A BIT OF THE BOG.

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AFRICA is changing fast. Every year sees fresh encroachment upon its fastnesses, every decade witnesses a diminution in its big game. The iron track forces its way into the wilderness, the dissonant blast of the motor horn disturbs the solitude.

Its very diseases are in places being stamped out, many of its perils and mysteries are things of the past.

Nothing has wrought greater alteration than the war. Territories have changed hands, strange flags flutter where other standards flew, the grim necessities of battle have rendered accessible the inaccessible, have thrown open regions remote and desolate, have brought the doubtful benefits, or at least the accessories, of civilization into places where once savage Nature held unchallenged sway. Hence, ere exploitation proceeds yet further afield, it may be well to cast a look backwards and recall one wild part of Equatoria as it was not so very long ago. In many respects it remains much as of yore, but the prospector is at work and the relentless march of progress will soon set its mark even on that distant province of the Sudan, known, so it is said, in the dim past to two centurions of the Roman Empire, and now a portion of another Empire which in might and magnitude far surpasses that of the emperor whom these two soldiers of fortune served.

The Bog is no bog, save in the playful parlance of the Sudan official, albeit at certain seasons and in certain parts it has a right to the name in all its dreary and deadly significance. It is a great province, larger far than the whole of Ireland, a huge territory of plain and forest, aye an' of hill ranges, of swamps and great rivers, and named like many another province after a water-way, a tributary of hoary Father Nile. And that river itself, sluggish, reed-choked, at times well-nigh unnavigable, is in its turn called, erroneously perhaps from a zoological standpoint, but from that of the Arab by no means unsuitably, Bahr-el-Ghazal, the river of the gazelle.

In some ways it is a dreary voyage up the Bahr-el-Ghazal and suggests the life of a bargee on some neglected canal, so narrow the stream, so still the current, so blocked the channel with vegetable growth. But what bargee ever hauled past floating islands of feathery papyrus, matted clumps of vossia grass and lightly drifting pistia—those tiny cabbages of the strange sudd region? And what bargee ever climbed upon the roof of his deck-house and looked out beyond reeds and rushes and yellow flowering ambatch beans upon vast green plains dotted by thousands of black ant-heaps, or on acres of oozy swamp, which in places resemble very startlingly
a level stretch among Scottish uplands carpeted by green and dying bracken? It is a strange outlook, soon growing wearisome because of its monotony, but for a time impressive by reason of its immensity and the very idea it gives of useless waste and unproductiveness. Yet is there life in it! A sudden rustle and shaking of reeds and out upon a piece of firm ground, rising a few feet from its water-logged surroundings, lumbers a great, clumsy, pink-muzzled hippo. He is so close that we can well-nigh see the bristles on him as, like some huge, unwieldy, flesh-coloured pig, he trots heavily towards shelter.

There are solid patches in the quagmire, and upon these we may see the grey and weird form of the shoebill stork, with his huge heavy beak sunk upon his breast feathers as though he meditated, or stretched before him as he flaps slowly like a heron over the morass. But it is not all swamp, and where the ant-hills are, there shall be found that most dainty of antelopes, the pretty white-eared cob.

Again, the river and its immediate verge are not devoid of life. The stern-wheeler, threshing its way up what looks like an inclined plane, dislodges from the papyrus fringe hundreds of snowy egrets, which flit in front on flapping wings, only to light and be flushed once more until, weary of the game, they break back and are lost to sight. With them may mingle sooty ibises, while every now and then a crane or heron speeds upwards with trailing legs, or ungainly grebes and darters, with snake-like necks, splash along the surface or skim across the stream to light upon the branches of some thick, possibly flowering, and certainly thorny, tree.

In the swamp belt itself are creatures of greater interest. A white patch catches the eye, something moves amongst the dense aquatic growth and field-glasses reveal a male Mrs. Gray, an absurd name for a very fine species of African water-buck. Not a true water-buck, perhaps, but a water-loving antelope with a head not unlike that of a goat and grand, ringed curving horns, a coveted trophy. The white patch is on his shoulder and must often have betrayed this wary and cunning beast. The novice goes light-heartedly in pursuit of a Mrs. Gray in country of this kind, but after half an hour of stumbling over seamed and gaping ground, of pushing through dense belts of reed, of dragging himself from miry pitfalls, of wading up to his waist, with his feet on sagging undergrowth, of sweating, panting, blowing and puffing, he begins to wonder if the game is worth the candle, and indeed if the game is anywhere within a mile of him. Frantic signals from those on the steamer scarcely aid him. His putties are black with the dust of charred grass stems, his body is bathed in perspiration, his boots squelch, and every now and then he fears he will be engulfed or that a lurking crocodile will make an end of him. It is no joke hunting the Mrs. Gray in its fastnesses, and at the end, if he is lucky enough to get within range, he must shoot straight and sure if he is to be comforted by the possession of the noble quarry.

For a space we leave the Gazelle River and run a little way into one of
its feeders, the Bahr-el-Arab, where there is a wooding station. We come upon it in a backwater, the home of countless water-lilies, surrounded on all sides by dense bush and low thorny forests and, as luck will have it, experience a nocturnal thunderstorm. Anything more unpleasant it were hard to conceive, at least on board a tiny steamer, where the cabin has a leaky roof and there is no mosquito house. The night is sultry and the stars have been blotted out by masses of black cloud. It is much too hot to sleep indoors, and shrouded by our curtains we lie on camp beds, uncovered by the sheets, trying in vain to slumber. Suddenly the wind rises, coming in fitful puffs, blowing the nets hither and thither, driving away the singing hordes of bloodthirsty gnats, which have been quartering the meshes seeking an entrance to the blood feast. A vivid lightning flash makes all clear as day for a brief moment, and then a clap of thunder, prolonged into a resonant roll, heralds the rain. Down it pours in veritable bucketfuls, each drop large as a sparrow’s egg, and suddenly the fitful wind gusts seem to unite and form a small tornado. With a truly tropical howl, answered by growls and rumbles and deafening crashes, the full violence of the storm bursts upon us. Flash and crash, flash and crash! Heaven’s artillery makes night hideous and awesome while wet and miserable we gather in the dripping cabin and gaze out upon the wildness of the scene. It might be magnificent were we under good cover, what with the zig-zagging of brilliant light across an inky background, the flare of electricity between contending clouds like a sudden illumination by a thousand incandescent lights, the ear-splitting thunder followed by strange mutterings, which die away only to reverberate again above and on every side. A flaming fire-ball sweeps through space and seems to plunge into the stream, which we see for a moment covered with white-crested waves and pitted hard by from the impact of a million rain-drops.

The turmoil ceases as suddenly as it has begun. The vault clears, the stars twinkle at us once more, the air is cooler, but alas! our mosquito curtains are soaked and torn while ping! ping! the greedy hordes are busy at us. Slap and curse! So it goes on till a rosy light steals into the east and the birds ashore begin to call and twitter, and then with a bound the sun is up, the day has commenced, and we finish loading the chopped lengths of red sunt trees, bringing aboard who knows how many scorpions in the process.

We make for the main stream again, and the voyage proves full of interest. We pass a glade in the thick scrub, a space almost like a ride cut through a forest of young pine. We get only a glimpse of it, but right in the centre, moving away from us, with head slouching forward and tail swinging softly upon his quarters, paces a small leopard. It is always the unexpected which happens, and there is no rifle handy. Even had there been, it could only have been a snap-shot, for we are past the spot in a twinkling and the tree stems hide the brute, but not before we had noted how yellow was the groundwork of his spotted hide, and how indifferent
he seemed to the sound of our stern-wheel beating and churning the dull greenish water into silver streaks and silver spray.

We leave the wooded country, and again on every hand stretches, the abomination of desolation, and we catch the smell of rotting vegetation, that strange dank scent, that pungent tang of putrefying growth which is perhaps the most abiding memory of all that goes to make up the once mysterious Equatoria.

So we come to Lake Fell, which was once called Lake Ambadie. After being long lost to civilization it was rediscovered by the gallant officer whose name it now bears and who gave his life in the exploration of these sudded solitudes. Its clear and shallow waters are full of fish. One can see them darting away from the steamer's bulk, and in the still of evening they rise like trout, hurling themselves into the air and splashing back again into the water. This is doubtless the tortoise meadow of which Schweinfurth speaks, for, as in his day, the coiling stalks of the African *vallisneria* rise to the surface in all directions, forming a subaqueous forest amongst which gambol the finny tribe.

It is a very fine morning when from the cabin roof we catch sight of the thatched *tukls* of the swamp-imprisoned Meshra and the flutter of a Union Jack and of a red Egyptian flag showing bravely against a background of fine umbrageous trees. It is, however, one thing to see Meshra and quite another to get close to it, for after several narrow shaves we are "sudded" at last, locked fast is the grip of the crowding, swaying papyrus, messed up amongst roots and water plants, anchored securely against our will. But if we cannot get at Meshra, there is nothing, as we soon learn to our cost, to keep the agile seroot flies from getting at us. They swarm near Meshra and, as is their way, darted on board, settling softly but very suddenly, chiefly, it is true, upon the funnel casing, but not infrequently on our unhappy selves. Watch one of these greedy blood-suckers after he has landed on your knee! He shifts a little, as if searching for the right spot, squares himself, so to speak, and then very deliberately you see his short stout proboscis sink through the thin cotton of your pantaloons. It is unlikely that you will desire to see any more of the operation, for no sane man appreciates a needle being driven through his skin. If, however, you have the fortitude to endure the stab, and some scientific curiosity, you will see the fly become bloated at your expense and marvel at the rapidity and skill with which his pumping organ works. His we say, but in all probability it should be *her*. A glance at the setting of the gorgeous compound eyes may tell us the sex and, as a rule, it is the female here, as elsewhere, that causes most of the trouble! There are many species of these Nile tabanidre, and they are interesting and attractive flies, not only from their wonderfully compact shape and agile movements but on account of the glory of their colouring.

Some are dull brown or grey with lighter markings on the belly, others are a fine tawny orange with ebony points, yet others are bog-black with
snowy white spots upon them, and there are species much more remarkable
but rarely encountered. In many the compound eyes are the most striking
part, for these are sometimes of a vivid emerald green, a green which is
almost startling in its intensity. Across these wonderful eyes bands of a
pale violet may run or strips which have the blending and shifting hues of
a thin oil film. It is a pity that all this brilliancy vanishes after death.
Seroots arranged in a case with pins stuck through them are but dull ghosts
of their former selves. The living tabanus is to the dead fly what the new
caught herring is to the faded fish of the hawker's barrow.

But we are forgetting Meshra and the method by which we got there at
last. There is only one way out of the difficulty and so overboard go a
couple of our sable crew, carrying a grapnel and a length of stout rope.
They plunge the flukes of the former into the dense aquatic growth and
one of them climbs out upon it and squats on it, keeping the iron teeth in
position. Then ting! goes the telephone bell, the stern-wheel revolves the
wrong way round and we back into the clearing. There is a soft rending
and tearing and then, with a sudden jerk, a great mass of papyrus is
dragged out of the sedge, cast off and sent astern of us. Hour after hour
the work goes on and we eat our way further and further into the heart
of the belt, pushing with long poles, swinging hither and thither, crushing
into the swaying growth, while the working song of the Sudanese rises
upon the air with many a jest and now and then a roar of rough laughter as
some unwary sailor is caught across the shanks by the tautening cable and
cascades into the depths. At last we are free and haul "up alongside the
little jetty, where lies a large steel whale-boat, one of the very craft used by
the audacious Marchand and his company of gallant Frenchmen. It is a link
with the past, but we remember that in all probability those two centurions
of Nero once forced their way to this very spot, and marvel again at the
courage and tenacity of those who served Imperial Rome.

During the greater part of the year Meshra is situated on an island, and
in order to reach the mainland a long causeway has to be traversed. It
is a poor thing at the best, rotten and sagging in many parts, winding
through the surrounding marsh and affording a treacherous foothold, even
to the nimble donkeys and mules which form part of our little caravan.

It is after mid-day when we make the start, riding out to the unknown,
our hamla following far in the rear and accompanied by the thwack of
sticks on the lean carcasses of the baggage asses and the objurgations of
their Arab drivers. Ere we have reached the further end of the causeway
we have seen big game in the shape of scattered tiang or bastard harte­
beeste, whose hides have the hue of old mahogany and who are well-nigh as
tame as sheep. Some of the bulls lumber up on to ant-hills to watch our
array, and make fine pictures, their hooves bunched like those of a chamois
perched upon a rock pinnacle. Tiang beef is excellent, but for the nonce
we are well provisioned and leave the herd in peace.

A few minutes later we are upon the verge of the primaeval forest,
whose great canopy of dense foliage we have marked from afar. Away to our left the land is little known, a leafy wilderness abandoned to the naked savage and the innumerable birds and beasts which find shelter and sustenance within its fastnesses. It makes one think of Mowgli and the jungle folk even to look at it. Why will someone not do for the African forest what Kipling's genius has accomplished for that of India?

Perhaps the first thing that strikes one in these sylvan solitudes is the resemblance they have to woods at home. Many of the trees are like our own familiar oaks, most of them are small and they are often gnarled and twisted as the result of damage done by fire. Here and there of course a big tamarind presents a stout trunk and abundance of foreign-looking foliage; here and there the quaint sausage-like nuts of the kigelia droop from bare branches; here and there a vivid flash of colour, a scarlet poker or a crimson tuft reminds one that he is far from Europe. The big fig trees have leathery leaves and there are strangely sweet-smelling blossoms like those of the white gardenia, but, taken as a whole, the scene is wonderfully home-like, at least at a little distance. A closer inspection, however, reveals the inevitable thorniness of every dense thicket and of well-nigh every small tree, for this is a land of the acacia, of Christ's thorn and of the spiky randia, as well as of the feathery-leaved albizzia and the common hegelig beloved of my lord, the elephant.

It was on the return journey from Wau, not very far indeed from Meshra, that there suddenly stole silently and swiftly across the path a maned and mangy-looking hyaena. We were after it in a twinkling, keen to get a shot. Strange to say the brute showed no hurry to be -- gone, though he knew he was being chased. It almost looked as if he also knew the marksmanship was not likely to be of the best, especially when he came to a dead halt behind a thick bush. The real explanation of his tardiness was apparent only when his mate emerged upon the path with a forepaw dangling helplessly. Her consort waited for her patiently, albeit in danger of his life, and it is pleasant to think that this devoted couple of carrion-eaters departed safely together. I confess I take my hat off to the hyaena. Anyhow this specimen was a chivalrous beast and worthy of respect.

Again there was another day when, after heavy rain, the sky was clearing. Wet and disconsolate we rode along the miry track, splashing through pools where water scorpions disported themselves. For the moment we might have been traversing a bush-fringed moorland in some dreary part of Scotland. Then, like the patriarch of old, we lifted up our eyes and lo! something huge and black was standing in the centre of the road some two hundred yards in front. At first the thought of a rhinoceros suggested itself, for we had seen the spoor of these animals and were on the look-out for them. But the black and bulky mass moved. It swung broadside on and revealed itself as a solitary buffalo bull. As the sound of our approach caught his sharp ears he faced us for a moment and then paced slowly into the long grass and undergrowth at the side of the path.
Pressing forward and dismounting, we came upon him standing under a tree, a monster of bone and muscle, with a coarse coat of ebony hue plastered with mud, with a pair of great horns meeting in heavy bosses upon his forehead, with a damp, shining muzzle and suspicious little eyes watching our every movement. No sooner did he see us than he was off. A stern chase is a long chase, and on this occasion it was a hopeless one as well, for he liked not the look of us and eventually went clean away across country at a swinging trot or ever we got a shot at him.

Ere this occurred, however, one was thinking of other things than buffaloes, for, having sat for a moment upon an ant-heap, one learned what it meant to entertain strangers unawares and spend a strenuous five minutes in endeavouring to keep one's skin intact. It must be the very refinement of torture to embed your enemy up to the neck in an ant-hill and leave him to the poisoned pincers of a crawling host, as was the playful custom of not a few tribes in the Bahr-el-Ghazal!

In due course, as darkness fell, the glow of a fire and the barking of many curs told us we had reached the Dinka village of Amian, a cluster of huts and cattle kraals in a fine open glade shaded by great trees. There we off-saddled, found the well water to be very fair, and out in the open slept the sleep of the just till shortly before dawn. So great is the heat that it is needful to start before the sun is up, making a morning skid, as it is called, to some small halting place where there is a well containing an apology for water.

It would be but a weariness to describe every part of the way, most of it through open park-like country, some of it through places like English lanes where bright yellow star-like flowers bedeck the path, some of it past stretches where herds of giraffe are feeding. There was no end to strange and lovely birds, scattered ostriches, large ground hornbills, the rare bucorax wandering about amongst the grass, weird tree hornbills like imps of the air, secretary birds stalking hither and thither looking for a dinner of snakes, vultures with naked necks, pied crows and gallant, whistling kites; great and little bustard, plump partridges whirring up from the bushes, flocks of noisy, toothsome, blue-wattled guinea-fowl, harbouring parasites galore both in their blood and their intestines, but none the less succulent and well-liking. Crowned cranes with golden crests and harsh voices speed in slow-moving companies over the vast areas where they feed and roost, heavy comb-ducks, with splendid iridescent wing plumage and snowy abdomens, flight heavily towards distant pools, snipe dart out of swampy spots and zigzag to safety. Doves boom from the thickets, tick birds are busy searching for their prey on the backs of Dinka cattle, a flash of brilliant blue shows where a jay is speeding through the woodland, a bronze shrike calls like a hammer tinkling on an anvil, finches flutter in the bushes, and from the tops of high trees bell-like notes resound upon the air.
If the birds make music by day the frogs take up the chorus by night, together with countless insects which hum and stridulate. Cicadas shrill from the trees before the sun sets and while the west is still glowing like a live ember.

On such an evening we reached the rest-house of Gardain and found the Dinkas much perturbed. The night before a couple of lions had raided the miserable cattle enclosure, struck down one cow and stampeded another in the darkness. Pursuing the latter, they had killed the hapless beast a quarter of a mile away, half eaten the carcass, and were expected to pay another visit to the spot, which they duly did and serenaded us in the darkness.

It is a great lion country round about Gardain. Not long before a British officer was asleep here shrouded in his mosquito curtain. Somehow in the small hours one of his servants wakened another and pointed out two strange lights close by their master's bed.

"Lights!" whispered the second, who was a shikari, "by Allah! Those are no lights. They are a lion's eyes!"

So they were, but fortunately the brute took himself off without doing any damage or even disturbing the sleeper. Doubtless he was puzzled by the mosquito net, which that night kept out something even more formidable than an infected anopheline.

Of antelope we saw many species, the massive Roan which the Arabs call Abu Rouf, the Father of Hair, in virtue of his fine mane, Jackson hartbeeste, with their queer long heads and sharply bending horns, the large Bohor reed buck, the little reed buck, the still smaller and very dainty oribi, the tiny dik-dik. Shoot a roan and you will almost certainly find amylomma ticks clustering upon him. The males are gorgeous in their colouring, their scuta being a bright green hue edged with a fine bronze like the copper sheathing which used to guard ships' bottoms. Other ticks are the curse of the traveller, digging their rostra into his skin and hanging on with the tenacity of bulldogs. There are no doubt many snakes, but few are visible. Lizards, however, are much in evidence, some of them very quaint in shape, in colour and in movement. There is one variety in a black and orange livery who keeps bobbing up and down on his short, bowed forelegs in a ludicrous fashion, while another has a tail of cerulean blue and a tongue which for sheer agility it would be hard to beat.

At last we reach the ironstone district wherein Wau is situated and through which courses the wide Sueh river, to become the Jur ere it enters the Bahr-el-Ghazal. The scenery changes utterly; it is all forest now, real forest with creepers festooning the trees, a land of ground orchids, of glorious bulbs and fragrant lilies. The path is bordered by clumps of a fair white flower striped with a delicate pink. The foliage meets overhead, the air is heavy and moist, there is more insect life. The narrow path winds past brakes of bamboo, we meet a Greek trader en route for the Nile with donkey loads of ivory. The rubber vines become a feature of the
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landscape, more especially the landolphia with its spherical fruit, the pulp of which is sweet and pleasant to the taste. Trees rise out of termite mounds, other trees, such as the “kwel,” spring from alien trunks; we pass the lulu, with a bark like a crocodile’s hide and a nut prized for its oil. The noble Sudan mahogany rears itself above its fellows. The birds are everywhere calling and whistling, and once we see a large yellow Chacma baboon rushing man-like for the nearest shelter. Signs of cultivation appear, areas cleared for sorghum, dukhn, telabun, the sweet potato, and the earth-nuts or “puggy”-nuts of our own young days. Tobacco also is grown here, and we see natives busy in their rude fields.

All the time we are climbing a forest-clad ridge, and at last gain its summit. A brief halt to gaze for a moment over a wide expanse of tree-tops, a sea of green, and then down we plunge to the valley of the Sueh.

The forest thins, and ere long we see the picturesque little capital of the Province bosomed in foliage, and even make out the mock battlements of its pretentious new Mudiria hard by what remains of the old French fort. The whole place seems to nestle and slumber in the forest away across the flats and over the shining, tortuous river. We make for the ferry, but stop suddenly and stand agaze. What is this we see? As at every Government post in the far-off pre-war days throughout the vast territories of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, two flags are flying, the one the old scarlet flag of Egypt, with its silver crescent and its silver star, the other the Union Jack, in all the glory of its red and white and blue. But the flags are not mast-headed. They flutter bravely half-way up the posts. We knew that far away to the south an officer of the Province was lying ill with blackwater fever. We had heard of him at Meshra. Had he then answered the call like many a pioneer before him? Would they lower the flags for him?

We knew also that our own Governor-General was far from well in England, was indeed dangerously ill. Was it possible—?

We did not stop to think, but kicked mule and donkey into a lolloping gallop. A boat was crossing the Sueh, the ferry worked by ropes. In the boat was a white man. As he drew nearer we saw it was the Governor. Now we would know. He landed and came towards us. We scarcely wasted time in an ordinary greeting.

“What is wrong?” we asked quickly. “Why are the flags at half-mast?”

“I am sorry to say,” replied the Governor quietly, “that the King is dead. He died three days ago.”

It was May 9, 1910.