

John Henry Patterson



The Man-Eaters of Tsavo

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Preface

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It is with feelings of the greatest diffidence that I place the following pages before the public; but those of my friends who happen to have heard of my rather unique experiences in the wilds have so often urged me to write an account of my adventures, that after much hesitation I at last determined to do so.

I have no doubt that many of my readers, who have perhaps never been very far away from civilisation, will be inclined to think that some of the incidents are exaggerated. I can only assure them that I have toned down the facts rather than otherwise, and have endeavoured to write a perfectly plain and straightforward account of things as they actually happened.

It must be remembered that at the time these events occurred, the conditions prevailing in British East Africa were very different from what they are to-day. The railway, which has modernised the aspect of the place and brought civilisation in its train, was then only in process of construction, and the country through which it was being built was still in its primitive savage state, as indeed, away from the railway, it still is.

If this simple account of two years' work and play in the wilds should prove of any interest, or help even in a small way to call attention to the beautiful and valuable country which we possess on the Equator, I shall feel more than compensated for the trouble I have taken in writing it.

I am much indebted to the Hon. Mrs. Cyril Ward, Sir Guilford Molesworth, K.C.I.E., Mr. T.J. Spooner and Mr C. Rawson for their kindness in allowing me to reproduce photographs taken by them. My warmest thanks are also due to that veteran pioneer of Africa, Mr. F.C. Selous, for giving my little book so kindly an introduction to the public as is provided by the "Foreword" which he has been good enough to write.

J.H.P. August, 1907.

FOREWORD

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It was some seven or eight years ago that I first read, in the pages of The Field newspaper, a brief account written by Col. J.H. Patterson, then an engineer engaged on the construction of the Uganda Railway, of the Tsavo man-eating lions.

My own long experience of African hunting told me at once that every word in this thrilling narrative was absolutely true. Nay more: I knew that the author had told his story in a most modest manner, laying but little stress on the dangers he had run when sitting up at nights to try and compass the death of the terrible man-eaters, especially on that one occasion when whilst watching from a very light scaffolding, supported only by four rickety poles, he was himself stalked by one of the dread beasts. Fortunately he did not lose his nerve, and succeeded in shooting the lion, just when it was on the point of springing upon him. But had this lion approached him from behind, I think it would probably have added Col. Patterson to its long list of victims, for in my own experience I have known of three instances of men having been pulled from trees or huts built on platforms at a greater height from the ground than the crazy structure on which Col. Patterson was watching on that night of terrors.

From the time of Herodotus until to-day, lion stories innumerable have been told and written. I have put some on record myself. But no lion story I have ever heard or read equals in its long-sustained and dramatic interest the story

of the Tsavo man-eaters as told by Col. Patterson. A lion story is usually a tale of adventures, often very terrible and pathetic, which occupied but a few hours of one night; but the tale of the Tsavo man-eaters is an epic of terrible tragedies spread out over several months, and only at last brought to an end by the resource and determination of one man.

It was some years after I read the first account published of the Tsavo man-eaters that I made the acquaintance of President Roosevelt. I told him all I remembered about it, and he was so deeply interested in the story -- as he is in all true stories of the nature and characteristics of wild animals -- that he begged me to send him the short printed account as published in *The Field*. This I did; and it was only in the last letter I received from him that, referring to this story, President Roosevelt wrote: "I think that the incident of the Uganda man-eating lions, described in those two articles you sent me, is the most remarkable account of which we have any record. It is a great pity that it should not be preserved in permanent form." Well, I am now glad to think that it will be preserved in permanent form; and I venture to assure Col. Patterson that President Roosevelt will be amongst the most interested readers of his book.

It is probable that the chapters recounting the story of the Tsavo man-eating lions will be found more absorbing than the other portions of Col. Patterson's book; but I think that most of his readers will agree with me that the whole volume is full of interest and information. The account given by Col. Patterson of how he overcame all the difficulties which confronted him in building a strong and permanent

railway bridge across the Tsavo river makes excellent reading; whilst the courage he displayed in attacking, single-handed, lions, rhinoceroses and other dangerous animals was surpassed by the pluck, tact and determination he showed in quelling the formidable mutiny which once broke out amongst his native Indian workers.

Finally, let me say that I have spent the best part of two nights reading the proof-sheets of Col. Patterson's book, and I can assure him that the time passed like magic. My interest was held from the first page to the last, for I felt that every word I read was true.

F. C. SELOUS. WORPLESDON, SURREY. September 18, 1907.

Chapter I: My Arrival at Tsavo

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It was towards noon on March 1, 1898, that I first found myself entering the narrow and somewhat dangerous harbour of Mombasa, on the east coast of Africa. The town lies on an island of the same name, separated from the mainland only by a very narrow channel, which forms the harbour; and as our vessel steamed slowly in, close under the quaint old Portuguese fortress built over three hundred years ago, I was much struck with the strange beauty of the view which gradually opened out before me. Contrary to my anticipation, everything looked fresh and green, and an oriental glamour of enchantment seemed to hang over the island. The old town was bathed in brilliant sunshine and reflected itself lazily on the motionless sea; its flat roofs and dazzlingly white walls peeped out dreamily between waving palms and lofty cocoanuts, huge baobabs and spreading mango trees; and the darker background of well-wooded hills and slopes on the mainland formed a very effective setting to a beautiful and, to me, unexpected picture.

The harbour was plentifully sprinkled with Arab dhows, in some of which, I believe, even at the present day, a few slaves are occasionally smuggled off to Persia and Arabia. It has always been a matter of great wonder to me how the navigators of little vessels find their way from port to port, as they do, without the aid of either compass or sextant, and how they manage to weather the terrible storms that at certain seasons of the year suddenly visit eastern seas. I remember once coming across a dhow becalmed in the

middle of the Indian Ocean, and its crew making signals of distress, our captain slowed down to investigate. There were four men on board, all nearly dead from thirst; they had been without drink of any kind for several days and had completely lost their bearings. After giving them some casks of water, we directed them to Muscat (the port they wished to make), and our vessel resumed its journey, leaving them still becalmed in the midst of that glassy sea. Whether they managed to reach their destination I never knew.

As our steamer made its way to its anchorage, the romantic surroundings of the harbour of Mombasa conjured up, visions of stirring adventures of the past, and recalled to my mind the many tales of reckless doings of pirates and slavers, which as a boy it had been my delight to read. I remembered that it was at this very place that in 1498 the great Vasco da Gama nearly lost his ship and life through the treachery of his Arab pilot, who plotted to wreck the vessel on the reef which bars more than half the entrance to the harbour. Luckily, this nefarious design was discovered in time, and the bold navigator promptly hanged the pilot, and would also have sacked the town but for the timely submission and apologies of the Sultan. In the principal street of Mombasa -- appropriately called Vasco da Gama Street -- there still stands a curiously shaped pillar which is said to have been erected by this great seaman in commemoration of his visit.

Scarcely had the anchor been dropped, when, as if by magic, our vessel was surrounded by a fleet of small boats and "dug-outs" manned by crowds of shouting and gesticulating natives. After a short fight between some rival

Swahili boatmen for my baggage and person, I found myself being vigorously rowed to the foot of the landing steps by the bahareen (sailors) who had been successful in the encounter. Now, my object in coming out to East Africa at this time was to take up a position to which I had been appointed by the Foreign Office on the construction staff of the Uganda Railway. As soon as I landed, therefore, I enquired from one of the Customs officials where the headquarters of the railway were to be found, and was told that they were at a place called Kilindini, some three miles away, on the other side of the island. The best way to get there, I was further informed, was by gharri, which I found to be a small trolley, having two seats placed back to back under a little canopy and running on narrow rails which are laid through the principal street of the town. Accordingly, I secured one of these vehicles, which are pushed by two strapping Swahili boys, and was soon flying down the track, which once outside the town lay for the most part through dense groves of mango, baobab, banana and palm trees, with here and there brilliantly coloured creepers hanging in luxuriant festoons from the branches.

On arrival at Kilindini, I made my way to the railway Offices and was informed that I should be stationed inland and should receive further instructions in the course of a day or two. Meanwhile I pitched my tent under some shady palms near the gharri line, and busied myself in exploring the island and in procuring the stores and the outfit necessary for a lengthy sojourn up-country. The town of Mombasa itself naturally occupied most of my attention. It is supposed to have been founded about A.D. 1000, but the

discovery of ancient Egyptian idols, and of coins of the early Persian and Chinese dynasties, goes to show that it must at different ages have been settled by people of the very earliest civilisations. Coming to more modern times, it was held on and off from 1505 to 1729 by the Portuguese, a permanent memorial of whose occupation remains in the shape of the grim old fortress, built about 1593 -- on the site, it is believed, of a still older stronghold. These enterprising sea-rovers piously named it "Jesus Fort," and an inscription recording this is still to be seen over the main entrance. The Portuguese occupation of Mombasa was, however, not without its vicissitudes. From March 15, 1696, for example, the town was besieged for thirty-three consecutive months by a large fleet of Arab dhows, which completely surrounded the island. In spite of plague, treachery and famine, the little garrison held out valiantly in Jesus Fort, to which they had been forced to retire, until December 12, 1698, when the Arabs made a last determined attack and captured the citadel, putting the remnant of the defenders, both men and women, to the sword. It is pathetic to read that only two days later a large Portuguese fleet appeared off the harbour, bringing the long-looked-for reinforcements. After this the Portuguese made several attempts to reconquer Mombasa, but were unsuccessful until 1728, when the town was stormed and captured by General Sampayo. The Arabs, however, returned the next year in overwhelming numbers, and again drove the Portuguese out; and although the latter made one more attempt in 1769 to regain their supremacy, they did not succeed.

The Arabs, as represented by the Sultan of Zanzibar, remain in nominal possession of Mombasa to the present day; but in 1887 Seyid Bargash, the then Sultan of Zanzibar, gave for an annual rental a concession of his mainland territories to the British East Africa Association, which in 1888 was formed into the Imperial British East Africa Company. In 1895 the Foreign Office took over control of the Company's possessions, and a Protectorate was proclaimed; and ten years later the administration of the country was transferred to the Colonial Office.

The last serious fighting on the island took place so recently as 1895-6, when a Swahili chief named M'baruk bin Rashed, who had three times previously risen in rebellion against the Sultan of Zanzibar, attempted to defy the British and to throw off their yoke. He was defeated on several occasions, however, and was finally forced to flee southwards into German territory. Altogether, Mombasa has in the past well deserved its native name of Kisiwa M'vitaa, or "Isle of War"; but under the settled rule now obtaining, it is rapidly becoming a thriving and prosperous town, and as the port of entry for Uganda, it does a large forwarding trade with the interior and has several excellent stores where almost anything, from a needle to an anchor, may readily be obtained.

Kilindini is, as I have said, on the opposite side of the island, and as its name -- "the place of deep waters" -- implies, has a much finer harbour than that possessed by Mombasa. The channel between the island and the mainland is here capable of giving commodious and safe anchorage to the very largest vessels, and as the jetty is

directly connected with the Uganda Railway, Kilindini has now really become the principal port, being always used by the liners and heavier vessels.

I had spent nearly a week in Mombasa, and was becoming very anxious to get my marching orders, when one morning I was delighted to receive an official letter instructing me to proceed to Tsavo, about one hundred and thirty-two miles from the coast, and to take charge of the construction of the section of the line at that place, which had just then been reached by railhead. I accordingly started at daylight next morning in a special train with Mr. Anderson, the Superintendent of Works, and Dr. McCulloch, the principal Medical Officer; and as the country was in every way new to me, I found the journey a most interesting one.

The island of Mombasa is separated from the mainland by the Strait of Macupa, and the railway crosses this by a bridge about three-quarters of a mile long, called the Salisbury Bridge, in honour of the great Minister for Foreign Affairs under whose direction the Uganda Railway scheme was undertaken. For twenty miles after reaching the mainland, our train wound steadily upwards through beautifully wooded, park-like country, and on looking back out of the carriage windows we could every now and again obtain lovely views of Mombasa and Kilindini, while beyond these the Indian Ocean sparkled in the glorious sunshine as far as the eye could see. The summit of the Rabai Hills having been reached, we entered on the expanse of the Taru Desert, a wilderness covered with poor scrub and stunted trees, and carpeted in the dry season with a layer of

fine red dust. This dust is of a most penetrating character, and finds its way into everything in the carriage as the train passes along. From here onward game is more or less plentiful, but the animals are very difficult to see owing to the thick undergrowth in which they hide themselves. We managed, however, to catch sight of a few from the carriage windows, and also noticed some of the natives, the Wa Nyika, or "children of the wilderness."

At Maungu, some eighty miles from the coast, we came to the end of this "desert," but almost the only difference to be noticed in the character of the country was that the colour of the dust had changed. As our train sped onwards through the level uplands we saw a fine ostrich striding along parallel with the line, as if having a race with us. Dr. McCulloch at once seized his rifle and by a lucky shot brought down the huge bird; the next and greater difficulty, however, was to secure the prize. For a time the engine-driver took no notice of our signals and shouts, but at last we succeeded in attracting his attention, and the train was shunted back to where the ostrich had fallen. We found it to be an exceptionally fine specimen, and had to exert all our strength to drag it on board the train.

Soon after this we reached Voi, about a hundred miles from the coast, and as this was the most important station on the line that we had yet come to, we made a short halt in order to inspect some construction work which was going on. On resuming our journey, we soon discovered that a pleasant change had occurred in the character of the landscape. From a place called N'dii, the railway runs for some miles through a beautifully wooded country, which

looked all the more inviting after the deadly monotony of the wilderness through which we had just passed. To the south of us could be seen the N'dii range of mountains, the dwelling-place of the Wa Taita people, while on our right rose the rigid brow of the N'dungu Escarpment, which stretches away westwards for scores of miles. Here our journey was slow, as every now and again we stopped to inspect the permanent works in progress; but eventually, towards dusk, we arrived at our destination, Tsavo. I slept that night in a little palm hut which had been built by some previous traveller, and which was fortunately unoccupied for the time being. It was rather broken-down and dilapidated, not even possessing a door, and as I lay on my narrow camp bed I could see the stars twinkling through the roof. I little knew then what adventures awaited me in this neighbourhood; and if I had realised that at that very time two savage brutes were prowling round, seeking whom they might devour, I hardly think I should have slept so peacefully in my rickety shelter.

Next morning I was up betimes, eager to make acquaintance with my new surroundings. My first impression on coming out of my hut was that I was hemmed in on all sides by a dense growth of impenetrable jungle: and on scrambling to the top of a little hill close at hand, I found that the whole country as far as I could see was covered with low, stunted trees, thick undergrowth and "wait-a-bit" thorns. The only clearing, indeed, appeared to be where the narrow track for the railway had been cut. This interminable nyika, or wilderness of whitish and leafless dwarf trees, presented a ghastly and sun-stricken appearance; and here

and there a ridge of dark-red heat-blistered rock jutted out above the jungle, and added by its rugged barrenness to the dreariness of the picture. Away to the north-east stretched the unbroken line of the N'dungu Escarpment, while far off to the south I could just catch a glimpse of the snow-capped top of towering Kilima N'jaro. The one redeeming feature of the neighbourhood was the river from which Tsavo takes its name. This is a swiftly-flowing stream, always cool and always running, the latter being an exceptional attribute in this part of East Africa; and the fringe of lofty green trees along its banks formed a welcome relief to the general monotony of the landscape.

When I had thus obtained a rough idea of the neighbourhood, I returned to my hut, and began in earnest to make preparations for my stay in this out-of-the-way place. The stores were unpacked, and my "boys" pitched my tent in a little clearing close to where I had slept the night before and not far from the main camp of the workmen. Railhead had at this time just reached the western side of the river, and some thousands of Indian coolies and other workmen were encamped there. As the line had to be pushed on with all speed, a diversion had been made and the river crossed by means of a temporary bridge. My principal work was to erect the permanent structure, and to complete all the other works for a distance of thirty miles on each side of Tsavo. I accordingly made a survey of what had to be done, and sent my requisition for labour, tools and material to the head-quarters at Kilindini. In a short time workmen and supplies came pouring in, and the noise of

hammers and sledges, drilling and blasting echoed merrily through the district.

Chapter II: The First Appearance of the Man-Eaters

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Unfortunately this happy state of affairs did not continue for long, and our work was soon interrupted in a rude and startling manner. Two most voracious and insatiable man-eating lions appeared upon the scene, and for over nine months waged an intermittent warfare against the railway and all those connected with it in the vicinity of Tsavo. This culminated in a perfect reign of terror in December, 1898, when they actually succeeded in bringing the railway works to a complete standstill for about three weeks. At first they were not always successful in their efforts to carry off a victim, but as time went on they stopped at nothing and indeed braved any danger in order to obtain their favourite food. Their methods then became so uncanny, and their man-stalking so well-timed and so certain of success, that the workmen firmly believed that they were not real animals at all, but devils in lions' shape. Many a time the coolies solemnly assured me that it was absolutely useless to attempt to shoot them. They were quite convinced that the angry spirits of two departed native chiefs had taken this form in order to protest against a railway being made through their country, and by stopping its progress to avenge the insult thus shown to them.

I had only been a few days at Tsavo when I first heard that these brutes had been seen in the neighbourhood. Shortly afterwards one or two coolies mysteriously disappeared, and I was told that they had been carried off

by night from their tents and devoured by lions. At the time I did not credit this story, and was more inclined to believe that the unfortunate men had been the victims of foul play at the hands of some of their comrades. They were, as it happened, very good workmen, and had each saved a fair number of rupees, so I thought it quite likely that some scoundrels from the gangs had murdered them for the sake of their money. This suspicion, however, was very soon dispelled. About three weeks after my arrival, I was roused one morning about daybreak and told that one of my jemadars, a fine powerful Sikh named Ungan Singh, had been seized in his tent during the night, and dragged off and eaten.

Naturally I lost no time in making an examination of the place, and was soon convinced that the man had indeed been carried off by a lion, as its "pug" marks were plainly visible in the sand, while the furrows made by the heels of the victim showed the direction in which he had been dragged away. Moreover, the jemadar shared his tent with half a dozen other workmen, and one of his bedfellows had actually witnessed the occurrence. He graphically described how, at about midnight, the lion suddenly put its head in at the open tent door and seized Ungan Singh -- who happened to be nearest the opening -- by the throat. The unfortunate fellow cried out "Choro" ("Let go"), and threw his arms up round the lion's neck. The next moment he was gone, and his panic-stricken companions lay helpless, forced to listen to the terrible struggle which took place outside. Poor Ungan Singh must have died hard; but what chance

had he? As a coolie gravely remarked, "Was he not fighting with a lion?"

On hearing this dreadful story I at once set out to try to track the animal, and was accompanied by Captain Haslem, who happened to be staying at Tsavo at the time, and who, poor fellow, himself met with a tragic fate very shortly afterwards. We found it an easy matter to follow the route taken by the lion, as he appeared to have stopped several times before beginning his meal. Pools of blood marked these halting-places, where he doubtless indulged in the man-eaters' habit of licking the skin off so as to get at the fresh blood. (I have been led to believe that this is their custom from the appearance of two half-eaten bodies which I subsequently rescued: the skin was gone in places, and the flesh looked dry, as if it had been sucked.) On reaching the spot where the body had been devoured, a dreadful spectacle presented itself. The ground all round was covered with blood and morsels of flesh and bones, but the unfortunate jemadar's head had been left intact, save for the holes made by the lion's tusks on seizing him, and lay a short distance away from the other remains, the eyes staring wide open with a startled, horrified look in them. The place was considerably cut up, and on closer examination we found that two lions had been there and had probably struggled for possession of the body. It was the most gruesome sight I had ever seen. We collected the remains as well as we could and heaped stones on them, the head with its fixed, terrified stare seeming to watch us all the time, for it we did not bury, but took back to camp for identification before the Medical Officer.

Thus occurred my first experience of man-eating lions, and I vowed there and then that I would spare no pains to rid the neighbourhood of the brutes. I little knew the trouble that was in store for me, or how narrow were to be my own escapes from sharing poor Ungan Singh's fate.

That same night I sat up in a tree close to the late jemadar's tent, hoping that the lions would return to it for another victim. I was followed to my perch by a few of the more terrified coolies, who begged to be allowed to sit up in the tree with me; all the other workmen remained in their tents, but no more doors were left open. I had with me my .303 and a 12-bore shot gun, one barrel loaded with ball and the other with slug. Shortly after settling down to my vigil, my hopes of bagging one of the brutes were raised by the sound of their ominous roaring coming closer and closer. Presently this ceased, and quiet reigned for an hour or two, as lions always stalk their prey in complete silence. All at once, however, we heard a great uproar and frenzied cries coming from another camp about half a mile away; we knew then that the lions had seized a victim there, and that we should see or hear nothing further of them that night.

Next morning I found that one of the brutes had broken into a tent at Railhead Camp -- whence we had heard the commotion during the night -- and had made off with a poor wretch who was lying there asleep. After a night's rest, therefore, I took up my position in a suitable tree near this tent. I did not at all like the idea of walking the half-mile to the place after dark, but all the same I felt fairly safe, as one of my men carried a bright lamp close behind me. He in his turn was followed by another leading a goat, which I tied