

## UNIT 9

# NATURAL SCIENCE

### THE FOUR-TUSKED ELEPHANT

*Armand Denis, Belgium (1896-1971)*

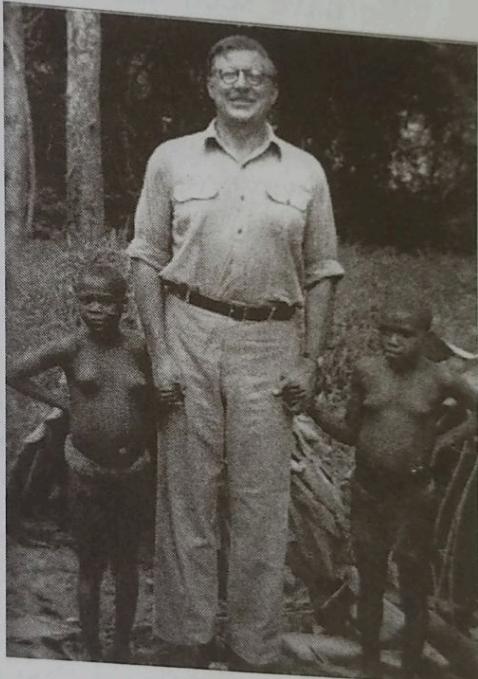
**Y**OU'LL be telling me next you've a unicorn hidden away in this forest of yours."

"Perhaps I have," said Putnam, still stroking his beard. "Perhaps I have."

"But four tusks," said the Texan. "There's no such animal."

Putnam smiled and refused to be drawn. He had probably got the effect he wanted and left the table soon after with all our questions about the four-tusked elephant unanswered.

I did not see him again until late the following day. He had been away in the forest. I found him on the edge of the camp talking to four or five pygmies and when he saw me, he waved me over. The pygmies were not of our own little tribe. They came from much deeper in the forest, but as usual Putnam was at home with them, squatting on the ground just



*Armand Denis with two pygmy grandmothers*

as they did and laughing and joking with them in their own tongue. I knew just enough of this to join in and we sat for a while chatting about the animals they hunted. They talked about the tiny forest antelope they caught in their long nets. They talked about the leopards that they sometimes killed with their arrows and finally they talked about elephants.

"But what about this four-tusked elephant you're supposed to have seen," I said. "D'you ever see him?"

At once there was silence. Putnam looked across at me as if I ought to have had more sense than to ask a question like that, but in the end one of the pygmies, older than the rest, answered me.

"We have seen him many times," he said. "He's very fierce and very wicked. He sees things the other elephants don't see. Many times in the forest he has come and spoiled our hunt. He has killed many of our people, and now we keep well away from him. We cannot kill with our spears an elephant with four tusks."

At this they started laughing in an embarrassed way, all except Putnam, and I did not know whether to believe them or not.

When I asked Putnam about it later the same evening he was still strangely non-committal.

"Don't ask me," he said. "You heard what the old chap said." "But you've never seen the four-tusked elephant yourself?"

"No, but that doesn't prove much either way. There are many things in the forest I've never seen. All I know is that every pygmy in this part of the Ituri Forest believes that he exists. I also know they're scared stiff of him, and pygmies don't scare easily."

From then on all I could think of was the four-tusked elephant. Twice I dreamed about him at night and I decided that whatever the cost, whatever the risk, I was going to find him and film him. In my mind's eye I could see the excitement the film would cause if I could get it back to

America. But when I asked Putnam to help he would not have anything to do with it.

"Take my advice," he said. "Leave it alone. The pygmies know what they're up to. I don't know the reason but there's something unhealthy about the whole business."

Well, I was young in those days and saw no reason for letting Putnam put me off something I had set my heart on. Whenever I saw the pygmies I asked them about the elephant and from several more of them who claimed to have seen him, I gradually pieced together a mass of legends about this mysterious animal. According to these, he was not only supposed to be the leader of the elephants, but was said to talk to them in a human voice, warning them when the hunters were approaching and killing more men than any animal they or their fathers or their fathers' fathers had ever known.

"But where is he now?" I would ask them.

"In the forest," they would reply, shaking their heads. "Many days' journey," and always I noticed they would point to the east.

It was from these talks I had with the pygmies that I finally formed some theory about where the elephant must be. All the indications pointed to one particular place, a low-lying area of swamp, eighty or ninety miles from Putnam's Camp.

None of the pygmies seemed particularly keen on accompanying me to such an ill-omened spot but in the end I found three young men, more daring than the rest, who agreed to come as my guides in return for almost all the tobacco I possessed.

I told Putnam I was going, but he said nothing and I set off hardly knowing whether to feel brave or foolish.

We travelled three and a half days, keeping up the gruelling pace the pygmies maintain in the forest. We lived on fruit, condensed milk, berries and chocolate, and at night, slept under rough shelters of leaves. By the fourth day I had

had enough and I was grateful when I saw the trees beginning to thin out and felt the ground becoming wet underfoot. There was much fresh elephant dung around.

We stopped beside a narrow stream. The pygmies signalled to me to keep quiet and as I waited I could see them in action, working skillfully forward, cautiously tracking the enormous footprints of an elephant through the bush.

They went slowly as if anxious to make no mistake, and telling from the lie of the grass and the way the ferns had been broken and not yet sprung back how recently the animal had passed.

"Is it he?" I would ask them, "the one with the four tusks," and they would gesture to me to keep quiet as if I should have known better.

"We'll see," they would whisper, "we'll see."

We kept going nearly six hours more before we found our elephant. He was in a clearing with about eight others, mostly young animals and they were all placidly eating away completely unaware of us, ripping down the branches from the trees and stuffing them unconcernedly into their mouths.

The elephant we had trailed was there in the middle of them. He was a very large, very old bull. I looked at his tusks. There were only two.

The three hunters turned to me and grinned.

"It's not him," they whispered. "It's not the king. He knew you were coming and he has gone."

As far as I was concerned, that was that. I had wasted a week but at least I felt that I had proved to myself that the four-tusked king of the Ituri Forest was a myth. Even Pat Putnam looked relieved when I returned, and I left Putnam's Camp a few days later to film in other parts of the Congo.

It was several months before I was back in the pygmy country and by then I had nearly forgotten about the elephant with four tusks. I was only passing through on some other business and we had stopped our trucks for the night at a settlement called Butembo on the edge of the forest.

Putnam's Camp lay a good way to the west and Butembo itself was a sad little place at the back of beyond boasting a single lodging house with the grandiose title of the Butembo Hotel. It was kept by an elderly Belgian and the night I was there I found myself sitting alone at a table next to four local Belgian settlers who had dropped in for an evening drink.

The one thing that made me take particular notice of them was that they talked Flemish, a language I had been fairly familiar with myself as a boy and I remember thinking it strange to be sitting there in the middle of Africa listening to these four hefty, rather sombre men with their big moustaches speak the language of my childhood. For a while they talked of nothing in particular but then I began to prick up my ears, for I heard them repeating the Flemish word "olifant" time after time. I listened more closely.

"But he insisted, this elephant had four tusks," said one.

"Oh, that's an African for you," said another. "If you asked them they would tell you that all their elephants have four tusks around here," and they all started laughing and one of them called for more beer.

By now I was engrossed in what they were saying, so I went over to their table, introduced myself, and asked them what all their talk was about a four-tusked elephant.

"Oh," said the man I had heard speaking first, "it's nothing really. I was just telling my friends here how I was in the office of one of the traders down the road this afternoon when I walked an African with a couple of pairs

of elephant tusks to sell. As you know they have a government tax on killing elephants round here, so the agent asked the fellow for his tax money on the two elephants he must have killed to get the ivory. D'you know what the blighter replied?"

The man paused for effect as I shook my head.

"He said, 'Bwana, I killed no elephants. I found one elephant lying dead in the forest and it had the four tusks I am selling you now.'"

As he told the story, his friends saw the funny side of it again and once more started laughing.

"So what happened then?" I asked.

"What do you think? The agent's a Greek and Greeks aren't fools. Besides, what government inspector would take any notice of this nonsense about a four-tusked elephant? No, he just deducted the tax money for two elephants from the price of the ivory, and booted the man out."

Of course, they might have been right. The African might have been trying to swindle the agent. But whether he was or he was not, the story naturally revived all my interest in the legends I heard the year before from the pygmies at Putnam's Camp and next morning, as soon as the trader opened his shutters, I was there to ask him about the tusks.

The settlers had been right about him. Like many of the traders in this part of Africa, he was a Greek, a plump genial man called Xantos, and he treated the story of the elephant with four tusks as almost as big a joke as the men had thought it the night before.

"But did you buy the ivory?" I asked.

"Sure I bought the stuff. It wasn't much good but I bought it. The four tusks must have come off a pair of really skinny old elephants. It was very discoloured ivory and although the tusks were eight feet long they were terribly thin. Not much good."

He grinned and spat on the floor, just to show what he meant.

"But can I see them?" I asked.

"Now there," he said throwing up his hands, "isn't that a nuisance. I'm sorry but you can't. Just an hour after I bought them the truck called to collect the ivory and take it down to the central warehouse at Abba where they sort it out for shipment to Belgium. If you want to see the tusks that badly, you can always write to the warehouse."

This was maddening, to have the tusks escape me just when I thought I was about to solve the whole mystery, and I wondered if there was anything else I could find out about them from Xantos while I was there. "What about their weight?" I asked, remembering that he must have weighed them when he paid the African.

"Oh yes. All about the same I think. Let me see. I've got them down in the book."

He rummaged amid a pile of books and papers that seemed to fill his roll-top desk. "Let me see," he said when he had found the book and had placed his spectacles laboriously in position. "Yes, I was right. The first was twenty-two kilos. So was the second.

The third was just over twenty-three and the fourth nearly twenty-four."

"They all seem pretty light for tusks eight feet long," I said.

Before he replied he paused just long enough to look suspiciously at me over the top of his glasses.

"You seem very interested for such bad ivory," he said. "If it's just ivory you want I'd have no difficulty getting you very much better tusks than those."

"Well," I said, "ivory's my hobby and you know how hard it is to find four old tusks so equally matched as these seem to be."

"I see," said Xantos non-committally. "It's none of my business anyhow. Is there anything else I can do for you over them?"

"Yes," I said. "You can give me the name of the African who brought them to you in the first place."

"Now how should I know that?" He spat once again on the floor. "I kicked the rogue out as soon as I'd paid him. When people try pulling a fast one over me I don't ask them to stay for a drink."

Luckily Butembo was the sort of place where everyone knew everyone else and after half an hour of discreet inquiries in the village, I knew who had sold Xantos the tusks. He was a young man called Mombeli. He was not married, and had his hut on the outskirts of the village. I found him sitting outside it rather miserably I thought, and at first he refused to answer my questions at all about the tusks as he obviously thought I had been sent to arrest him.

I gave him a cigarette, lit it for him, and then put the whole packet in his hands.

"Mombeli," I said, "I want to know the truth about this four-tusked elephant you say you found. Did you really find him, Mombeli, or were you just trying to cheat the trading company out of their tax money?"

"No, bwana, I was cheating no one."

"But you mean to say you really found an elephant with four tusks lying dead in the bush? No one's ever heard of an elephant with four tusks, Mombeli."

"I know, bwana," he said. "I would not have believed it myself, but there he was, a great elephant, bigger than I have ever seen. He had been lying dead many days and he had the four tusks I brought to the agent." He grinned sheepishly as if he realised the improbability of what he was saying.

"Where did this happen?" I asked and he pointed to the west describing a marshy area near a stream that sounded very like the place I had gone to the previous year with the

pygmies in my original search for the elephant. If Mombeli really was telling the truth his discovery of the four-tusked elephant would be a fantastic coincidence. But stranger things have happened in Africa.

"Could you find the remains of the elephant?" I asked him.

He shrugged his shoulders. "It is a long way," he said. "It might be difficult to find the place."

"Come over to my truck a minute, Mombeli," I said. He followed me without too much enthusiasm, but I opened the back and took out the first objects of value I saw—an oil lantern and a large chrome battery-operated flashlight. I also took the watch off my wrist. I knew all three objects were highly coveted among the Africans of the Congo.

"Listen, Mombeli. I want the head of that elephant and I want it badly. I have to go north but if you have that head waiting here for me when I return I will give you all these things. Do you think you will be able to find the head for me now?"

His face broke into an enraptured smile. "Sure, bwana. Now I understand. I find it. I find it all right."

I returned to my camp still not knowing quite what to think. I was certain by now that Mombeli believed what he was telling me, but that was not proof that the four-tusked elephant really had existed. I would have full and complete proof only if I succeeded in getting those tusks that had been sent on to Abba, and in fitting them, one by one, into the sockets of the skull they had originally come from. Unless I could get both the skull and the tusks, I would be wasting my time.

So the next thing was to write to the warehouse of the trading company at Abba describing the tusks in detail, offering a price well over their market value for them, and asking that they should be sent immediately to me care of the post office at Butembo. After this there was nothing to do

but wait, and I set off on my journey north knowing I had done everything I could to settle the mystery.

It was nearly four months before we were back again in Butembo.

I went straight to Mombeli's hut. It was deserted. I asked his neighbours where he was, but nobody knew. Someone said they thought he had gone off to Stanleyville for a job five or six weeks before, but there had been no news from him, and although I searched all round his hut just in case he had left the elephant's head there, I could find nothing.

Again I asked his neighbours whether they had seen him carrying the head into the village, but they said "no," and looked at me sympathetically as if afraid I had been having a little too much sun.

Once again it looked as if the four-tusked elephant was going to escape me and keep his mystery after all. I realised then that there was one last chance of finding the head. There was a Belgian administrator living in Butembo. His name was Renaud and I knew him slightly. There was just a possibility that Mombeli, after waiting several weeks for my return, had taken the head to him for safe keeping.

Renaud was an administrator of the old school. A large, courteous old man, he was also something of a martinet<sup>1</sup> and a stickler for the niceties of life. He was not a man to appreciate a story about a four-tusked elephant.

"Did an African called Mombeli leave a large package for me while I was away?" I asked him.

"No, Mr. Denis," he said sharply. "What were you expecting?"

"An important anatomical specimen," I said rather pompously. "You're sure nobody left anything like that at all?"

<sup>1</sup> martinet: a strict disciplinarian

He shook his head. "What sort of specimen?" he said.

"Nothing important," I replied, trying to hide my disappointment. "It was just that an African from the village had promised to try and get hold of the skull of a particular elephant for me."

"An elephant skull, so that's what it was," bellowed old Renaud. "I wouldn't have recognised it. Filthy-looking thing it was when the boy brought it in. Crawling with worms. Stank the office out. Next time you go asking Africans to collect decaying elephants' heads for you, I would be obliged if you would ask them to leave them in someone else's house."

I tried to calm him down. "But what happened to it ... Monsieur Renaud?" I asked.

"Happened to it? What the devil d'you think happened to it? I told your African friend to get rid of it and pushed him out before we all caught something from it."

Well, that was that. After so much trouble I had lost the proof I needed. Unless I had the skull and the tusks actually fitted perfectly into place, no one would believe the four-tusked elephant ever had existed. The only thing to do now was to go along to the post office and collect the tusks that I had asked the warehouse at Abba to send me the last time I was in Butembo, but even here I was out of luck. Instead of the tusks, there was a letter from one of the trading company's clerks.

"We have identified your tusks," he wrote. "They are in bundles Nos. 4632 and 4639. Unfortunately, by the time we received your letter they had already been despatched to our warehouse in Belgium. If you wish to pursue the matter further, we suggest you contact our head office in Antwerp."

As things were it hardly seemed worth taking the trouble. The skull was lost and so the tusks proved nothing. But as I

strolled, rather despondently, back to my camp I passed Renaud's office again, and just beyond it, in a mud ditch skirting the road, I caught sight of something white. It looked at first like a huge ball of bone lying half buried in the mud. I walked over and prodded it with my stick. It was bone, and when I began pushing the earth away, I saw that at last my luck had turned. It was the skull of a fully grown elephant.

When I thought about it, I realised what had happened. After old Renaud had pushed the unfortunate Mombeli out of his house, the African had obviously looked around for somewhere to dump the head of this elephant that had caused him so much trouble. Understandably he had chosen the ditch.

This changed everything and I felt all my previous excitement return. The first thing to do was to make sure of the tusks. This was not so difficult as it might have been as my family still lives in Antwerp. So I rushed back to the post office and sent off a telegram to my father, asking him to go to the company's warehouse at once and buy for me tusks Nos. 4632 and 4639.

When that was done, I went back to my camp, threw a shovel into the back of one of the trucks and drove back to disinter the skull. It was hard work. The skull was even bigger than I had thought, and old Renaud had been right about it. The stench was terrible.

But finally, doing my best to hold my breath, I heaved the thing out on to the road and looked where the tusks had been. On each side of the jaw, one above the other, were two quite separate sockets. I was jubilant. All my filming was finished. We were ready to drive back to Europe at the end of my first big successful expedition, and now to crown it I had proof of the existence of an animal no one had thought to exist.

But I was still far from the end of my troubles. I still had to reunite the skull with those tusks and to do this meant

carrying the skull just as it was, all the way back to Europe with us. It soon proved quite the most uncomfortable piece of luggage I have had to take anywhere.

First we tried carrying it wrapped in a tarpaulin and lashed to the roof of one of the trucks to spare us the smell but that did not work. A low branch swept it off as we drove through the forest in French Equatorial Africa, and we had a terrible time trying to rescue it from the stream where it had fallen. After this I was not taking any risks. Smell or no smell I was not letting it out of my sight. No one else in the expedition would put up with it so I drove alone in the cab with the skull in solitary state behind me.

Even then there was trouble. One evening just as we had pitched camp on the edge of the Sahara before tackling the six day drive across the desert, I had left the skull inside the truck with the rear doors open to try to let the air circulate a little. I was in my tent and just dropping off to sleep when I heard a great noise of howling and snarling outside. I peered out, and there in the moonlight I made out three hyenas fighting over something large they had just dragged from the back of the truck. It was the head, and, although we finally drove the hyenas away the bone was badly chewed and split in places. Luckily it was only the back of the head.

The jaw and the sockets were untouched, but I decided that from now on I was going to take even greater care of it, and drove the rest of the journey across the Sahara and up through Morocco, Spain and France with the truck doors locked and the skull securely roped to the floor.

By the time we reached Antwerp I had had enough; I remember driving gratefully along the Avenue Brialmont where my father had his house, and thinking to myself that in a few moments now my ordeal would be over.

We had been away altogether eighteen months and my family's welcome was wonderful but after we had greeted each other almost my first words to my father were, "You've got the tusks I cabled you about?"

As a judge my father always spoke with careful deliberation. "Ah, yes! The tusks," he said. "I received your cable from the Congo and I went to the warehouse. They showed me the tusks you had cabled about."

"Did you buy them?" I said. "Did you buy them?"

"Well, I looked at those tusks and they seemed very poor to me. They had far better tusks at the warehouse."

"Did you buy them?" I said again. "Did you buy them?"

"Well, I hesitated a long time. I don't know why you could have wanted those terrible tusks, and . . ."

My voice almost failed me, but I said once more, "Did you buy them?"

"Sure, sure. I bought them. They're quite safe. You mustn't get so excited, Armand."

"But where are they?" I almost shouted.

"They're in New York, of course."

"New York?" I said.

"Yes, New York. Didn't you ask me to send all those specimens of yours to the New York Museum of Natural History? I naturally thought you intended me to include the tusks."

When we sailed for New York a fortnight later, the elephant's head, packed in a big airtight crate, was still with us, like some grisly and cumbersome talisman. As soon as we docked I telephoned the Museum of Natural History to make sure the tusks had arrived safely. They had, so, without waiting for anything else I loaded the skull into a taxi and drove straight to the Museum.



*Armand Denis's four tusks on display in New York City*

When we arrived, Dr. James Clark, one of the directors of the Museum, met me. He had the tusks waiting in his office. They were exactly as Xantos had described them, old, heavily scarred, with the ivory pitted and discoloured. As I looked at them I could not help thinking of the first conversations I had had with the pygmies at Putnam's Camp and the way they had described the elephant king of the Ituri Forest. I wondered how many of their tribe these very tusks had accounted for.

We still had to make sure that these really were the tusks belonging to the skull. So we unwrapped the skull, placed it on the floor, and tried fitting the tusks into their original holes. There were grooves in

the sockets matching slight grooves in the ends of the tusks, and the first three tusks slid home perfectly and there could be no possible doubt that they belonged.

But, try as we would we could not fit in the last tusk. Suddenly I realised the truth: the fourth tusk, instead of curving outward as normal tusks do, curved inwards. The four-tusked elephant had had three normally shaped tusks and one that pointed inwards and actually rubbed against those opposite. We turned the fourth tusk around and it slid into position as neatly as the others.

Even when the skull and the tusks were assembled, I could still hardly believe that I had finally solved the mystery of the elephant king of the Ituri Forest and that the long search for the king of the elephants who talked and who carried four tusks was over.

