



CROCODILE TALES.



ONE of our servants (says Emil Holub, the most recent African traveller) had a rencontre that was rather alarming, with one of the crocodiles, from which the river derives its name. He was washing clothes upon the bank, when a dark object emerged from the water, startling him so much that he let the garment slip from his hands. He called out, and had the presence of mind to hurl a big stone at the crocodile's head, and succeeded in clutching the article back just as the huge creature was snapping at it. An adventure of a somewhat similar character happened to myself. Finding that the Limpopo was only three feet deep,

just below its confluence with the Marico, I determined to make my way across. We felled several stout mimosa stems, and made a raft; but the new wood was so heavy that under my weight it sank two feet in the water. Convinced that my experiment was a failure, I was springing from one side of the raft on to the shore, when a crocodile mounted the other side—an apparition sufficiently startling to make me give up the idea of crossing for the present.

On another occasion I was taking an afternoon stroll along the river-side, when I saw a crowd of natives manifestly in great excitement; it appeared that the body of a girl, who had been killed by a crocodile a few days before, had just been washed ashore. Crocodiles

have the habit of drowning human beings, or any animals that they are unable to swallow, by holding them down at the bottom of the water until the cessation of all struggling seems to make them aware that no resistance is to be expected, when they open their jaws and let free their prey. Unless one crocodile is assisted by another, it cannot by itself tear a fresh corpse in pieces; but it has to wait until the process of decomposition sets in, when the gaseous exhalations raise it to the surface in a condition that permits it to be torn asunder and devoured piece-meal. If a crocodile's attention should be attracted by a fish, or anything that seems fit for food, it will forsake its larger prey in the daytime, but only return to it in the evening.

I was once told by Sepopo, and by many of his people, that these reptiles are more dangerous near Sesheke than in most other parts of the kingdom. Shortly before my arrival a man had been dragged by one of them from his boat, and a boy of six years of age had been snapped up while bathing; and during my stay I heard of no less than thirty deaths that were attributed to the rapacity of these creatures.

Small crocodiles are occasionally caught by accident in the fishing-nets; the larger ones have to be captured by an arrangement of great hooks. The crocodile-tackle is very ingenious, and probably may be more easily understood from an illustration than from any verbal description. The bait which conceals the hook is covered by a net which is attached to a strong fast rope more than twelve feet long by a number of twisted threads, the other end of the rope being wound round a bundle of reeds that serves as a float. It is only now and then that the king gives orders for the tackle to be brought into use, and then the bundle of reeds is laid upon the bank; the hook is generally baited with

a piece of putrefied dog's flesh, of which the Marutse believe the crocodile to be especially fond, and is supported on a tripod of reeds, three or four feet above the water, and almost close to its edge. After a crocodile has scented the bait, it usually hovers round it for a long time, sometimes until late in the evening, before it makes a snap at it; but when it attempts to swallow it, the projecting points of the hook prevent the closing of the jaws, and the water rushing into the throat and windpipe makes the brute sink to the bottom, where it soon becomes exhausted; its carcass floats down the stream, either towards the shore or against a sandbank, its position being indicated by the float which drags after it. Two or three crocodiles have been repeatedly known to be taken in this way during a single night from the setting of five hooks. Except they are found alive on the hook, or are accidentally wounded by fishermen or hunters, they are never speared. Crocodile-snares, fishing-nets, are all royal property.

On one occasion, when the hooks had been baited over night, I went down to the river to ascertain the result, and met three large canoes with two men apiece, each of them conveying the carcass of a crocodile big enough to contain a human body. As soon as the carcasses were brought to shore, some of the Sepopo's people proceeded to cut off their heads; the eyelids, the coverings of the nostrils, and a few of the scales from the ridge of the back were reserved for the king, to be used as charms.

I did what I could to induce the crowd that had found the body of the poor girl to have it buried, but my pleading was to no purpose; her relatives declared that it was Nyambe's will that the crocodile should seize her, and therefore the crocodile must be allowed to have her. The body was accordingly left to be devoured at sunset.