

HUNTING THE ELEPHANT IN AFRICA

AND OTHER RECOLLECTIONS OF
THIRTEEN YEARS' WANDERINGS

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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FOREWORD

FOR three-quarters of a century there have been capital books written on big game hunting in Africa, — one of the best being the earliest, that by Captain Cornwallis Harris. Of course the only type of big game hunter who can write a book really worth reading is the hunter who is also at least to a certain extent an out-of-doors naturalist. In addition, he should thoroughly enjoy the strange desolate scenery of the African wilderness, and have a sympathetic understanding of the wild men who accompany him on most of his hunts. More and more of late years the best type of big game hunter has tended to lay stress on the natural history and ethnology of the regions into which he has penetrated, and to make his book less and less a catalogue of mere slaughter.

Captain Stigand is one of the most noted of recent African big game hunters and explorers, and he is also a field naturalist of unusual powers. His studies of the tracks of animals have been almost unique. The only studies approaching them are those about the tracks of the game of continental Europe, in the German hunting books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He has the keenest appreciation of the vivid and extraordinary beauty of the teeming African wild life, and has

made close first-hand observations of the life histories of very many species of big game. In the past there have been many big game hunters who wrote overmuch of their own exploits, so that it becomes wearisome to read the endless lists of the animals that they killed. With Captain Stigand our quarrel is the direct reverse. He tells too little of his own achievements. He has, as I can myself testify, the reputation among all first-class African hunters of being himself one of the foremost. He is equally fond of venturing into unknown regions and of the chase of dangerous game, and is an adept in the especially difficult art of wood and bush tracking and stalking. Three times he has been nearly killed by his quarry: once by a rhinoceros, once by a lion, and once by an elephant. It is unfortunate that he will not give us more minute and extended accounts of his own personal adventures — one of the excellent features of the books of that other great African hunter Selous is that he does give such extended accounts of his personal experiences. But it is as difficult to get Captain Stigand to tell what he has himself done as it was to get General Grant to talk about his battles. After this manuscript was in my hands, Captain Stigand was nearly killed by an elephant. It was in the Lado, and he was taken down to Khartoum; but his letters to his friends at home touched so lightly on the subject that they had to obtain all real information from outside sources.

However, Captain Stigand more than makes up for this reticence about himself by the keenness and wide range of his observations about the life histories of the big game, and by his sympathetic and understanding appreciation of his native allies and companions. Modern biologists have grown to realize the prime scientific value of such first-hand field observations. There are but a limited number of men who combine the opportunity and the power to make these observations about big game. In this limited number Captain Stigand stands high.

Like Mr. Selous, Captain Stigand has made much field study of the subject of protective coloration as applied to big game. Scientific men are no more immune from hysteria and suggestion than other mortals, and every now and then there arises among them some fad which for quite a time carries even sane men off their feet. This has been the case with the latter-day development of the theories of protective coloration and of warning and recognition marks — but especially the first. Because some animals are undoubtedly protectively colored and take advantage of their coloration and are served by it, a number of naturalists have carried the theory to fantastic extremes. They have applied it where it does not exist at all, and have endeavored to extend it to a degree that has tended to make the whole theory ridiculous. Most good observers are now agreed that in the higher vertebrates, that

is, in mammals and birds, the coloration of probably the majority of the species has little or nothing to do with any protective or concealing quality. There are some hundreds of species which we can say with certainty are protectively colored; there are a great number which we can say with certainty are not protectively colored. As regards others we are still in doubt. There have not been sufficiently extensive observations made of wild animals under natural conditions to enable us to speak with certainty as to just the part played by protective coloration among large numbers of the smaller mammals and birds. We are, however, able to speak with certainty as regards most big birds and especially most big mammals.

Captain Stigand has shown that as regards most of the big game of Africa protective coloration plays not even the smallest part in concealing them from their foes. This is especially true of the animals of the plains, the giraffe, zebra, hartebeest, oryx, eland, roan and sable antelope, wildebeest, topi, gazelle, and the like. As to these animals we have a sufficient number of first-hand observations to warrant us in saying that the extreme theories of Professor Poulton and the Messrs. Thayer have no basis whatever in fact. It is much to be regretted that there are not more scientific writers with the clear scientific judgment displayed by Messrs. DeWar and Finn in their "Making of Species."

The big game animals of the plains do not seek to

clude observation and are not helped by their color in the struggle for life. It is astounding that some of the closet theorists who have written on this matter should have failed to understand what the conditions actually are. For example, it has been seriously asserted that zebras, oryx, and the various plains antelope are protected by their colors at their drinking places. No such statement would ever have been made by any man who had ever seen these animals approach a drinking place. They make no attempt whatever to hide, and if they pay attention to cover at all, it is merely to avoid it, because it may hold their great enemy, the lion. They often come in great herds to drink. They are in motion of course — otherwise they could not get down to drink — and anything in motion at once catches the eye of any beast hunter. They move forward, now at a walk, now at a trot; halt, wheel, and run backwards; and often do not come down to drink until there have been half a dozen such false alarms. Occasionally, especially if they suspect the presence of a foe, they make their final rush at furious speed, gulp the water hastily down, and rush off again. The coloring of the different species is infinitely varied, and this although they are living under precisely similar conditions. It is varied in some species even between the male and female, who live in the same herd. Yet those species like eland and roan antelope, whose general tint does often shade into the landscape, make no more effort to

hide than such animals as the sable and the wildebeest, whose coloration is advertising in the highest degree. There is no reason to suppose that the species of one type are helped or the species of the other type harmed by their coloration. The coloration of the zebra, giraffe, and of many of the antelopes so far as it has any effect is of a revealing or advertising quality. Of course there are circumstances under which any type of coloration, no matter of what conceivable kind, is concealing; but with most of the African big game the coloration must reveal them much more often than it conceals them; nevertheless the circumstances of their lives are such that neither the revealing nor the concealing quality of the different coloration patterns has any effect upon the life of the species.

Mr. Wallace does not go to the extremes of the ultra concealing coloration men. But in a recent volume he has strained the recognition mark theory to an impossible point by claiming that the horns of certain African antelopes are useful as such recognition marks. He gives several pictures of these antelopes. In most of the species thus pictured only the adult males have the horns which he describes, and it can hardly be seriously contended that there has been a development of "recognition" marks to the exclusion of all of the animals of one sex and of half of the animals of another, including all the young. Among the species Mr. Wallace enumerates as having horns which serve as

recognition marks are hartebeests. Now the hartebeests have relatively small and inconspicuous horns, whereas their bodily shape is unmistakable. They live under conditions which make it certain that they must see one another in the immense majority of cases at distances such that their shape would identify them and their horns would not, and in the remaining cases they would be so near that they could not fail to identify one another even if they were absolutely hornless.

When leaders of scientific thought develop theories of this kind it is natural that many good observers should be unconsciously influenced by the opinions of those to whom they had been trained to look up as authorities. In consequence, even good outdoors men have committed themselves to statements on this subject which will not stand investigation. It is one of the merits of Captain Stigand that he is among the observers who have set forth the facts so clearly as regards big game that there is now no excuse for further mistakes or misstatements in the matter.

In short, Captain Stigand has written a book which ought to appeal to every believer in vigor and hardihood, to every lover of wilderness adventure, and to every man who values at their proper worth the observations of an excellent field naturalist.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.