

NINE BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

COLONEL ROOSEVELT'S "GAME TRAILS"*

This is the best of the East African books, because it gives a coherent picture of the country and what goes on therein. That is what we like. There is nothing more interesting to the average wide-awake world-citizen of whatever nationality than to hear plainly how the other fellow does it. To hear plainly means that small details must be told in the language of the listener. The statement that the veldt is covered with kopjes from which dongas radiate in several directions is undoubtedly an excellent topographical description, but much of that sort of thing borders on the soporific. But if you tell me that a plain with a lot of little hills scattered around on it has dry washes cut out like the western banancas, then I am interested, for I have seen something of that kind at home. And if, further, you proceed to point out clearly that said plains are covered with herds of game like cattle; and that said hills are populated with rock antelope; and that the ravines with the patches of stuff like sage brush in them are quite apt to conceal lions instead of coyotes or jack rabbits, then you have me excited. If, lastly, you will only refrain from saying spring-bok and dricker and klip-springer and such until I have had time to get a trifle acquainted, then I will follow you to the end—and be sorry the end has arrived!

The ultra-sophisticated pose is here even less defensible than elsewhere. The writer of books—except he be a writer of technical books—must for his work's salvation get away from the idea that he is writing for his fellow-experts. This is especially true of shooting books. As a usual thing the sportsman is a modest fellow. When he tells how the enraged pogniffle bit off his left ear he abridges the thing to its dry elements for fear the other sportsmen who read his book will think him cocky and trying to show off. As a result, only sportsmen get any sense

* African Game Trails. By Theodore Roosevelt. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

of reality from the incident. The great public gather only the rather vague idea that you do not catch pogniffles with a butterfly net. This is not right. Were that sportsman playing fair he would justify the dollars *net* he demands for his book. In the first place, we want to know what is the pogniffle and where does he dwell; what are his habits, and does he enjoy dust; how is he hunted, and is he unkind by disposition or only by prodding; what in particular did he do on this occasion, and *exactly* how did the sportsman feel and act; what rifle was used, how far were the shots, and what effect did the bullets have; above all, what did the pogniffle do with the ear after he *did* bite it off?

That is exactly what we do not get from most African books; and what we do get from Mr. Roosevelt. The usual screed from that country consists mostly in fairly monotonous reiterations of exciting shooting. A friend of mine parodies it as follows:

After picking up his liver and replacing it in his abdominal cavity, the cowardly gun-bearer, instead of remaining to distract the rhinoceros's attention, climbed a tree and hung there, groaning. On the following day, by way of example, I had him stuck full of thorns dipped in acid.

From it all one gets only the impression of hot days, some dust, thorn trees, two distant mountains, and swarms of beasts. In other words, the writer, quite naturally, stopped short at the first and stupendous fact of the Game.*

But Mr. Roosevelt does get beyond it. He is too broad in his sympathies to be stricken blind even by so vivid a flash of the unusual as that. The physical lay of the country; the many tribes of negroes, as human beings, not "tribes" or "natives" merely; the little industrial activities; and above all the feeling for the picturesque little things that give his narrative

*I am, of course, omitting mention of such encyclopedic works as those of Sir Harry Johnston. But they are ethnological and administrative; and, like the others, they give no picture of the living country.

colour, these are in full evidence. He retains the boyish and delighted power of gloating over the strange and unusual. Without that power, which is only the power of "make-believe" grown up, a man is middle-aged; with it he is always young. The average man remarks, with what he thinks is a commendable repression, that

After killing the lion in rather a nasty fracas, we were so belated that we were not in camp until after dark. The porters welcomed us with much rejoicing.

Says Mr. Roosevelt:

. . . the porters appeared, bearing on poles the skin of the dead lion, and the lioness entire. The moon was nearly full, and it was interesting to see them come swinging down the trail in the bright silver light, chanting in deep tones over and over again a line or phrase that sounded like:

"Zon-zon-boulé ma ja guntai; zon-zon-boulé ma ja guntai!"

Occasionally they would interrupt it by a repetition in unison at short intervals, of a guttural ejaculation, sounding like "huzlem." They marched into camp, then up and down the lines, before the rows of small fires; then, accompanied by all the rest of the porters, they paraded up to the big fire where I was standing. Here they stopped and ended the ceremony by a minute or two's vigorous dancing amid singing and wild shouting. The fire-light gleamed and flickered across the grim dead beasts, and the shining eyes and black features of the excited savages, while all around the moon flooded the landscape with her white light.

That is what we wanted to know; that is what we would have seen had we been there.

In like manner the book, in the main, tells us just the things we would like to know. I suppose in a literary magazine I should base my criticism on literary principles; but that is a little difficult. One secret of good literature is, of course, to know what to select, what to leave out, and how to arrange it. Literature must be exceedingly difficult in Africa, for there is such a superabundance of material. It must be the easiest thing in the world to slip into mere cataloging—and very incomplete cataloging

at that. One must, as we have shown, present details; but, on the other hand, mere details of an unknown character are worse than useless. Undoubtedly bird-life swarms; but a check-list of birds observed around camp will convey little to one who does not know their names. Some other method must be used to convey the impression. Mr. Roosevelt's feeling of proportion carries him safely by this danger; but some of his few long paragraphs full of "There were the—" and "There were also the—" phrases swings his craft perilously close to the rocks.

But he does avoid the danger; and the few defects of the sort are more than made up for by the habit-observations he gives us. These are closely taken and valuable; as are his remarks illuminating on the human institutions with which he comes in contact. His style is direct, clear and forceful. It conveys perhaps what he wants to convey, but not all that he sees and feels. This is because it misses the literary quality in many respects, owing probably to the fact that Mr. Roosevelt had at the time three or four other jobs on hand. *African Game Trails* is a particularly valuable book in that it is the first to tell us about Africa in our own language.

Stewart Edward White.