

A Strange Duel.

By E. F. Martin, late of the Royal Niger Company's Service.

IN the month of January, a few years ago, towards the close of a dazzling tropical day in the Western Sudan, I had a memorable encounter with a family of hippos.

It happened, at the time, to be returning from a shooting trip up the Benue, a river that joins the Niger at Lokoja. I was due at the latter place next day. In order to catch the steamer that was to take me down river, on my way home on leave. I had gone up the Benue as far as the town of Loko, on the north bank, not far from the large island town of Nassarawa. At Loko I had contracted a severe dose of malarial fever, and at the time of which I write I was feeling anything but up to the mark; in fact, I could hardly put one foot before the other. As all those who have suffered from tropical malarial fever know, it does not require a very severe attack to leave you quite unfit for any ordinary exertion.

My party was an exceedingly small one, consisting of my servant, Bakari, a Fulani from Marawa, beyond Yola, and two camemen; and my conveyance, a little Kakanda dug-out, was barely large enough to carry the four of us in safety. In my hurry to get back to Lokoja I had to leave our large craft behind at Loko.

The river Benue at the point where my adventure occurred was broad and deep—in width about a quarter of a mile—flowing between great sweeping stretches of golden sand on the one side and dark virgin forests on the other. These forests teemed with game.

The few natives who still inhabit that part of the country are gone too friendly. They form the remnants of the original inhabitants who were driven across to the south bank of the river by the continual slave raids of the Mohammedan races from the north.

The wonderful hush which at eventide hangs like a mystic veil over all the tropical world was settling down, and the sun had just sunk below the horizon.

Presently I noticed a far-off splashing, intermingled, now and then, with the unmistakable snort of the hippo.

Following the direction of the sound I could dimly see, some hundreds of yards away, that a family of the great aquatic beasts was sporting itself in giant gambols. Had it been possible, we would have shaped a course away from the group, as it is never safe for a canoe to pass near where young hippos are at play. We had no help for it, however, but to go straight on our course, as the river at this point ran in a single deep channel.

The sunset splendour gradually died out of the sky, and the glassy surface of the river, stretching for mile on mile, took on the cloak of night. Suddenly my canoe-man started to urge the frail craft forward eagerly. Their keen ears had heard some sound that I, as yet, was unable to distinguish. But I soon discovered the cause of their anxiety; our worst fears were justified. Old Father Hippo had spotted us!

In the gathering gloom the hissing, blowing sound of the great beast could be heard from time to time as he swam swiftly in our wake.

My boatmen were now standing up, straining every muscle in the wild race for life. There was no more concealment. The frail craft leapt forward with a swish and a surge at every powerful paddle-stroke, the man in the bow, in his intense excitement, ever now and then sending a shower of water over me. Up against the stars, the man in the stern swung and bent like a sinuous shadow in the tremendous struggle. He grunted as he strained every muscle, and his breath came in sobbing gasps. Rocking up and down, and from side to side, the canoe tore through the water like a living thing.

I carefully examined the magazine and lock of my rifle, for nothing could be left to chance now. My servant knelt at my feet, his white coat showing up very clearly against the night. Every now and then he would say: "Dooba, massa, chan! Ka gani! Kaji!" (Look, sir, yonder! You see! You hear?)

The darkening surface of the water seemed to be broken some distance astern,

but it was difficult to make anything out for certain, while our speed and the noise of our going prevented me from hearing very clearly what my servant seemed to hear so well. Not very long after this, however, I caught the whiff of a gleam of foam, and heard the spluttering hiss above the rush of water. In spite of our pace, our pursuer was overhauling us.

Then, as we dashed, but ever nearer and nearer came that menace of the dark waters, threatening to engulf us in the dark.

Then, raising my rifle and taking a quick snap aim at the patch of foam, I let go.

The flash of the explosion and the stunning report of the discharge, together

with the rush of water overwhelmed me. As I was engulfed, a feeling of being lost in a great cold vastness seized me—the terror of the unknown depths was upon me—for I was hurled down and down, a helpless thing, the black waters all around me and above me, waters that swarmed with that terror of rivers, the alligator. As the canoe upset, something struck me between the shoulders, sending me headlong to the bottom. I struck madly outwards and upwards, and finally I rose to the surface spluttering and well-nigh done. I found that I had come up close to the great steering-paddle used by our Cox. Taking this as a float, and with the aid of the stream, I made for the south shore. In order not to draw the attention of my enemy, I at first uttered no sound, but swam on and on down the stream, edging ever to the left.

The horrible thought that at any moment cruel jaws might seize me, dragging me down to a death too terrible to think of, was always with me. Later on, when I thought that I might be out of harm's way, so far as the hippopotamus was concerned, I uttered a faint halloo. I had hardly any voice left, what with fever, excitement, and fatigue.

A weird, long-drawn wail answered me,



"With a roar it turned on its unlooked-for assailant."

with the smell of burnt powder—all the associations of that moment, away out on the wide waste of dark waters—have left an impression on me that I shall never wipe out. The sudden glare of that instantaneous photograph revealed the crouching form of the canoe-man in the stern, who had stopped paddling when I raised my gun, and over whose head I had fired; the peering, strained attitude of my servant, and that ominous gurgling patch of brilliant white, where our enemy was now thrashing along, right under our stern. Then everything vanished in the subsequent blackness, the darkness of night seeming intensified a thousandfold.

Suddenly the whole place seemed filled with rolling echoes. Over the water, far and wide, volley after volley of distant and still more distant musketry thundered and roared, stirring the leaves of the trees in the woods and dying away gradually in the hidden recesses of the hills. Frightened monkeys chattered on the far-off banks of the river; the sudden call of a night-bird was heard in the forest. Then something happened that baffles description. There came a roar and a splash just at our stern, and the hot breath of the beast that was chasing us blew in our faces. My shot had not taken effect!

With a horrible snapping crunch the terrible jaws closed on the poor dug-out. A gurgling cry, a ghostly scream; then a

from no great distance ahead. Suddenly I touched bottom. Half swimming, half wading, I had hardly reached dry land when I thought I noticed a familiar hissing and blowing behind me. Suddenly an enormous black shape came splashing and foaming after me, out of the depths. I had floundered right into the family of hippos!

I had barely time to dodge to one side before the beast was on me. I tried to run, but stumbled and fell heavily. Wet and exhausted, I lay panting on the sand as the enraged animal rushed by me. Then something happened that I should never have believed possible, had I not seen it with my own eyes. The beast had stopped and turned, evidently intending to come for me again, when up from the sand, just behind the hippo, sprang the dark form of a man. Slipping quickly and silently alongside of the monstrous brute, the stranger stooped and made a desperate lunge at its belly. With a roar it turned on its unlooked-for assailant, who had run off to some little distance and awaited the hounding charge, which he easily dodged, following it by the same deadly knife-thrust.

Like a flash the man was away, and again stood waiting, eager and alert, at some distance behind his gigantic enemy, who, on finding he had missed his man, flung himself round, bellowing the while. Seeing his opponent once more, he went for him again with a mad fury. This

duel to the death went on for some time—a time that seemed an eternity to me—as I never knew that the next charge might not mean the end of my new friend and helper. Exhausted as I was, if the hippo had won, I should have died like a dog, crushed and mangled out of all recognition.

But my time was not yet. The great river monster was beginning to stagger and founder in his repeated fruitless attempts to close with his foe. Dark patches showed on the ploughed-up sand, where its life-blood was soaking. Presently the man seemed to gather himself together, and, rushing in on his enemy, struck fiercely and repeatedly, burying his long knife up to the hilt in the gaping wound that was now visible low down on the hippo's right side. The moon had risen over the closing scene of this titanic struggle, and as the monstrous head lurched forward and downward I saw a torrent of blood gush forth from the cavernous jaws, and knew that the end was at hand, and that my unknown friend had saved my life. A moment more, and with a gulping, sobbing mutter the hippo rolled over on its side—dead.

I must have lain for at least an hour after the great fight had ended, too exhausted to move or to care even what became of me. My new friend (who later proved to be an Akpoto Bissa) disappeared when the hippo fell, but soon returned with a bundle of brushwood and made a cheerful fire quite close to my feet, and presently, in spite of my wet clothes, I fell into a deep sleep.

When I awoke, several men and women were sitting and standing about in the firelight, some of the women cooking at two or three other fires close at hand. My clothes had been taken off as I slept, and were being dried not far from me. My servant, Bakari, was sitting on his heels near by. When I asked him how on earth he got there he explained that he had been picked up by a canoe containing some traders, on their way up river, who on seeing our fire had decided to camp on the same sandbank. Neither of my two camemen had put in an appearance.

With the help of the traders and their people my Bissa friend cut up the hippo, but presented me with the canine tusks as a memento of an occasion that hardly required much in the way of a souvenir to keep me from forgetting it.

Next morning the friendly Bissa procured me a canoe, and I set off on my interrupted journey to Lokoja, accompanied by Bakari. On arriving at my destination I found that our bow canoe-man had preceded us, and was calmly ensconced under my bungalow. The other poor fellow was not found until some days later, when a mangled, lifeless form was seen floating among some reeds by the river bank, near Mozum. The hippo had taken his toll.

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