

BY THE MARGIN OF AFRIC'S FOUL WATERS.

BY CAPTAIN A. W. DRAYSON, R.A.



Monkeys, the Guana Lizard, and Nests of the Yellow Oriole.

THERE is always something interesting to be found on the banks of a river. Even in England we may, where rivers or even streams abound, watch the crafty proceedings of an old water-rat, whose secure retreat is entered from beneath the water-level; or we may perceive that most cunning of birds, the moor-hen, which, when almost within our reach, noiselessly creeps away, and lies hidden, we know not where, although we may be certain it is within six feet of us.

There yet remain some few localities where the graceful otter can be found; but he who wishes to observe this creature in its native state must employ even more caution in his approach to its haunts than is practised by even a hungry pussy when creeping towards the unconscious sparrow.

You can obtain great amusement by watching the movements and position of various members of the finny tribe, whose habits may be studied from the river bank, and useful memoranda also be made as to the time and conditions selected by the fish for feeding, and the nature of the fly, or other food, most sought after. Half-an-hour thus employed may lead to a most successful day's sport; whereas, if unacquainted with the taste of the fish in the locality, you may often fail to kill, and have to resign your unsuccessful rod.

At all times of the year a river's banks are a favourite resort of the naturalist and sportsman, but never more so than during the mid-day heat of summer, or when the long shadows of evening begin to spread over the water, and a "bathe" seems the one idea in our minds. During the summer evenings the animal creation

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naturally approach the river's bank, there to seek a retreat for the night, or to merely quench their thirst and return to their accustomed haunts.

These are the conditions which prevail in our own well-watered England, and they are those, also, which usually exist in the distant lands of the South. In Africa especially, where, from the intense heat of the climate, water evaporates very rapidly, and small streams often become dried up—a few stagnant pools alone remaining to indicate where a stream once bubbled over its pebbly bed—the banks of rivers are doubly interesting. It is there that, each night, the giants of the forest will slake their hot thirst; it is on the soft banks that impressions of vast feet become visible, and we can read, from evidence written in the mud, that elephants, buffaloes, hippopotami, hyenas, and other strange monsters lie concealed by day amidst the tangled brushwood of the forest, or among the rocky fastnesses near it, and that by night these same animals boldly stalk abroad, and, seemingly, carry on strange gambols in the cool pools of the mountain streams.

Although a telescopic examination had been made by me of the mouths of two or three rivers which are situated between the Cape of Good Hope and Algoa Bay, yet I may fairly say that the Sundays river was the first in South Africa on the banks of which I rambled. The day, I remember, had been terrifically hot; a north-east wind had been blowing, and this wind is, in many parts of Africa, as hot as though it had been poured from the mouth of an oven expectant of "bakings." The wretched quadruped that had carried me some twenty miles had required nearly as much exercise from my legs to make him travel as would have sufficed to carry my own body. It was, therefore, with no small feeling of pleasure that I found myself on the banks of a little rippling stream, and my day's journey at its end.

"Ah!" said my companion, an old Dutch colonist, "the Sundays river looks little and quiet now, but I have seen it when it was a roaring torrent, carrying before it large trees, stones, and gravel, and then it would have been certain death to have attempted to cross it. So quickly, too, does it rise, when the rain falls heavily in the mountains, that, not long since, a waggon which was crossing the drift was suddenly overwhelmed by the rush of water, and was, with several of the oxen, carried down the stream, where the oxen were drowned and the waggon dashed to pieces."

A quiet ramble up the banks of this river was not to be omitted; for the idea of a bathe was very pleasant, and there was yet half-an-hour's daylight to enable me to find my way.

At a few hundred yards from the "drift," as the ford of a river is here called, the banks of the stream extended on either side to the distance of about a hundred yards. These banks rose to about two hundred feet, and were densely wooded.

It was with considerable surprise that I observed on the trees, which were situated forty or fifty feet above the then level of the river, indications which showed that, not long since, the water must not only have fully filled the wide bed of the river, but must have reached fifty feet up the bank.

Huge knotted and creeper-covered stumps had been borne on the torrent from their distant mountain home, and had been deposited amongst the bushes and trees that here lined the steep bank. Masses of tangled and matted grass hung suspended from the boughs of the trees, whilst large water-worn stones were cast high up amongst the *débris*, and remained as evidences of the power of the late torrent.

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With such facts before one's eyes, it was not difficult to comprehend how a waggon and oxen might be carried away by the sudden rising of this mountain torrent.

At the time of my visit, however, the stream was low, and could easily be crossed on horseback at the drift. Many large, still pools, from which the quaint-looking water-tortoise protruded his head, yielded a cool and refreshing bath; and here, surrounded by the wildest of wild scenery, I first made the acquaintance of an African river. And this one, I afterwards found, was but a type of nearly every other in the country.

A residence of some months near one of the prettiest rivers that flow out of Kaffirland enabled me to observe the habits of several creatures whose habitat was on its banks. This stream rose amongst the fastnesses of the Amatola Mountains, flowed through an undulating and bushy country, leaped down some few falls, and joined itself with another and more powerful stream. The name given to this river was the Chumie.

Amongst the many interesting creatures to be seen on its banks, none afforded me greater amusement than the birds and the monkeys. There was always a kind of war going on between the two, whilst skill and cunning were employed on both sides. The birds which abounded most on the banks were the yellow orioles, whose nests are built in the shape of a retort with the neck downwards. These nests are fastened to the ends of the most pliant branches that overhang the water, and no small amount of judgment is required on the part of the bird in order to select a judicious position for its habitation.

Driven from our wattle and daub hut by the intense heat of the sun, and the dryness of the scorching wind, we retreat to the river bank, where we seek the shade of a fine yellow wood tree (a species of yew), and, having refreshed ourselves with a dip in the rippling stream, we lazily lounge on the bank and watch the proceedings of the busy little weavers that fly around us. There, amidst the stout branches, are about a dozen little yellow birds, somewhat of the size and shape of a house-sparrow; they are all twittering at once, and seem to be quarrelling about a matter of deep importance. In a very few minutes, however, the dispute appears to be settled, and the party disperse, leaving two birds only on the branch, who appear to have established their right to that particular limb of the tree. Not a moment is lost by these two busy little creatures, who commence twisting together, in a sort of braid, two or three of the small twigs at the end of the branch on which they were disputing.

This preliminary operation having been completed, the two birds fly away, evidently in search of something; in a minute they return, and great is the twittering and screaming when a trespasser is found upon their branch. He is soon driven away, however, and half-a-dozen pieces of long grass are carefully woven round the braided twigs by the two birds, who appear to help one another. A second departure and return cause the fabric on the end of the branch to be more apparent; and after about three hours the upper portion of the retort-like nest is completed, and another day's labour will render the habitation fit for the residence of the happy pair.

Not one or two nests only are suspended from a tree situated in a favourable position, but I have often counted thirty or forty of these strange-looking nests, some of which are attached to others previously completed, probably to those of brothers or sisters.

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Now for the reason of this form and position of the nest.

The country which these birds inhabit is frequented by great numbers of monkeys and snakes. Both these creatures are very fond of eggs, and both are able to ascend trees—the monkeys particularly being regular residents in them. If, then, the birds in such a district were to build their nests in a similar manner to birds in England, not a single egg would escape the vigilance of the monkeys, and not one young unfledged bird could remain in its nest when a snake felt hungry.

The plan adopted by the birds, then, is, first, to construct a nest in such a manner that it can only be entered from below, and by a creature possessing wings, and of small size; secondly, to place it in such a position that any extra weight on the branch to which the nest is attached will cause nest and branch to bend into the water.

Now it may seem a very dangerous position for the birds to select, viz., so near the water that any weight above their own will cause them to be submerged, but they seem by instinct to know the likes and dislikes of monkeys, and to be aware that, although a monkey can and does sometimes swim, yet he has usually a very wholesome antipathy to the water, and consequently, when he finds that the branch along which he is scampering is gradually lowering him into the water, he gives up his predatory ideas, and returns to a more stable position.

A snake also, although much less heavy than a monkey, cannot crawl along the very slender twigs, nor could it elongate itself conveniently so as to crawl up the neck of the nest; but, if it could do so, its position would be one of extreme danger, as the birds could then attack it and peck it with perfect impunity to themselves, all the energies of the snake being employed in holding on to its unstable position.

On many occasions I have been a witness to an attempt on the part of monkeys to obtain possession of the eggs in one of these nests, and have been much amused at the artifices adopted by each party.

Concealed, in a great measure, by the stem of a tree, or at such a distance as to cause no alarm to either birds or monkeys, I have seen one or two monkeys come galloping towards the river, where they would bend down and take a good drink, looking painfully human in all their ways as they did so; then, observing the nests and the birds, they would sit for a few minutes as though contemplating the possibility of a robbery. With a quaint, jocose sort of movement, they would ascend the tree, and approach that nest which appeared in the least well-selected position. Climbing along the branch, they would soon find that they could not reach within several feet of the nest, and yet they were within less than that of the water. It would be evidently unsafe to approach nearer, and yet the eggs must have been very tempting; but, after several fierce shakes had been given to the branch, the monkeys usually retreated baffled.

All these proceedings on the part of the monkeys were not taken quietly by the birds. No sooner did the burglars begin to ascend the trees than the alarm would spread amongst the birds, twenty or thirty of which would fly shrieking around the heads of the monkeys, making dashes at them of which they seemed by no means to approve. Their retreat was usually more rapid than their advance. Had I been disposed to turn traitor against the birds, I might have whispered four words into the ears of the monkeys, and which would have been the "open sesame" to the eggs. These four words would have been, "Break off the branches;" for such a proceeding would have been quite within the power of the monkeys, and

would have enabled them to capture in detail the contents of every nest. I refrained, however, from thus imparting assistance to the more powerful of the two combatants, and victory, undoubtedly, still remains with the ingenious yellow oriole.

The greatest noise and consternation amongst the birds usually took place when a hawk or an eagle approached. The advent of such a formidable visitor was one that called for a national demonstration; and no sooner did any member of the hawk tribe appear, than he was surrounded or chased by a hundred little yellow tormentors, who dashed recklessly at him, as though they were conscious that individual safety was best obtained by acts of individual bravery.

On the banks of this same river that enormous lizard, the guana, was very common, and grew to a large size, several being seen as much as five feet in length. It used to be found basking on the dead stumps near the stream, and, when disturbed, would dash into the water with a heavy plunge. It was perfectly harmless, and, I had heard, was very good eating; so on one occasion I was induced by my curiosity to shoot one, and to try its flavour. Finding that the regular cook was not inclined to cook "such a nasty creature," I was forced to perform the culinary operation myself, and, therefore, compared the flavour of the flesh after boiling and grilling. Having had the opportunity of tasting many strange dishes, amongst which are boiled and roast hippopotamus, eland, horse, camelopard, shark, porcupine, &c., I may fairly claim to be a judge of dishes, and I can conscientiously pronounce grilled guana very good.

Wandering upwards of six hundred miles from the locality just named, and in a north-easterly direction, we find ourselves on the banks of another river of South Africa.

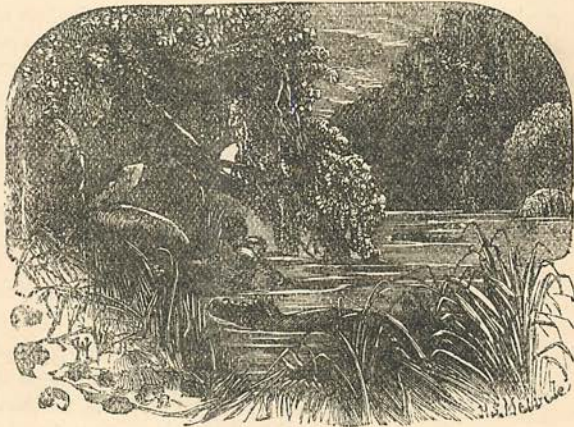
On its sandy shores, deeply indented in the soft soil, we observed the impressions of some strange feet. Arranged in pairs, and at intervals of about two feet, these marks were imprinted all along the shore of the river. They were the first of the kind that I had seen, and I was then new to the spoor of South African game.

Here is a representation of the singular marks which then puzzled me. Having measured them, I found that they must have been caused by some large animal, for they were five inches across, and, from the depth that they had sunk in the sand, it was evident that the animal must have been very heavy. A sketch having been made, I had very shortly an opportunity of tracing in the sand near a Kaffir's hut a representation of this spoor, and a Kaffir hunter immediately pronounced that it had been caused by "*invubu*." A reference to my small pocket dictionary explained to me that *invubu* was no other than the mighty hippopotamus.

Strange, indeed, was the feeling when I knew that I had crossed the fresh traces of a wild beast, and that one of the largest and most curious in creation. I remembered how, in my boyhood, I had gazed again and again at the strange form sketched in books of natural history, and which, it was asserted, represented the Behemoth of Scripture, or the hippopotamus of Egypt and South Africa. How I then thirsted for a view of this strange creature, and wondered whether my wish would ever be gratified! Often had I, in imagination, pictured to myself the deep, secluded pool, surrounded by a strange but luxuriant vegetation, on the banks or

in the waters of which the massive frame of Behemoth might be seen; that my good fortune would ever lead me into such a region then seemed beyond the bounds of the probable. To learn, then, that I had trodden in the recent tracks of the hippopotamus produced a singular feeling of excitement and wonder, and I at once determined that no amount of trouble should prevent me from obtaining a view of the animal which had so lately roamed on the banks of the river.

From information which I obtained from Hottentot hunters, I learned that the evening or night was the best time to obtain a sight of Behemoth, for then he left his secure retreat amongst the reeds and rushes, and wandered over the grassy hills, where he could graze, or browse on the tender young trees, according to his taste.



Behemoth at the Bath.

Armed with a rifle of formidable size, I selected a calm evening when moonlight soon succeeded to sunlight, and placed myself in a commanding position in order to watch for my formidable game.

"It must have been dull work, to sit half the night under a bush," once remarked a friend to whom I described my proceedings. But with this opinion I could not agree. There was really something quite attractive in sitting beneath the branches of a thick tropical tree, surrounded by a dense forest, except where the river glided onwards before one, watching eagerly the distant moon-lighted bank, and the rich foliage beyond, listening intently to the many singular noises which were caused by strange animals, and which alone broke the stillness of the night.

A very interesting concert was carried on that night, I well remember. Near me a whole pack of little creatures, somewhat similar to ferrets in appearance, were busily digging up roots, and they occasionally fought over the spoil, fierce and angry squeaks being uttered from time to time. Several night birds flew shrieking overhead, bent on distant journeys before day broke. Far across the river, and amidst the depths of the forest beyond, a large branch was occasionally snapped, the sharp crack sounding not unlike the report of a rifle. This I knew could only be caused by the monarch of the forest, the all-powerful elephant, whose advent

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would have been as eagerly welcomed as would that of hippo. himself. Several hours had passed, and yet no signs of the large game were visible, so I decided upon quitting my hiding-place, and, guided by the brilliant moonlight, to walk along the river bank. This proceeding I afterwards found was a mistake.

In almost every case, the wild animals that inhabit a bushy country, or which seek safety by concealment rather than by speed, depend mainly upon their senses of hearing and scent to discover the approach of an enemy. Their hearing, particularly, is very acute. Eyesight is not to them of such very great importance nor can they employ it effectually in dense cover; so that most commonly the approach of a friend or foe is first made known to them by means of their hearing or scent. With man, however, the eyesight is far superior, as a means of discovery, to either the scent or hearing, except a person is sitting down, and can hold his breath for some time. Even then I have found the beating of the heart cause noise sufficient to disturb the delicate conditions requisite to enable one to discover the first slight sounds which announce the approach of a wild beast; for it is a long time before the expected approach of an elephant, hippopotamus, or buffalo ceases to produce the least increase in the rate of the heart's movement.

To roam about by night, therefore, is not wise, for the range and distinctness of one's vision are then considerably contracted, whilst an animal can hear just as well by night as by day.

It proved unfortunate on this occasion, for I disturbed a hippopotamus when it was fully a hundred yards from me, and I had merely the satisfaction of hearing its giant form rushing through the reeds, and the heavy plunge that announced its safe arrival in the water—a retreat in which there was no chance of obtaining even the slightest glance of it, as this creature can dive to a considerable distance, and, when conscious of danger, will merely protrude the extremity of its snout in order to take a fresh breath.

Not very far from the locality where I first saw the spoor of the hippopotamus there was a lake, the banks of which were covered with dense reeds. In this lake there were several hippopotami; and, during my rambles on its banks, and on those of several other South African rivers, I made the acquaintance of Behemoth, and had several opportunities of observing his habits.

The hippopotamus is naturally gregarious, herds of ten, fifteen, or twenty being often found together; yet, like many other large animals, it often happens that a solitary hippopotamus is found in most out-of-the-way localities, and this creature is not one that has been left whilst others have been slain, but is really a traveller, whose wandering disposition seems to have led him on an exploring expedition.

At about seven miles from the Bay of Natal there is a very pretty river, called the Umlass. There is a sort of bay at the mouth of this river, the banks of which are steep in many places, and wooded in all. This bay was a favourite resort of wild-fowl, and I, therefore, usually paid it a visit at least once or twice a week. I was thus well acquainted with the game that was located in the neighbourhood, and I knew that no hippopotami were within several miles. On one occasion, however, I came upon the fresh traces of a moderate-sized hippopotamus, who must have arrived in the neighbourhood within a day or two of my visit. More than once I obtained a snap shot at him, but could never get within less than one hundred and fifty yards of his protruded head, which appeared above the water only

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for a few seconds. He remained in solitude for about three months, and then disappeared.

Hippopotami are very large eaters, and feed either on grass or young trees, they are very destructive to crops of Indian corn or wheat, and their visits are as much dreaded by the farmer as are those of the elephant. They are, however, very timid, and will not, except when driven to desperation, attack a man.

Their flesh is very good eating. When fresh, it tastes very like fat pork, the grain being rather coarser, but yet tender. When salted, it is not dissimilar to beef; and a person who ate salt boiled hippopotamus might be easily persuaded that he was eating boiled beef.

It is from the hide of this animal that the whips of South Africa are usually manufactured; the heavy driving-whip used by the Hottentots for the rear oxen in a team, and termed the "*achter sjambok*," is formed out of a strip of hide cut lengthways from the back of a hippopotamus; it is usually about seven feet in length, and fully an inch in diameter at the butt-end. The whips formed from the hide of the rhinoceros are usually more transparent than those made from the skin of hippo., but they are not commonly as thick; both skins, however, are extensively made use of for the purpose.

It has been said by some sour-tempered South African traveller that "the birds are without song, the flowers without scent, and the rivers without fish." This is, however, a libel, and is without truth. The birds certainly are not such gifted vocalists as are those of Europe, yet many of them utter plaintive and harmonious notes, and, as is usually the case, those which fail to please the ear, dazzle the eye with their brilliant colours. That the flowers have no scent needs not contradiction, the sweetness of the Cape jasmine and the musk being well known.

In spite of the number of enemies that the fish have to escape, there are very few South African rivers without them; whilst the mouths of the rivers and the bays on the coast abound with the most delicious kind. Near the mouth of the Umganie some excellent flattish sort of fish could be caught with a rod and line, whilst at high tide sport might be had with a species of dog-fish or shark, which then entered the river in great numbers.

The method that I adopted with these voracious creatures was to procure from the Kaffirs a barbed assagy. To the wooden part of this, and near the iron end, I attached a piece of lead, in order to increase the weight of the spear. A stout, strong piece of string was then attached to the assagy in two places, and with a large coil of string carefully arranged behind me, and its extremity attached to a tree, I took my station near a bush on the banks of the river.

I had not to wait long before two or three dorsal fins would appear above the water, gliding along near the bank. When the fish arrived within ten or twelve feet of me, the spear was thrown at them. By a rapid rush they would sometimes avoid being struck; but if caution were used, so that the action of throwing was not seen, the iron of the weapon usually passed through the fish, and his struggles to escape were ineffectual, for, held by the string and impeded by the spear, he could make little or no way in the water. They were formidable-looking fish, some of them being nearly six feet in length, and their destructive propensities towards the eatable fish formed the excuse for their own capture.

Another resident in the rivers of South-eastern Africa is the alligator. Reaching to a great size, and possessing a jaw and teeth formidable to almost every animal,

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he becomes the dread of most creatures whose necessities oblige them to seek the river side or to cross its deeper parts. Either basking in the sun on some dry sandy bank, or floating on the surface of a quiet, warm pool, the alligator passes the day in a state of apparent torpor; but if any prey approaches him the monster soon becomes animated, and adopts the most crafty proceedings to procure a meal.

Although I have seen many alligators in their wild state, I never but once found that they did not instantly retreat when they became conscious of my presence; and, on that particular occasion, I believe the creature was labouring under a mistake. It happened that I was walking near the banks of the Sea-Cow Lake, near Natal, and was in search of small buck. My double-barrelled gun was loaded with buck-shot and with a bullet. Upon passing a quiet pool, which was surrounded by reeds, I observed rather a large alligator crawling along the banks. I did not care to fire at the brute, as I was some miles from home, and its death could not benefit me; so, after watching it for a few seconds, I walked on. Whether it was that the creature fancied that I was endeavouring to escape, and feared it, or that the natural wish to pursue a fleeing creature impelled it to follow me, I know not; but, hearing a slight noise behind me, I turned round to look, and, to my surprise, found the alligator rapidly following me, and distant only about thirty paces. There was not the slightest danger or occasion for fear, for several small trees were near, and up these I might at once have procured a sanctuary, even had I not been able to escape by running and dodging. So that, although a huge mouth and formidable teeth were very near me—and the rapidity with which an alligator can move is very great—I should, even if unarmed, have had the best of it. Being desirous, however, that he should inform his brethren of the nature of the human being, and should thus caution them to avoid the presence even of Kaffir women and children, I saluted him on the back with a charge of buck-shot. The frantic jump that immediately followed, and the rush to regain the water, plainly indicated a sort of awakening from a temporary delusion, and gave me a very fair example of the speed and activity really possessed by the awkward-looking alligator.

Whether on the banks of the rivers near the coast, where voracious fish abounded, and where rare sea-monsters sometimes left their footprints, or amidst the densely-wooded banks of more inland portions of the river, where the elephant, buffalo, and various bush buck sought shelter—or whether near the high mountains of the Quathlamba range, where the cool and rapid brook afforded nourishment to the trees, in which the green parrot and gorgeous lory sought a retreat—yet in each there will always be found much of interest to repay the naturalist, sportsman, or lover of nature, for his rambles on the river side.

