

IV--THE LAST ROUND

"On the morrow I woke up full of painful recollections, and not without a certain feeling of gratitude to the Powers above that I was there to wake up. Yesterday had been a tempestuous day; indeed, what between buffalo, rhinoceros, and elephant, it had been very tempestuous. Having realized this fact, I next bethought me of those magnificent tusks, and instantly, early as it was, broke the tenth commandment. I coveted my neighbours tusks, if an elephant could be said to be my neighbour de jure, as certainly, so recently as the previous night, he had been de facto--a much closer neighbour than I cared for, indeed. Now when you covet your neighbour's goods, the best thing, if not the most moral thing, to do is to enter his house as a strong man armed, and take them. I was not a strong man, but having recovered my eight-bore I was armed, and so was the other strong man--the elephant with the tusks. Consequently I prepared for a struggle to the death. In other words, I summoned my faithful retainers, and told them that I was now going to follow those elephants to the edge of the world, if necessary. They showed a certain bashfulness about the business, but they did not gainsay me, because they dared not. Ever since I had prepared with all due solemnity to execute the rebellious Gobo they had conceived a great respect for me.

"So I went up to bid adieu to the old head man, whom I found alternately contemplating the ruins of his kraal and, with the able assistance of his last wife, thrashing the jealous lady who had slept in the mealie

hut, because she was, as he declared, the fount of all his sorrows.

"Leaving them to work a way through their domestic differences, I levied a supply of vegetable food from the kraal in consideration of services rendered, and left them with my blessing. I do not know how they settled matters, because I have not seen them since.

"Then I started on the spoor of the three bulls. For a couple of miles or so below the kraal--as far, indeed, as the belt of swamp that borders the river--the ground is at this spot rather stony, and clothed with scattered bushes. Rain had fallen towards the daybreak, and this fact, together with the nature of the soil, made spooring a very difficult business. The wounded bull had indeed bled freely, but the rain had washed the blood off the leaves and grass, and the ground being so rough and hard did not take the footmarks so clearly as was convenient. However, we got along, though slowly, partly by the spoor, and partly by carefully lifting leaves and blades of grass, and finding blood underneath them, for the blood gushing from a wounded animal often falls upon their inner surfaces, and then, of course, unless the rain is very heavy, it is not washed away. It took us something over an hour and a half to reach the edge of the marsh, but once there our task became much easier, for the soft soil showed plentiful evidences of the great brutes' passage. Threading our way through the swampy land, we came at last to a ford of the river, and here we could see where the poor wounded animal had lain down in the mud and water in the hope of easing himself of his pain, and could see also how his two faithful companions

had assisted him to rise again. We crossed the ford, and took up the spoor on the further side, and followed it into the marsh-like land beyond. No rain had fallen on this side of the river, and the blood-marks were consequently much more frequent.

"All that day we followed the three bulls, now across open plains, and now through patches of bush. They seemed to have travelled on almost without stopping, and I noticed that as they went the wounded bull recovered his strength a little. This I could see from his spoor, which had become firmer, and also from the fact that the other two had ceased to support him. At last evening closed in, and having travelled some eighteen miles, we camped, thoroughly tired out.

"Before dawn on the following day we were up, and the first break of light found us once more on the spoor. About half-past five o'clock we reached the place where the elephants had fed and slept. The two unwounded bulls had taken their fill, as the condition of the neighbouring bushes showed, but the wounded one had eaten nothing. He had spent the night leaning against a good-sized tree, which his weight had pushed out of the perpendicular. They had not long left this place, and could not be very far ahead, especially as the wounded bull was now again so stiff after his night's rest that for the first few miles the other two had been obliged to support him. But elephants go very quick, even when they seem to be travelling slowly, for shrub and creepers that almost stop a man's progress are no hindrance to them. The three had now turned to the left, and were travelling back again in a semicircular

line toward the mountains, probably with the idea of working round to their old feeding grounds on the further side of the river.

"There was nothing for it but to follow their lead, and accordingly we followed with industry. Through all that long hot day did we tramp, passing quantities of every sort of game, and even coming across the spoor of other elephants. But, in spite of my men's entreaties, I would not turn aside after these. I would have those mighty tusks or none.

"By evening we were quite close to our game, probably within a quarter of a mile, but the bush was dense, and we could see nothing of them, so once more we must camp, thoroughly disgusted with our luck. That night, just after the moon rose, while I was sitting smoking my pipe with my back against a tree, I heard an elephant trumpet, as though something had startled it, and not three hundred yards away. I was very tired, but my curiosity overcame my weariness, so, without saying a word to any of the men, all of whom were asleep, I took my eight-bore and a few spare cartridges, and steered toward the sound. The game path which we had been following all day ran straight on in the direction from which the elephant had trumpeted. It was narrow, but well trodden, and the light struck down upon it in a straight white line. I crept along it cautiously for some two hundred yards, when it opened suddenly into a most beautiful glade some hundred yards or more in width, wherein tall grass grew and flat-topped trees stood singly. With the caution born of long experience I watched for a few moments before I entered the glade, and then I saw why the elephant had trumpeted. There in the middle of

the glade stood a large maned lion. He stood quite still, making a soft purring noise, and waving his tail to and fro. Presently the grass about forty yards on the hither side of him gave a wide ripple, and a lioness sprang out of it like a flash, and bounded noiselessly up to the lion. Reaching him, the great cat halted suddenly, and rubbed her head against his shoulder. Then they both began to purr loudly, so loudly that I believe that in the stillness one might have heard them two hundred yards or more away.

"After a time, while I was still hesitating what to do, either they got a whiff of my wind, or they wearied of standing still, and determined to start in search of game. At any rate, as though moved by a common impulse, they bounded suddenly away, leap by leap, and vanished in the depths of the forest to the left. I waited for a little while longer to see if there were any more yellow skins about, and seeing none, came to the conclusion that the lions must have frightened the elephants away, and that I had taken my stroll for nothing. But just as I was turning back I thought that I heard a bough break upon the further side of the glade, and, rash as the act was, I followed the sound. I crossed the glade as silently as my own shadow. On its further side the path went on. Albeit with many fears, I went on too. The jungle growth was so thick here that it almost met overhead, leaving so small a passage for the light that I could scarcely see to grope my way along. Presently, however, it widened, and then opened into a second glade slightly smaller than the first, and there, on the further side of it, about eighty yards from me, stood the three enormous elephants.

"They stood thus:--Immediately opposite and facing me was the wounded one-tusked bull. He was leaning his bulk against a dead thorn-tree, the only one in the place, and looked very sick indeed. Near him stood the second bull as though keeping a watch over him. The third elephant was a good deal nearer to me and broadside on. While I was still staring at them, this elephant suddenly walked off and vanished down a path in the bush to the right.

"There are now two things to be done--either I could go back to the camp and advance upon the elephants at dawn, or I could attack them at once. The first was, of course, by far the wiser and safer course. To engage one elephant by moonlight and single-handed is a sufficiently rash proceeding; to tackle three was little short of lunacy. But, on the other hand, I knew that they would be on the march again before daylight, and there might come another day of weary trudging before I could catch them up, or they might escape me altogether.

"'No,' I thought to myself, 'faint heart never won fair tusk. I'll risk it, and have a slap at them. But how?' I could not advance across the open, for they would see me; clearly the only thing to do was to creep round in the shadow of the bush and try to come upon them so. So I started. Seven or eight minutes of careful stalking brought me to the mouth of the path down which the third elephant had walked. The other two were now about fifty yards from me, and the nature of the wall of bush was such that I could not see how to get nearer to them without

being discovered. I hesitated, and peeped down the path which the elephant had followed. About five yards in, it took a turn round a shrub. I thought that I would just have a look behind it, and advanced, expecting that I should be able to catch a sight of the elephant's tail. As it happened, however, I met his trunk coming round the corner. It is very disconcerting to see an elephant's trunk when you expect to see his tail, and for a moment I stood paralyzed almost under the vast brute's head, for he was not five yards from me. He too halted, threw up his trunk and trumpeted preparatory to a charge. I was in for it now, for I could not escape either to the right or left, on account of the bush, and I did not dare turn my back. So I did the only thing that I could do--raised the rifle and fired at the black mass of his chest. It was too dark for me to pick a shot; I could only brown him, as it were.

"The shot rung out like thunder on the quiet air, and the elephant answered it with a scream, then dropped his trunk and stood for a second or two as still as though he had been cut in stone. I confess that I lost my head; I ought to have fired my second barrel, but I did not. Instead of doing so, I rapidly opened my rifle, pulled out the old cartridge from the right barrel and replaced it. But before I could snap the breech to, the bull was at me. I saw his great trunk fly up like a brown beam, and I waited no longer. Turning, I fled for dear life, and after me thundered the elephant. Right into the open glade I ran, and then, thank Heaven, just as he was coming up with me the bullet took effect on him. He had been shot right through the heart, or lungs, and down he fell with a crash, stone dead.

"But in escaping from Scylla I had run into the jaws of Charybdis. I heard the elephant fall, and glanced round. Straight in front of me, and not fifteen paces away, were the other two bulls. They were staring about, and at that moment they caught sight of me. Then they came, the pair of them--came like thunderbolts, and from different angles. I had only time to snap my rifle to, lift it, and fire, almost at haphazard, at the head of the nearest, the unwounded bull.

"Now, as you know, in the case of the African elephant, whose skull is convex, and not concave like that of the Indian, this is always a most risky and very frequently a perfectly useless shot. The bullet loses itself in the masses of bone, that is all. But there is one little vital place, and should the bullet happen to strike there, it will follow the channel of the nostrils--at least I suppose it is that of the nostrils--and reach the brain. And this was what happened in the present case--the ball struck the fatal spot in the region of the eye and travelled to the brain. Down came the great bull all of a heap, and rolled on to his side as dead as a stone. I swung round at that instant to face the third, the monster bull with one tusk that I had wounded two days before. He was already almost over me, and in the dim moonlight seemed to tower above me like a house. I lifted the rifle and pulled at his neck. It would not go off! Then, in a flash, as it were, I remembered that it was on the half-cock. The lock of this barrel was a little weak, and a few days before, in firing at a cow eland, the left barrel had jarred off at the shock of the discharge of the right,

knocking me backwards with the recoil; so after that I had kept it on the half-cock till I actually wanted to fire it.

"I gave one desperate bound to the right, and, my lame leg notwithstanding, I believe that few men could have made a better jump. At any rate, it was none too soon, for as I jumped I felt the wind made by the tremendous downward stroke of the monster's trunk. Then I ran for it.

"I ran like a buck, still keeping hold of my gun, however. My idea, so far as I could be said to have any fixed idea, was to bolt down the pathway up which I had come, like a rabbit down a burrow, trusting that he would lose sight of me in the uncertain light. I sped across the glade. Fortunately the bull, being wounded, could not go full speed; but wounded or no, he could go quite as fast as I could. I was unable to gain an inch, and away we went, with just about three feet between our separate extremities. We were at the other side now, and a glance served to show me that I had miscalculated and overshot the opening. To reach it now was hopeless; I should have blundered straight into the elephant. So I did the only thing I could do: I swerved like a course hare, and started off round the edge of the glade, seeking for some opening into which I could plunge. This gave me a moment's start, for the bull could not turn as quickly as I could, and I made the most of it. But no opening could I see; the bush was like a wall. We were speeding round the edge of the glade, and the elephant was coming up again. Now he was within about six feet, and now, as he trumpeted or rather screamed,

I could feel the fierce hot blast of his breath strike upon my head.

Heavens! how it frightened me!

"We were three parts round the glade now, and about fifty yards ahead was the single large dead thorn-tree against which the bull had been leaning. I spurted for it; it was my last chance of safety. But spurt as I would, it seemed hours before I got there. Putting out my right hand, I swung round the tree, thus bringing myself face to face with the elephant. I had not time to lift the rifle to fire, I had barely time to cock it, and run sideways and backward, when he was on to me. Crash! he came, striking the tree full with his forehead. It snapped like a carrot about forty inches from the ground. Fortunately I was clear of the trunk, but one of the dead branches struck me on the chest as it went down and swept me to the ground. I fell upon my back, and the elephant blundered past me as I lay. More by instinct than anything else I lifted the rifle with one hand and pulled the trigger. It exploded, and, as I discovered afterwards, the bullet struck him in the ribs. But the recoil of the heavy rifle held thus was very severe; it bent my arm up, and sent the butt with a thud against the top of my shoulder and the side of my neck, for the moment quite paralyzing me, and causing the weapon to jump from my grasp. Meanwhile the bull was rushing on. He travelled for some twenty paces, and then suddenly he stopped. Faintly I reflected that he was coming back to finish me, but even the prospect of imminent and dreadful death could not rouse me into action. I was utterly spent; I could not move.

"Idly, almost indifferently, I watched his movements. For a moment he stood still, next he trumpeted till the welkin rang, and then very slowly, and with great dignity, he knelt down. At this point I swooned away.

"When I came to myself again I saw from the moon that I must have been insensible for quite two hours. I was drenched with dew, and shivering all over. At first I could not think where I was, when, on lifting my head, I saw the outline of the one-tusked bull still kneeling some five-and-twenty paces from me. Then I remembered. Slowly I raised myself, and was instantly taken with a violent sickness, the result of over-exertion, after which I very nearly fainted a second time. Presently I grew better, and considered the position. Two of the elephants were, as I knew, dead; but how about No. 3? There he knelt in majesty in the lonely moonlight. The question was, was he resting, or dead? I rose on my hands and knees, loaded my rifle, and painfully crept a few paces nearer. I could see his eye now, for the moonlight fell full upon it--it was open, and rather prominent. I crouched and watched; the eyelid did not move, nor did the great brown body, or the trunk, or the ear, or the tail--nothing moved. Then I knew that he must be dead.

"I crept up to him, still keeping the rifle well forward, and gave him a thump, reflecting as I did so how very near I had been to being thumped instead of thumping. He never stirred; certainly he was dead, though to this day I do not know if it was my random shot that killed him, or if he died from concussion of the brain consequent upon the tremendous

shock of his contact with the tree. Anyhow, there he was. Cold and beautiful he lay, or rather knelt, as the poet nearly puts it. Indeed, I do not think that I have ever seen a sight more imposing in its way than that of the mighty beast crouched in majestic death, and shone upon by the lonely moon.

"While I stood admiring the scene, and heartily congratulating myself upon my escape, once more I began to feel sick. Accordingly, without waiting to examine the other two bulls, I staggered back to the camp, which in due course I reached in safety. Everybody in it was asleep. I did not wake them, but having swallowed a mouthful of brandy I threw off my coat and shoes, rolled myself up in a blanket, and was soon fast asleep.

"When I woke it was already light, and at first I thought that, like Joseph, I had dreamed a dream. At that moment, however, I turned my head, and quickly knew that it was no dream, for my neck and face were so stiff from the blow of the butt-end of the rifle that it was agony to move them. I collapsed for a minute or two. Gobo and another man, wrapped up like a couple of monks in their blankets, thinking that I was still asleep, were crouched over a little fire they had made, for the morning was damp and chilly, and holding sweet converse.

"Gobo said that he was getting tired of running after elephants which they never caught. Macumazahn (that is, myself) was without doubt a man of parts, and of some skill in shooting, but also he was a fool. None

but a fool would run so fast and far after elephants which it was impossible to catch, when they kept cutting the spoor of fresh ones. He certainly was a fool, but he must not be allowed to continue in his folly; and he, Gobo, had determined to put a stop to it. He should refuse to accompany him any further on so mad a hunt.

"'Yes,' the other answered, 'the poor man certainly was sick in his head, and it was quite time that they checked his folly while they still had a patch of skin left upon their feet. Moreover, he for his part certainly did not like this country of Wambe's, which really was full of ghosts. Only the last night he had heard the spooks at work--they were out shooting, at least it sounded as though they were. It was very queer, but perhaps their lunatic of a master----'

"'Gobo, you scoundrel!' I shouted out at this juncture, sitting bolt upright on the blankets, 'stop idling there and make me some coffee.'

"Up sprang Gobo and his friend, and in half a moment were respectfully skipping about in a manner that contrasted well with the lordly contempt of their previous conversation. But all the time they were in earnest in what they said about hunting the elephants any further, for before I had finished my coffee they came to me in a body, and said that if I wanted to follow those elephants I must follow them myself, for they would not go.

"I argued with them, and affected to be much put out. The elephants were

close at hand, I said; I was sure of it; I had heard them trumpet in the night.

"'Yes,' answered the men mysteriously, 'they too had heard things in the night, things not nice to hear; they had heard the spooks out shooting, and no longer would they remain in a country so vilely haunted.'

"'It was nonsense,' I replied. 'If ghosts went out shooting, surely they would use air-guns and not black powder, and one would not hear an air-gun. Well, if they were cowards, and would not come, of course I could not force them to, but I would make a bargain with them. They should follow those elephants for one half-hour more, then if we failed to come upon them I would abandon the pursuit, and we would go straight to Wambe, chief of the Matuku, and give him hongo.'

"To this compromise the men agreed readily. Accordingly about half-an-hour later we struck our camp and started, and notwithstanding my aches and bruises, I do not think that I ever felt in better spirits in my life. It is something to wake up in the morning and remember that in the dead of the night, single-handed, one has given battle to and overthrown three of the largest elephants in Africa, slaying them with three bullets. Such a feat to my knowledge had never been done before, and on that particular morning I felt a very 'tall man of my hands' indeed. The only thing I feared was, that should I ever come to tell the story nobody would believe it, for when a strange tale is told by a hunter, people are apt to think it is necessarily a lie, instead of

being only probably so.[*]

[*] For the satisfaction of any who may be so disbelieving as to take this view of Mr. Quatermain's story, the Editor may state that a gentleman with whom he is acquainted, and whose veracity he believes to be beyond doubt, not long ago described to him how he chanced to kill four African elephants with four consecutive bullets. Two of these elephants were charging him simultaneously, and out of the four three were killed with the head shot, a very uncommon thing in the case of the African elephant.--Editor.

"Well, we passed on till, having crossed the first glade where I had seen the lions, we reached the neck of bush that separated it from the second glade, where the dead elephants were. And here I began to take elaborate precautions, amongst others ordering Gobo to keep some yards ahead and look out sharp, as I thought that the elephants might be about. He obeyed my instructions with a superior smile, and pushed ahead. Presently I saw him pull up as though he had been shot, and begin to snap his fingers faintly.

"What is it?' I whispered.

"The elephant, the great elephant with one tusk kneeling down.'

"I crept up beside him. There knelt the bull as I had left him last

night, and there too lay the other bulls.

"Do these elephants sleep?' I whispered to the astonished Gobo.

"Yes, Macumazahn, they sleep.'

"Nay, Gobo, they are dead.'

"Dead? How can they be dead? Who killed them?'

"What do people call me, Gobo?'

"They call you Macumazahn.'

"And what does Macumazahn mean?'

"It means the man who keeps his eyes open, the man who gets up in the night.'

"Yes, Gobo, and I am that man. Look, you idle, lazy cowards; while you slept last night I rose, and alone I hunted those great elephants, and slew them by the moonlight. To each of them I gave one bullet and only one, and it fell dead. Look,' and I advanced into the glade, 'here is my spoor, and here is the spoor of the great bull charging after me, and there is the tree that I took refuge behind; see, the elephant shattered it in his charge. Oh, you cowards, you who would give up the chase

while the blood spoor steamed beneath your nostrils, see what I did single-handed while you slept, and be ashamed.'

"'Ou!' said the men, 'ou! Koos! Koos y umcool!' (Chief, great Chief!) And then they held their tongues, and going up to the three dead beasts, gazed upon them in silence.

"But after that those men looked upon me with awe as being almost more than mortal. No mere man, they said, could have slain those three elephants alone in the night-time. I never had any further trouble with them. I believe that if I had told them to jump over a precipice and that they would take no harm, they would have believed me.

"Well, I went up and examined the bulls. Such tusks as they had I never saw and never shall see again. It took us all day to cut them out; and when they reached Delagoa Bay, as they did ultimately, though not in my keeping, the single tusk of the big bull scaled one hundred and sixty pounds, and the four other tusks averaged ninety-nine and a half pounds--a most wonderful, indeed an almost unprecedented, lot of ivory.[*] Unfortunately I was forced to saw the big tusk in two, otherwise we could not have carried it."

[*] The largest elephant tusk of which the Editor has any certain knowledge scaled one hundred and fifty pounds.

"Oh, Quatermain, you barbarian!" I broke in here, "the idea of spoiling

such a tusk! Why, I would have kept it whole if I had been obliged to drag it myself."

"Oh yes, young man," he answered, "it is all very well for you to talk like that, but if you had found yourself in the position which it was my privilege to occupy a few hours afterwards, it is my belief that you would have thrown the tusks away altogether and taken to your heels."

"Oh," said Good, "so that isn't the end of the yarn? A very good yarn, Quatermain, by the way--I couldn't have made up a better one myself."

The old gentleman looked at Good severely, for it irritated him to be chaffed about his stories.

"I don't know what you mean, Good. I don't see that there is any comparison between a true story of adventure and the preposterous tales which you invent about ibex hanging by their horns. No, it is not the end of the story; the most exciting part is to come. But I have talked enough for to-night; and if you go on in that way, Good, it will be some time before I begin again."

"Sorry I spoke, I'm sure," said Good, humbly. "Let's have a split to show that there is no ill-feeling." And they did.