

ON MANY TRAILS

II.—Through Africa on a Hunt for Gold

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Edited by

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FOR a month we had been traveling northward from Johannesburg. Across four hundred miles of veldt and bush country we had toiled in the incessant downpour of the rainy season toward the land of the Zambesi, the distant wilderness that beckoned to us with promises of gold, the region where, we believed, the ancient mines of King Solomon were waiting to yield yellow wealth to adventurers like ourselves. But now, with more than a third of the distance to the Zambesi covered, it looked as if the hardships and perils we had undergone were to be in vain. We stood on the grassy bank of the Shashi, viewing with dismayed eyes a mile expanse of rushing water.

"We're in a bloomin' hole," remarked Lawler, the cockney Englishman, lighting his pipe. "We can't go a'ead, and, with the grub about gone, I'm blessed if I can see how we can go back."

Lawler had summed up the situation accurately.

With our four pack-donkeys it seemed impossible to ford this flooded river, and yet, because the rains

and mud had made our progress very slow, we had only two days' provisions left. The last human habitation we had passed, a little Boer trading-post, was many miles behind us. We had intended to replenish our supplies at Fort Tuli, a mining camp only a day's travel to the north of where we were; but Tuli, with that mile of water intervening, seemed a great way off. Why, I asked myself, had we disregarded the warnings of those who knew by attempting this journey in the rainy season? But now that we were here, it devolved upon me, as the leader of the expedition, to make the best of our situation, and so I turned to the others smilingly.

"Well, boys, it does seem, as Lawler says, that we are in a hole; but I have climbed out of deeper ones. The Shashi can't prevent us from having a bite of supper and some sleep, anyhow. We'll tackle this African Mississippi in the morning."

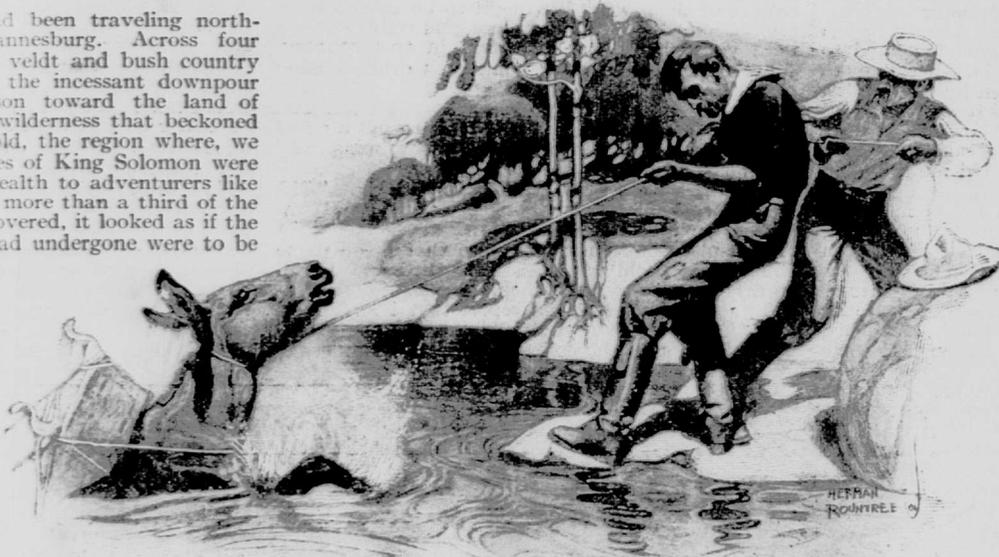
Jones, the tenderfoot from Ohio, and Nimmo, who, like myself, had obtained frontier training in Texas, decided to go up the river to see if they could kill a buck, in order that we might have fresh meat, but after a couple of hours they came back empty-handed. We ate sparingly of the last of our canned corned beef and rolled ourselves in our blankets for a gloomy night. The next morning, with the sun, for a wonder, shining sparkingly on the Shashi, Nimmo and I waded in, feeling our way with long poles. Every instant we expected to strike water beyond our depth, but we waded on and on. When about half-way across I began to sink, though not in water. My feet were in a trap of quicksands.

Narrow Escape From Quicksand

HELP, Nimmo, quick!" I shouted over my shoulder, getting more deeply in with every effort to drag myself out. He came up with long strides, braced himself on a rock, seized the end of my pole, and finally pulled me to solid ground again. If I had been alone, there would have been no chance for me. After an hour of toil we stood on the northern bank of the Shashi, waving back to Jones and Lawler. Nowhere had we found the water more than three feet deep.

We returned as quickly as we could, because before us was the big task of getting the donkeys over. Two, with their packs on their backs, were driven in. Everything went well for a little while, but suddenly the donkeys' advance began to flounder. The sands had been treacherous. Treading gingerly, we found that the river bottom here had enough consistency to bear the weight of a man. In an instant one of us was at the donkey's head, to keep his nose above water, while the other three labored strenuously to lift him out. We actually carried our small friend to a place where he could get a firm footing. It took us three hours to get the three donkeys across. The others were relieved of their packs before we drove them into the water. After eight and a half round trips donkeys and baggage were on the north bank. The sun was sinking when the work was finished. It was one of the hardest day's labor I had ever put in; but we had overcome the Shashi.

With the rush so thick about us that the faint trail seemed like an interminable tunnel, we plodded on the next day until about noon, when a dozen dilapidated huts proclaimed the settlement of Tuli. It was on the other side of a stream—the Shashi again, we learned afterward, but narrow here. We



Poor Jack Was Nearly Choked to Death by the Rope, but We Got Him Across.

forded it quickly, and in a few moments were surrounded by the whole population of a most dismal community. There were about fifteen in Tuli, all men, and most of them Englishmen, who had penetrated to this forlorn spot in the dry season in search of gold. They were emaciated by malarial fever and parched by the sun—mere shells of Englishmen. Since we were the first strangers they had seen in many months, they crowded around us eagerly, plying us with questions as to the doings beyond the wilderness, and repeatedly expressing their astonishment that we should have attempted the trip during the rains. They were all hoping that the fever would spare them until the rivers should sufficiently subside to enable them to get out. They had neither the strength nor recklessness to go as we had come. Tuli was so far from enlivening that, after laying in some fresh provisions and resting for one day, we said good-by to these half-dead Englishmen. I heard afterward that only four or five of them survived the fever and got back to civilization.

Problem of a Furious River

THE Lundi River! The vicious, snarling Lundi! Never will I forget its aspect. It raged over rocks and boulders, throwing spray high in the air, sweeping past us uprooted trees. Some eighty yards below us was a roaring cataract, over which the trees plunged, tossing their branches upward like frantic arms as they took the leap. As we gazed our hearts were in our throats. We must cross this furious stream. All that day and all the next we remained idle in camp, wondering what could be done. The prospect of retreating to a living death in Tuli was appalling, and so, the morning of the third day, I determined to get across the Lundi, or drown in the attempt.

It seemed proper that I should be the man to make the venture, for the reason that I had induced the others to come upon this journey, and was, besides, the strongest swimmer, having acquired expertness in the Hudson during the old days at West Point. I forced my way up stream through the underbrush for about two hundred yards, and carefully stepped down the steep bank into the water. Instantly I was beyond my depth. The whirling current had me in its grip. With relentless force it was sweeping me along—down toward the place where the water was boiling over the rocky ledge of the cataract. The shore glided by me rapidly. It seemed useless to struggle; the forces against me were too strong. But all the while I was struggling desperately.

I got a little clear of the main current, and headed on a tangent for some boulders round which the water swirled. I knew that if I missed these my last hope was gone. When I neared the narrow mill-race that ran between me and the first big rock, I struck out as I never had before, and got my fingers on the rock. In a moment I was climbing upon it. When I rose to my feet I noticed that the stream between me and the northern bank was shallow enough for wading, if one was careful to obtain a good foothold with each step.

"If you can get this far you are all right," I shouted to the boys. "But it's awful! Go higher up stream if any of you intend to try it."

Nimmo began to make his preparations. Having been wise enough to provide ourselves with plenty

of rope, he took from the pack a light but strong line and tied it securely about his body beneath the arms. Then, profiting by my experience and advice, he went about fifty yards farther up the stream than I had, and plunged in. As he worked his way through the water the others paid out the line, keeping well abreast of him as the current carried him down. In a couple of minutes, having cleared the main channel higher up than I had, he came sprawling on the rocks.

We now decided to see what could be done with a donkey. Jack, our strongest animal, was selected for the trial. His pack had been removed, of course, but the boys on shore put on his back our bake-oven—our precious bake-oven, without which we could have no bread. With its legs sticking upward, and the oven lid beneath, they secured it with the diamond hitch, and then fastened their end of the rope about Jack's neck. They now led him to the place where

Nimmo had gone in, and pushed him off the bank. Immediately Nimmo and I began to pull. Poor Jack's head was under water most of the time, and he was nearly choked to death by the rope, but by degrees we got him across the channel. He was plunging through the current that whirled swiftly around the rock when suddenly the oven lid shot out from his back and sank into the stream.

"I must get that lid. The oven's no good without it," I remarked when we had pulled the donkey up.

"You'll go over the cataract if you try," said Nimmo.

"We'll call one of the others over here," I answered, "and then I will depend on both of you to hold onto me while I'm in the current."

Jones, entering the water even farther up than had Nimmo, crossed in safety. Then I fastened the rope beneath my arms and went off the rocks. I had noted the spot where the lid went down. Several yards above it I dove quickly, saw that valuable piece of metal dimly through the water, and made a successful grab for it as I went by. The boys now began to pull me back. The rope cut into my flesh; but soon I was on the rocks again, much elated over the fact that we would still have bread.

We waded with Jack to the opposite bank, and finally got ourselves, our donkeys, and all our provisions across the Lundi. Under ordinary circumstances we would never have dared that river. The fact that we did, and reached the other side, indicates what obstacles may be surmounted when one is up against grim necessity.

Encountering Ferocious Crocodiles

OUR immediate objective point now was Fort Victoria, a mining settlement two hundred miles to the northwest of Tuli. We had no more trouble with the streams, except that, upon reaching one of them, we were startled to see, basking in the sun on the opposite bank, a huge crocodile. Observing us, it made for the water with great rapidity. Having no doubt that it had joined others in the muddy depths, and having no desire to come into close quarters with these man-eating reptiles, which have captured and consumed thousands of human beings in African streams, we paused on the bank.

"All we can do," I remarked, "is to shoot into the water to frighten the devils away, and chance it."

With this three of us began firing, while Nimmo, rifle in hand, entered the creek with a donkey. Continuing to fire, we drove the other donkeys in, and, in single file, did some rapid wading. Most of the streams we had already crossed were full of crocodiles; but they lie in quiet eddies in the rainy season, and consequently are less dangerous than when the currents are not so swift.

The rains having delayed us, we were still four days from Fort Victoria, when again our food gave out. All we had left was pepper, salt, and coffee. This condition gave speed to our tired legs. Worn and gaunt, with our belts strapped in to the last hole, we forged ahead, ascending into higher country, and coming into view of some distant mountains. At last, a little before sundown one afternoon, we reached a high ridge, and saw Victoria. Jones and Lawler hurried on in advance, and returned with food a little while after Nimmo and I, near a stream about a mile from town, had unpacked the donkeys and built our fire. There was much less of