

TRACKING BUFFALOES IN AFRICA

By F. R. N. Findlay

OF the many and varied animals which once roamed in countless herds and troops over the plains and forests, plateaus and swamps of Africa, and to-day are but sparsely represented in the remotest and, to man, almost inaccessible corners of the continent, I think undoubtedly the one that affords the pedestrian hunter the best sport in its pursuit is the buffalo (*Boscapher typicus*). Its natural craftiness and strength, and when wounded, its fierce vindictiveness, clearly mark it as an animal worthy of the sportsman's best effort, and justifies its being placed at the head of the list of African sporting animals. The sportsman will find his skill, stamina and nerve severely taxed in the tracking and stalking of an animal so keen of scent and so fleet of foot as the buffalo. Its eyes and ears are ever on the alert, and to great strength and power to inflict injury are superadded great courage and pluck and Reynard's cunning.

The present habitat of the buffalo in South East Africa is hedged in by, and pitted with, numberless obstacles and hindrances to success, to man's movement, to good health, and safety. Swamps—the principal home of the mosquito and the hotbed of malarial fever—almost impenetrable masses of reeds, and grass and dense forest recesses of thorny scrub, and the dreaded tsetse fly, have to be faced and overcome. The risks and dangers of buffalo hunting can be greatly minimized by studiously omitting to follow up the wounded animals; but sportsmen will always discountenance such a course, as well from humane considerations as by reason of the increased hazard that has to be run. Indeed, he is no keen sportsman who, well armed and supported by his trusted *camarade de chasse*, does not follow up the blood spoor of the stricken buffalo, and stick to it persistently through swamp, reeds and dense bush in the hope that he may come up with his wounded quarry. And, if he does, he may reckon on sport that will make every nerve and fiber in his body tingle with

pleasure, that is, if he and his friend succeed in avoiding and stopping the sudden and fierce charges of their antagonist; for once the wounded buffalo is brought to bay the chances are it becomes a fight on sight, when the only way to stop the charging is to kill the buffalo. Out of every ten buffaloes which have been severely wounded and have taken to dense cover, nine will elect to fight, and will charge, if the sportsman persistently follows them; some will charge at once on being wounded and followed up; others again retreat several times upon the nearer approach of the sportsman and then dash suddenly from the dark shade of an overhanging bush or other obscure position, or unexpected ambush, in a last wild charge and determined attack.

I do not for a moment advocate reckless following up of a wounded buffalo, especially when the hunter is alone or accompanied only by a native, which amounts practically to the same thing; on the contrary I think no man can be too careful in dealing with this crafty animal. Personally I am, and have resolved always to be, very cautious in pursuit of this sport; and I would impress on those who intend to try their luck that the sooner they realize the dangers of their pursuit, the better for them. The majority of accidents are, in a great measure, due to the foolhardy manner in which the hunter has rushed after the wounded buffalo as if it were a winged "keewit.*"

It is true that by carefully adapting one's weapons and mode of attack to suit the particular nature and character of the quarry, good sport can be had in the attack and pursuit of a great many animals. The wart hog, if he did not find a convenient bear hole to get into, or other fit hole such as everywhere dots the African veld, would be a formidable animal to meet with the short or "jobbing" spear; and even the bushpig affords excellent sport, as Mr. F. V. Kirby has pointed out in his book "In Haunts of Wild Game," if you attack it with an "ikempi" or, Zulu its peculiar cry, just as the English bird is

*The wreathed plover, called "Keewit" from named "Peewit."

stabbing assegai as it retreats before the noisy beaters. But these animals, and even the lion, cannot be compared with the African buffalo as a sporting animal. The nocturnal habits of the lion, and its disposition to retire to dense cover during the day, and the absence of a trackable trail in a grass country by which the hunter can follow it to its lair, all militate against its pursuit, in comparison with that of the buffalo. It is true that by watching at a "kill" by night some grand sport and excitement may be had with lions and leopards, and it must not for a moment be supposed that I wish to raise my voice with those who some years ago hurled all manner of

in places by bush, such as exists in Portuguese Africa, between the Zambesi and Pungwe rivers, the lion is seldom to be encountered by day, and thus, in my mind, only ranks second to the buffalo as a sporting animal. Mr. F. J. Jackson, in his article on the buffalo in the "Great and Small Game of Africa," says, "Personally, I consider it the pluckiest, and when wounded, the most cunning and savage of all game that is considered 'dangerous.'"

To give some idea of the excitement of buffalo shooting and the tracking of wounded animals, I may here give an account of a day's shooting in Portuguese East Africa. The warm, penetrating rays of the sun were struggling to pierce the dense mist which, at eight o'clock still enshrouded the whole country, when B. and I, accompanied by half a dozen "boys," quitted our camp near old Narugwe's kraal, on the Pungwe stream, one August morning, and set out for the Madingue-dingue River, in the hope of finding buffaloes in the tract of country encircled by that river and the Upper Pungwe, and known as Monongvia Island.

An hour's quick walking brought us to the Madingue-dingue River, on the opposite bank of which we could see the conical-shaped roofs of some of the huts of Tambara's kraal snugly ensconced beyond the dark shade that was thrown by two enormous trees growing on the river bank, with stems standing out, as it were, like giant sentinels.

Securing the services of two young men at this kraal, and undertaking to pay them a *queinta** each if they brought us within sight of buffaloes, we followed our guides. For the

first ten minutes we proceeded along a pathway, through dense reeds about eight feet high, on the right bank of the stream, until another kraal was reached. Then we struck away at right angles. One of our guides was a short, thickset, light-



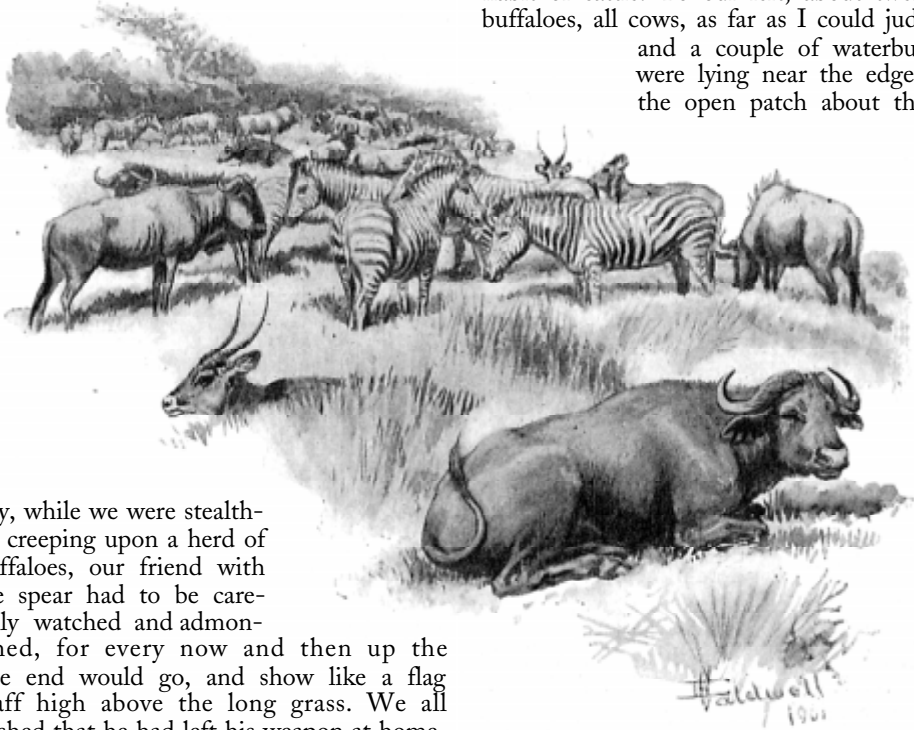
"THE ODDS WERE ALL IN FAVOR OF THE BUFFALO."

depreciative remarks at the lion and his pluck; on the contrary, I have a most profound respect and admiration for his strength, pluck, beauty, fierceness, and even his voice; but his habits are such that in a country overgrown by grass and covered

*A Portuguese 500 reis silver piece, about the size of half-a-crown and equivalent to about 36 cents in American money.

skinned native, with a baboon face, but he was a demon for getting over swampy ground; the other was tall, good looking, of a deeper black, and might have passed for a Zulu. The former carried an extraordinary hippo spear; it had a moderately sized blade, but the shaft was many feet long, I would not like to say how many—in fact, it was a young tree stem, and was several inches in diameter—about the size of a good-sized boat oar. Later in the

virgin tract of country, they were taking a siesta in an open, grassy spot, devoid of all reeds and cover. Leaving our boys, B. and I crawled forward, advancing from cover to cover until a short one hundred and fifty yards separated us from the nearest bull, a grand old patriarchal fellow with a pair of exceedingly massive, yet short and apparently well-worn horns. He was lying down in the middle of the open patch of short grass, his legs doubled under him, as is the habit of cattle. To our left, about twenty buffaloes, all cows, as far as I could judge, and a couple of waterbuck, were lying near the edge of the open patch about three



day, while we were stealthily creeping upon a herd of buffaloes, our friend with the spear had to be carefully watched and admonished, for every now and then up the one end would go, and show like a flag staff high above the long grass. We all wished that he had left his weapon at home, and after a time, I believe, he had his regrets. A grass swamp, with from two, to three feet of water, was crossed after twenty minutes floundering about amongst the entwining duckweed, and then we out the fresh spoor and droppings of a single buffalo. At last the welcome word, *inyati!* (buffalo!), fell from one of our boys, who had climbed the topmost branches of a leafless dangwe tree. The magic word gave us renewed vigor and keenness, and we silently tightened our grip on the rifles, and advanced in the direction which the wind compelled us to take to avoid being scented by the game. The grass, from three to four feet high, afforded us ample cover until we got within three hundred yards of the herd. Being but rarely disturbed in this

"DURING THE HEAT OF THE DAY."

hundred yards distant. To our right, some two hundred paces away, a dozen cows and, I should say, twenty blue wildebeests and as many zebra and waterbuck, lay or stood about, and beyond the old bull were a motley troop of buffaloes, wildebeests, zebras and waterbuck. It was a grand sight to see these animals together, fearlessly lying in the open during the heat of the day; it was especially so to us, realizing, as we did, the practical extermination which seems to await these sadly reduced herds, the remnant of the almost countless hordes that roamed undisturbed before the terrible ravages of the rinderpest in 1897 and 1898 laid thousands low forever.

As I had lately been having some successful sport with buffaloes, it was decided that B. should fire the first shot at the bull lying broadside on; so, taking a steady aim with his 450 express, he touched the trigger. The bullet "clapped" loudly, and the peaceful scene of a moment before was rudely broken. On receiving the shot, the bull jumped up and was off. Feeling sure that B. had given it a fatal shot, I turned my attention to a cow, and got a long-distance running shot, but missed, and then had a couple of snap shots at a large blue wildebeest bull, the nearest animal to me.

The buffalo had entered the long grass, and we found the trail, with here and there a small clod of mud, evidently from its cloven hoofs, adhering to the grass, and farther on a speck of blood. The sight of blood was sufficient to make our gun-bearers drop ignominiously to the rear, and it was only occasionally thenceforth that we caught a glimpse of one or other of them in a treetop, or that they reminded us of their whereabouts by giving voice to a warning wail. It was exciting work following the trail through the six-foot grass, with but here and there a guiding speck or streak of blood; the eye alive to the least movement in the surrounding grass, the ear catching the slightest rustle; the muzzle of the rifle held well forward, and the twitching forefinger ever ready to do its duty; indeed, all the complex machinery which constitutes the human frame and mind, set on the hair-trigger. It is to experience the thrill and aspiration of moments, and often many minutes, such as these that the sportsman takes to buffalo hunting. He knows that his quarry may now become his antagonist, and yet he knows not where his antagonist is. The bull may have beaten round and returned to within a yard or two of his blood-stained pathway, where, with bated breath, outstretched nose and sullen eyes, he stands prepared to carry out his evil intent. His naturally savage temper becomes more violent and irrepressible every moment. As he hears the low whispers and slow movements of his late aggressors, and as sharp, piercing pains rake his whole system, he becomes the very embodiment of malignant ferocity, but withal he is patient, and will await with fox-like cunning the favorable moment when, all his pent-up rage, strength and speed is to be put into

one last short, sharp and destructive charge. Or he may not have stayed his retreat until he has reached those straggling bushes and low, broad-leaved palms, interspersed with long grass, on that slight rise ahead; or he may sweep down upon you from the rear, or resort to some other cunning tactics. Experience has taught the Sportsman to advance with exceeding caution; cool judgment must hold supreme sway.

Advancing by a series of semi-circular short casts, we presently came upon a small patch of blood where the buffalo had stood for some time, but after proceeding several hundred yards farther without encountering it, we were beginning to think it had gone clean off and rejoined the main troop of cows, when, on glancing to one side of the path, I saw some blood on the spot where it had been standing, head on, at right angles to the track. Had it remained there, I should certainly have been bowled over, even had I managed to fire point blank; the dark shade and surrounding branches would most probably have completely concealed its black coat and horns until too late. With renewed care and vigilance, we advanced into the heart of the bush, now struggling to force a passage through the dense undergrowth on the one side of the buffalo's path in order to make a forward semi-circular cast, and then swarming up a thorny acacia tree to reconnoiter the immediate vicinity. It was tiring work, but full of possibilities. Presently we lost the spoor, and whilst beating about to regain it, there was a sudden bellow, a rush, and a crash, and then all was silent for a moment. These ominous sounds had come from behind a dense mass of almost impenetrable bush a dozen yards ahead, and every instant we expected to see the buffalo break through the barrier and dash at us; we stood our ground—B, in an open spot, and I within arm's length of a stout palm stem, behind which I would, I think, have been able to avoid the first rush had the bullets from B.'s ten-bore and my Mauser rifle failed to stop it. Before long there was another rush, and the buffalo passed within fifteen yards of us, but out of sight, and lumbered away at a heavy, swinging pace which seemed to denote that its right foreleg was injured between the knee and the shoulder, and this seemed to be confirmed by the hight at which we had found the blood on the grass.

After tracing the spoor for some distance farther we decided to abandon it, and follow the troop, amongst which, one of our boys said, he had seen a large bull. I was sorry to give up the chase, but the buffalo was evidently not very badly wounded; we had

country imaginable. Just as we reached the other side of a dambo, two buffalo bulls rushed from a patch of reeds and passed close in front of us at a tremendous pace. B. and I each got in a hurried shot, and our bullets told on the larger of the two.



"HE BECOMES THE VERY EMBODIMENT OF MALIGNANT FEROCITY."

already followed it for more than an hour, and might be led a considerable distance in the opposite direction from that taken by the herd. We struck across the veld, until we cut the broad trail of the herd, which soon led us into a tract of the wildest

The next instant they had disappeared in the long grass, and we heard a distant rushing and crashing noise as the main troop, startled by our shots, broke from a dense mass of reeds several hundred yards ahead. Hardly had we advanced ten paces into

the long grass, following the spoor of the wounded bull, when one of the boys shouted from a tree that he could see it, but it soon made off again. We had to proceed very cautiously, for we found ourselves in as bad a bit of jungle and grass as, I think, any sportsman has ever followed a wounded buffalo into. It was almost impossible to advance, except along the track which the buffalo had by sheer strength mowed for itself through the masses of unfooted bush, reeds and grass. When one of us endeavored to force a passage parallel to the track, it was found to be such tiring and slow work, and at times one felt so hopelessly engulfed in the rank vegetation, so utterly unable to avoid a charge, and so cut off from his companion, that he soon returned to the track. The wounds were evidently severe, for the grass and twigs on both sides were besprinkled with blood, and here and there clots of a darker color were observed, leading us to believe that the lungs were injured. We had perhaps followed the spoor for ten minutes when I found that, beyond the five in the magazine of my rifle, I had no cartridges with me, so I shouted to my boy Galazi to bring the belt he was carrying, when we were suddenly startled by the buffalo rushing out from behind a dense mass of foliage a dozen paces in front of us. He disappeared almost immediately. I think it was rather lucky that I shouted when I did, as we probably would have walked on to its very horns, so well concealed was it in its dark nook. Then followed half an hour of some of the most difficult and, apparently dangerous tracking I have ever undertaken. We were led into the heart of a veritable chaos of trees, scrubby bush and stunted palms, interspersed with coarse, rank grass. We could see half a dozen paces ahead of us along the course taken by the quarry, and occasionally farther, but the jungle on both sides was impenetrable to the eye, and we realized that when the momentarily expected charge took place, only the one who was walking in front would be able to fire.

Twice we halted to consider if it was good enough to continue the chase, but still we advanced until, at last, as the jungle became more dense than ever, we came to

the conclusion that it was a mad game without dogs, or, as B. rightly summed up the situation, "The odds were all in favor of the buffalo." Slowly, and even sadly, we retraced our steps and joined our boys, feeling none too pleased with ourselves; but I for one set my teeth and determined to secure buffalo meat for our numerous following before I turned my face towards our distant camp on the Pungwe river—as I may add, I did.

The trail along which we now proceeded became broader and more clearly defined, another herd having joined the first. For the next hour we rapidly followed it. The track which sixty to a hundred buffaloes, rushing pellmell through the country, in a solid phalanx, leave behind them, is truly surprising. At one place the herd had cut a path fully fifteen yards broad through a belt of the tallest and stoutest reeds I have ever seen, enabling us to follow at a trot. Within an hour of sunset we got up to the herd, standing, strangely enough, on one of the few open green glades we had seen that day. Stalking to within two hundred yards of the nearest cow, I took a steady aim at a fine old bull with a splendid head, and fired. After getting in a second shot with my quick-firing Mauser, I dropped a cow with a third. As I ran toward the spot where the bull had entered the long grass, the cow jumped up again, but having to traverse fully one hundred and fifty yards of open country, I was able to get in three out of four shots on its hind-quarters from a distance of one hundred to two hundred and fifty yards, and with a dying bellow it fell on reaching the cover. I found the bull lying down, evidently very sick, and put an end to its sufferings. The horns of this old fellow measured three feet two inches from elbow to elbow (outside.)

Fortunately there was a native footpath leading to Tambara's, about three miles higher up the river.

We saw several zebra and many water-buck en route and hundreds of water birds, spur-winged geese, teal, tree ducks, rails, spoonbills and beautiful egrets, on a large vlei, and by the time we reached Tambara's kraal, the short African twilight had passed into a dark but starry night.