and for days after, we saw nothing but hippos. We saw them floating singly and in family groups, with generally four or five cows to one bull, and sometimes in front a baby hippo no larger than a calf, which the mother with her great bulk would push against the swift current, as you see a tugboat in the lee of a great liner. Once, what I thought was a spit of rocks suddenly tumbled apart and became twenty hippos, piled more or less on top of each other. During that one day, as they floated with the current, enjoying their afternoon's nap, we saw thirty-four. They impressed me as the most idle, and, therefore, the most aristocratic of animals. They toil not, neither do they spin; they had nothing to do but float in the warm water and the bright sunshine; their only effort was to open their enormous jaws and yawn luxuriously, in the pure content of living, in absolute boredom. They reminded you only of fat gouty old gentlemen, puffing and blowing in the pool at the Warm Springs.

The next chance we had at one of them on shore came on our first evening in the Kasai just before sunset. Captain Jensen was steering for a flat island of sand and grass where he meant to tie up for the night. About fifty yards from the spot for which we were making, was the only tree on the island, and under it with his back to us, and leisurely eating the leaves of the lower branches, exactly as though he were waiting for us by appointment, was a big gray hippo. His back being toward us, we could not aim at his head, and he could not see us. But the *Deliverance* is not noiseless, and, hearing the paddle-wheel, the hippo turned, saw us, and bolted for the river. The hippopotamus is as much at home in the water as the seal. To get to the water, if he is surprised out of it, and to get under it, if he is alarmed while in it, is instinct. If he does venture ashore, he goes only a few rods from the bank and then only to forage. His home is the river, and he rushes to bury himself in it as naturally as the squirrel makes for a tree. This particular hippo ran for the river as fast as a horse coming at a slow trot. He was a very badly scared hippo. His head was high in the air, his fat sides were shaking, and the one little eye turned toward us was filled with concern. Behind him the yellow sun was setting into the lagoons. On the flat stretch of sand he was the only object, and against the horizon loomed as large as a freight car. That must be why we both missed him. I tried to explain that the reason I missed him was that, never before having seen so large an animal running for his life, I could not watch him do it and look at the gun sights. No one believed that was why I missed him. I did not believe it myself. In any event neither of us hit his head, and he plunged down the bank to freedom, carrying most of the bank with him. But, while we still were violently blaming each other, at about two hundred yards below the boat, he again waddled out of the river and waded knee deep up the little stream. Keeping the bunches of grass between us, I ran up the beach, aimed at his eye and this time hit him fairly enough. With a snort he rose high in the air, and so, for an instant, balanced his enormous bulk. The action was like that of a horse that rears on his hind legs, when he is whipped over the nose. And apparently my bullet hurt him no more than the whip the horse, for he dropped heavily to all fours, and again disappeared into the muddy river. Our disappointment and chagrin were intense, and at once Anfossi and I organized a hunt for that evening. To encourage us, while we were sitting on the bridge making a hasty dinner, another hippopotamus had the impertinence to rise, blowing like a whale, not ten feet from where we sat. We could

have thrown our tin cups and hit him; but he was in the water, and now we were seeking only those on land.

Two years ago when the atrocities along the Kasai made the natives fear the white man and the white man fear the natives, each of the river boats was furnished with a stand of Albini rifles. Three of the black soldiers, who were keen sportsmen, were served with these muskets, and as soon as the moon rose, the soldiers and Anfossi, my black boy, with an extra gun, and I set forth to clear the island of hippos.

To the stranger it was a most curious hunt. The island was perfectly flat and bare, and the river had eaten into it and overflowed it with tiny rivulets and deep, swift-running streams. Into these rivulets and streams the soldiers plunged, one in front, feeling the depth of the water with a sounding rod, and as he led we followed. The black men made a splendid picture. They were naked but for breech-cloths, and the moonlight flashed on their wet skins and upon the polished barrels of the muskets. But, as a sporting proposition, as far as I could see, we had taken on the hippopotamus at his own game. We were supposed to be on an island, but the water was up to our belts and running at five miles an hour. I could not understand why we had not openly and aboveboard walked into the river. Wading waist high in the water with a salmon rod I could understand, but not swimming around in a river with a gun. The force of the shallowest stream was the force of the great river behind it, and wherever you put your foot, the current, on its race to the sea, annoyed at the impediment, washed the sand from under the sole of your foot and tugged at your knees and ankles. To add to the interest the three soldiers held their muskets at full cock, and as they staggered for a footing each pointed his gun at me. There also was a strange fish about the size of an English sole that sprang out of the water and hurled himself through space. Each had a white belly, and as they skimmed past us in the moonlight it was as though some one was throwing dinner plates. After we had swum the length of the English Channel, we returned to the boat. As to that midnight hunt I am still uncertain as to whether we were hunting the hippos or the hippos were hunting us.

The next morning we had our third and last chance at a hippo.

It is distinctly a hard-luck story. We had just gone on the bridge for breakfast when we saw him walking slowly from us along an island of white sand as flat as your hand, and on which he loomed large as a haystack. Captain Jensen was a true sportsman. He jerked the bell to the engine-room, and at full speed the *Deliverance* raced for the shore. The hippo heard us, and, like a baseball player caught off base, tried to get back to the river. Captain Jensen danced on the deck plates:

"Shoot it! shoot it!" he yelled, "Gotfurdamn! shoot it!" When Anfossi and I fired, the *Deliverance* was a hundred yards from the hippo, and the hippo was not five feet from the bank. In another instant, he would have been over it and safe. But when we fired, he went down as suddenly as though a safe had dropped on him. Except that he raised his head, and rolled it from side to side, he remained perfectly still. From his actions, or lack of actions, it looked as though one of the bullets had broken his back; and when the blacks saw he could not move they leaped and danced and shrieked. To them the death of the big beast promised much chop.

But Captain Jensen was not so confident. "Shoot it," he continued to shout, "we lose him yet! Gotfurdamn! shoot it!"

My gun was an American magazine rifle, holding five cartridges. We now were very near the hippo, and I shot him in the head twice, and, once, when he opened them, in the jaws. At each shot his head would jerk with a quick toss of pain, and at the sight the blacks screamed with delight that was primitively savage. After the last shot, when Captain Jensen had brought the

Deliverance broadside to the bank, the hippo ceased to move. The boat had not reached the shore before the boys with the steel hawser were in the water; the gangplank was run out, and the black soldiers and wood boys, with their knives, were dancing about the hippo and hacking at his tail. Their idea was to make him the more quickly bleed to death. I ran to the cabin for more cartridges. It seemed an absurd precaution. I was as sure I had the head of that hippo as I was sure that my own was still on my neck. My only difficulty was whether to hang the head in the front hall or in the dining-room. It might be rather too large for the dining-room. That was all that troubled me. After three minutes, when I was back on deck, the hippo still lay immovable. Certainly twenty men were standing about him; three were sawing off his tail, and the women were chanting triumphantly a song they used to sing in the days when the men were allowed to hunt, and had returned successful with food.

On the bridge was Anfossi with his camera. Before the men had surrounded the hippo he had had time to snap one picture of it. I had just started after my camera, when from the blacks there was a yell of alarm, of rage, and amazement. The hippo had opened his eyes and raised his head. I shoved the boys out of the way, and, putting the gun close to his head, fired pointblank. I wanted to put him out of pain. I need not have distressed myself. The bullet affected him no more than a quinine pill. What seemed chiefly to concern him, what apparently had brought him back to life, was the hacking at his tail. That was an indignity he could not brook.

His expression, and he had a perfectly human expression, was one of extreme annoyance and of some slight alarm, as though he were muttering: "This is no place for *me*," and, without more ado, he began to roll toward the river. Without killing some one, I could not again use the rifle. The boys were close upon him, prying him back with the gangplank, beating him with sticks of firewood, trying to rope him with the steel hawser. On the bridge Captain Jensen and Anfossi were giving orders in Danish and Italian, and on the bank I swore in American. Everybody shoved and pushed and beat at the great bulk, and the great bulk rolled steadily on. We might as well have tried to budge the Fifth Avenue Hotel. He reached the bank, he crushed it beneath him, and, like a suspension bridge, splashed into the water. Even then, we who watched him thought he would stick fast between the boat and the bank, that the hawser would hold him. But he sank like a submarine, and we stood gaping at the muddy water and saw him no more. When I recovered from my first rage I was glad he was still alive to float in the sun and puff and blow and open his great jaws in a luxurious yawn. I could imagine his joining his friends after his meeting with us, and remarking in reference to our bullets: "I find the mosquitoes are quite bad this morning."

With this chapter is published the photograph Anfossi took, from the deck of the steamer, of our hippo—the hippo that was too stupid to know when he was dead. It is not a good photograph, but of our hippo it is all we have to show. I am still undecided whether to hang it in the hall or the dining-room.

The days I spent on my trip up the river were of delightful sameness, sunshine by day, with the great panorama drifting past, and quiet nights of moonlight. For diversion, there were many hippos, crocodiles, and monkeys, and, though we saw only their tracks and heard them only in the jungle, great elephants. And innumerable strange birds—egrets, eagles, gray parrots, crimson cranes, and giant flamingoes—as tall as a man and from tip to tip measuring eight feet.

Each day the program was the same. The arrival at the wood post, where we were given only excuses and no wood, and where once or twice we unloaded blue cloth and bags of salt, which is the currency of the Upper Congo, and the halt for hours to cut wood in the forest.

Once we stopped at a mission and noted the contrast it made with the bare, unkempt posts of the State. It was the Catholic mission at Wombali, and it was a beauty spot of flowers, thatched houses, grass, and vegetables. There was a brickyard, and schools, and sewing-machines, and the blacks, instead of scowling at us, nodded and smiled and looked happy and contented. The Father was a great red-bearded giant, who seemed to have still stored up in him all the energy of the North. While the steamer was unloaded he raced me over the vegetable garden and showed me his farm. I had seen other of the Catholic Missions, and I spoke of how well they looked, of the signs they gave of hard work, and of consideration for the blacks.

"I am not of that Order," the Father said gravely. He was speaking in English, and added, as though he expected some one to resent it: "We are Jesuits." No one resented it, and he added: "We have our Order in your country. Do you know Fordham College?"

Did I know it? If you are trying to find our farm, the automobile book tells you to leave Fordham College on your left after Jerome Avenue.

"Of course, I know it," I said. "They have one of the best baseball nines near New York; they play the Giants every spring."

The Reverend Father started.

"They play with Giants!" he gasped.

I did not know how to say "baseball nines" in French, but at least he was assured that whatever it was, it was one of the best near New York.

Then Captain Jensen's little black boy ran up to tell me the steamer was waiting, and began in Bangalese to beg something of the Father. The priest smiled and left us, returning with a rosary and crucifix, which the boy hung round his neck, and then knelt, and the red-bearded Father laid his fingers on the boy's kinky head. He was a very happy boy over his new possession, and it was much coveted by all the others. One of the black mammies, to ward off evil from the little naked baby at her breast, offered an arm's length of blue cloth for "the White Man's fetish."

My voyage up the Kasai ended at Dima, the headquarters of the Kasai Concession. I had been told that at Dima I would find a rubber plantation, and I had gone there to see it. I found that the plantation was four days distant, and that the boat for the plantation did not start for six days. I also had been told by the English missionaries at Dima, that I would find an American mission. When I reached Dima I learned that the American mission was at a station further up the river, which could not be reached sooner than a month. That is the sort of information upon which in the Congo one is forced to regulate his movements.

As there was at Dima neither mission nor plantation, and as the only boat that would leave it in ten days was departing the next morning, I remained there only one night. It was a place cut out of the jungle, two hundred yards square, and of all stations I saw in the Congo, the best managed. It is the repair shop for the steamers belonging to the Kasai Concession, as well as the headquarters of the company and the residence of the director, M. Dryepoint. He and Van Damme seemed to be the most popular officials in the Congo. M. Dryepoint was up the river, so I did not meet him, but I was most courteously and hospitably entertained by M. Fumière. He gave me a whole house to myself, and personally showed me over his small kingdom. All the houses were of brick, and the paths and roads were covered with gravel and lined with flowers.

Nothing in the Congo is more curious than this pretty town of suburban villas and orderly machine shops; with the muddy river for a street and the impenetrable jungle for a back yard. The home of the director at Dima is the proud boast of the entire Congo. And all they say of it is true. It did have a billiard table and ice, and a piano, and M. Fumière invited me to join his

friends at an excellent dinner. In furnishing this celebrated house, the idea had apparently been to place in it the things one would least expect to find in the jungle, or, without wishing to be ungracious, anywhere. So, although there are no women at Dima, there are great mirrors in brass frames, chandeliers of glass with festoons and pendants of glass, metal lamps with shades of every color, painted plaster statuettes and carved silk-covered chairs. In the red glow of the lamps, surrounded by these Belgian atrocities, M. Fumière sat down to the pianola. The heat of Africa filled the room; on one side we could have touched the jungle, on the other in the river the hippopotamus puffed and snorted. M. Fumière pulled out the stops, and upon the heat and silence of the night, floated the "Evening Star," Mascagni's "Intermezzo," and "Chin-chin Chinaman."

Next morning I left for Leopoldville in a boat much larger than the *Deliverance*, but with none of her cheer or good-fellowship. This boat was run by the black wife of the captain. Trailing her velvet gown, and cleaning her teeth with a stick of wood, she penetrated to every part of the steamer, making discipline impossible and driving the crew out of control.

I was glad to escape at Kinshasa to the clean and homelike bungalow and beautiful gardens of the only Englishman still in the employ of the State, Mr. Cuthbert Malet, who gave me hospitably of his scanty store of "Scotch," and, what was even more of a sacrifice, of his precious handful of eggs. A week later I was again in Boma, waiting for the *Nigeria* to take me back to Liverpool.

Before returning to the West Coast and leaving the subject of the Congo, I wish to testify to what seemed to me the enormously important work that is being done by the missionaries. I am not always an admirer of the missionary. Some of those one meets in China and Japan seem to be taking much more interest in their own bodies than in the souls of others. But, in the Congo, almost the only people who are working in behalf of the natives are those attached to the missions. Because they bear witness against Leopold, much is said by his hired men and press agents against them. But they are deserving of great praise. Some of them are narrow and bigoted, and one could wish they were much more tolerant of their white brothers in exile, but compared with the good they do, these faults count for nothing. It is due to them that Europe and the United States know the truth about the Congo. They were the first to bear witness, and the hazardous work they still are doing for their fellow men is honest, practical Christianity.