

AMONG THE WILD ANIMALS OF EAST AFRICA

True Stories Related by a Young Traveler

IX. A CROCODILE ADVENTURE

DURING my stay in central East Africa, I lived for a time on a farm near the shore of a large lake. I had a young friend, the son of the owner of the farm on which I was employed. This young man attended school at Nairobi, but usually spent his vacations on his father's farm. He liked the life on the large plantation, the riding on the small mountain ponies, and the fishing in the nearby lake and small streams.

In the evening the boy's father would sit in a big chair before the open fire, and tell stories of adventures of the early European colonizers of East Africa, of whom he was one. "And remember, son," he would say, "the dangers of the olden days are still with us in this country; the jungles of East Africa are still full of wild animals."

My young friend and I would sit and listen to these stirring tales. Sometimes as we sat thus, the stillness of the African night was interrupted by the roar of a lion or the snarling of some leopard nearby. Of course we were safe here in the stone farmhouse whose windows had strong iron bars as a protection against dangerous animal intruders.

The planter warned his son against riding out into the country without having a native boy with him and a gun for their defence. The young man had been trained early to use a rifle, and it was really unnecessary for the father to remind his son to take a weapon with him into the wilderness. When my young friend took a trip into the jungle, Wataia, the native boy, was always glad to follow him.



The Crocodile—a Dangerous Enemy

Wataia was only a few years older than my young friend. As boys they had been reared on the same farm, and had been on many safaris together. The native knew the country better than the planter's son, who spent much of his time in school

in Nairobi, and so was not very familiar with the sights and sounds of the jungle and wild plains. Wataia was able to smell a snake in the high grass, and more than once had kept his master's son from running into a dangerous reptile. Wataia had only his long spear as a protection, but the planter's son had a rifle and a revolver for defence.

My young friend had again come home for a summer's vacation. A few days after his arrival, he proposed to me

that we go on a fishing trip. Just then work was not very pressing on the plantation, so I gladly accepted the invitation. I was really looking for a little excitement. Anything might happen on this fishing trip, for everything in East Africa is an adventure, and sometimes an adventure turns out to be a dangerous one.

Accordingly we went to the lake to prepare for our fishing trip. The boats and fishing equipment had to be looked over, for they had not been used for several months. As usual, Wataia went with us. He was very useful in overhauling the boats and getting the fishing paraphernalia in readiness. Presently we had everything prepared to go out fishing the next morning. We were going to use a heavy, safe rowboat and a light, narrow canoe.

That night we all sat before the open fire at the plantation house. Once again my young friend's father warned us of the dangers of an African jungle. "There are hundreds of crocodiles in the lake and the streams. Do not leave the boat and go into the water—one is never sure where a crocodile is lurking. A savage old crocodile may suddenly appear from the depths of the water."

Early next morning we left the house. We wanted to begin fishing before the larger fish left the surface of the water for the cooler depths of the lake. We intended to stay the whole day at the lake and not return home until dusk. We had taken food with us, and, with some of the fish which we would catch fried in a skillet over the coals, we would fare sumptuously.

Soon we were ready to paddle to the fishing grounds. My young friend and I were in the larger rowboat, and Wataia was in the canoe. Each of us had our

fishing tackle all ready in our boat, and a small can of live bait. My companion and I had each taken a rifle; one never knows in East Africa when a rifle is necessary, even in the water. Of course Wataia had his long spear. We all thought of the crocodiles which my young friend's father had spoken of the night before. From previous fishing trips, we knew there would be many crocodiles ready to give us trouble if they could do so.

The fishing was splendid. At every cast we had a bite. In a couple of hours we had many fish—more than we could possibly eat. We would take a good catch home to the plantation where they would be a welcome addition to the larder.

Before the sun had reached its hot noon-day position, we intended to return to the shore and stay there under the shadows of the tall trees. When the sun was high over head we started for the shore.

We were about two hundred yards from the landing place. Wataia was considerably ahead, because he could paddle faster in his canoe than we could row in our boat. Suddenly a big crocodile appeared. Wataia stood up, spear in hand, ready to hurl it at the reptile. In so doing, he shifted his weight, so that the canoe capsized. The next second we saw Wataia in the water and the canoe floating with its keel upward.

Wataia was a good swimmer and struck out for the shore. At that instant the big crocodile saw him and started toward him, swimming rapidly.

"Swim! Swim! Wataia," I shouted. "The crocodile is after you." Wataia heard me and speeded up. But to our dismay we saw that the crocodile was

gaining. I aimed my rifle at the reptile and fired, but either I missed him or my shot had no effect on his tough skin.

The crocodile was rapidly gaining. We were petrified with fear. We looked around for other crocodiles, and I was horrified when I saw another and yet another making for the boy.

Wataia changed his course and started for some overhanging branches on the shore. He put forth superhuman effort. One of the ugly reptiles was almost up to him. Both of us in the boat were firing at the crocodiles, but we were afraid of firing at the one nearest Wataia, lest we hit the boy.

We saw the treacherous wake of the crocodile rapidly approaching the native boy. Wataia had only a few strokes left and he would reach the overhanging branches, but the speed with which the crocodile followed him gave the native very little chance to escape certain death.

"Swim, Wataia, swim," my young friend called after the boy as he aimed his rifle and fired at the swimming crocodile. He knew quite well he could not kill the animal from such a distance, but he hoped to attract its attention from the swimming native. But the reptile followed its prey undisturbed, and I feared the worst for the native boy.

Suddenly Wataia gave a leap out of the water and grabbed a low-hanging branch above his head. The next second the crocodile had reached the place where the native had been swimming. The reptile snapped furiously at Wataia, but the boy was so high above the great open mouth of the creature that the crocodile missed him.

We watched breathlessly and felt relieved when we saw Wataia swinging in the low branches. The native was safe

at least for a short while. But we must relieve him quickly, or he might fall into the water again. The crocodile was swimming around and waiting for its prey. We began rowing toward Wataia and the crocodile.

"Quick, master," shouted the native boy. "I am slipping." We redoubled our efforts, but before we could get there, Wataia fell into the water. The crocodile saw him and started toward the boy. As he did so, my young friend, now nearer the reptile, aimed his rifle and struck the animal in the eye. By that time Wataia reached our boat, and I quickly pulled him aboard.

We all sat in the boat a little while to recover from the shock of our adventure. As we sat thus, my young companion and I fired at the crocodiles, and they soon disappeared. Then we went to our landing place and in a little while were frying fish over an open fire. We enjoyed our meal and a rest under the shady trees. Late that afternoon we returned home with a good mess of fresh fish, and were none the worse for our thrilling adventure with a crocodile.

QUESTIONS

1. Where is Nairobi?
2. What is a *safari*?
3. Why does the author say that "everything in East Africa is an adventure?"
4. What was the danger of the water?
5. What was the accident which placed Wataia in a dangerous position?
6. What did Wataia do to save himself from the crocodile?
7. Do you think Wataia was quick-witted in the jungle? Why?
8. What saved the life of Wataia?