

AMONG THE WILD ANIMALS OF EAST AFRICA

True Experiences Related by a Young Traveler

V. A JUNGLE FIRE



Their only aim was to escape from the great jungle fire.

HEAVY CLOUDS of smoke were driving over the great plains which border the foothill of Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa. (See the map on page 168.) We had been watching those smoke clouds from the little hotel at Merangu. The view from this hotel was excellent. In the morning we could get a splendid view of the white, snow-covered top of Kilimanjaro, some 19,800 feet above sea-level. During the noon hour we had a beautiful view of the wide plains toward the south.

"There must be a great fire in the foothills," said the owner of the little hotel, a man who had lived in this place for many years. He had come out on the veranda at the moment when my friend

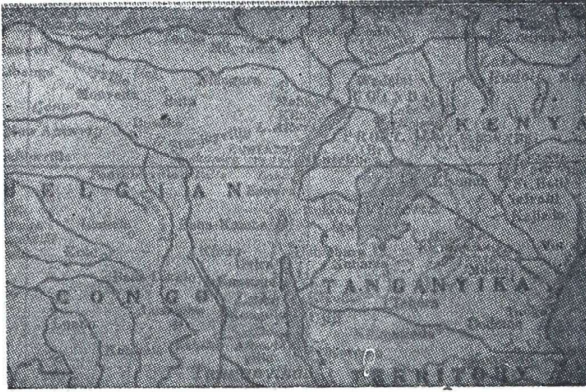
had called my attention to the black smoke-clouds.

"I have never seen a great fire here on the plains," I said. "Those which I have seen near Nairobi were usually quickly under the control of government fire fighters." (Locate Nairobi on the map on page 168.)

"I would like very much to have a nearer look at this fire," my friend said, as he looked over at me.

"I think you could reach the place in less than an hour from here," the hotel proprietor remarked, "but you should be careful and not go too near. These fires burn quickly, and sometimes people are caught in such fire-traps."

"We will be careful," said my friend,



Locate the town of Nairobi and Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in East Africa.

as we both started for our little Ford car.

We drove down the main road toward the south in the direction of the hills where the fire was raging. Our attention was directed toward the black smoke which became heavier and more threatening. We were out on the plains and the road led us along the foothills of Kilimanjaro.

The slopes of the mountain are very fertile and furnish a habitat to every kind of wild animal which can be found in East Africa. When one is on the slopes of Kilimanjaro, he is, indeed, among the wild animals of East Africa.

The plains below the mountain slopes are dry and dusty except during the rainy season. When there is rain the rank grass grows to a height of eight or ten feet. During the dry season this grass becomes parched and brown, and burns like tinder.

The road which we had to follow went through this high, dry grass. Occasionally leading from this there was a private road which led to some lonely farm located in the foothills of Kilimanjaro.

We had driven for nearly an hour when we saw the blaze of the fire at the end of a private road. We turned our auto up this narrow lane. When we came to a clearing where the auto was

safe, we parked our car and walked on by foot. We passed a group of gesticulating East African natives who were all pointing to the fire and talking about it. From that point we could see how the flames were eating their way through the jungle down toward the plains. The flames had not yet reached the plains, but the distance was not more than a half-mile from the edge of the jungle fire. When the flames reached the tall dry grass, they would spread with terrific speed.

My friend and I walked nearer to the jungle and the fire. We could see a long stretch where the fire was cutting a road into the old forest, but on account of the wind the fire did not spread on our side of the jungle. The fire moved before the wind which swept through a valley down from the mountain. We were lucky to stand at a safe distance from this road of fire.

We could see a long bare space between the jungle and the beginning of the high plain grass. We decided to remain where we were and watch how the fire would spring over the bare place to the tall, dry grass. This took quite a little time, as the fire was still some distance in the jungle.

All this time wild animals were fleeing in terror at the on-coming fire. Fire is the only common enemy of all animals. Elephants had left their grazing places on the higher slopes. Herds of them came rushing from the jungle toward the open plains. They ran across the bare space before us. Their trunks were held high in the air, their ears were extended out straight, and their heavy feet moved rapidly over the ground. They were escaping from the great jungle fire.

African buffaloes, easily distinguished by their broad, heavy horns and great

dark manes, pawed the earth and ran toward the plains. The African buffalo is noted for his ferocious and vindictive spirit, but these characteristics were not in evidence in these particular animals, whose only aim was to get into safety from the fast approaching blaze.

Lions came in groups from their lairs in the jungle. They ran for safety with their yellow manes flowing around their great heads, while their tails pointed straight backwards. Terrified females followed the stronger males, their cat-like heads stretched forward. I saw a lioness with two cubs in her mouth leap from the jungle; she was much slower than the others, for she had to save her babies.

The dark-spotted cousin of the lion, the leopard, was also in flight; he leaped into the grass of the plains.

Among these beasts of prey were herds of bucks, antelopes, elands, gazelles, and zebras. These animals are always frightened at the sight of a leopard or a lion, but today all the East African wild animals in that section were frightened alike at a common enemy from which they were fleeing, the jungle fire.

Birds of different kinds flew through the air, screaming for their burning

young ones in the nests. Great snakes darted out of the jungle and rushed to safety. We saw eight giant pythons glide into the grass with quick movements of their large bodies. Their short, ugly heads pointed straight forward away from the fire.

With a crackling noise and a great roar the fire was eating to the edge of the jungle. In less than half an hour it reached the edge. The final moments of

the fire in the jungle were the worst. The remaining members of the animal world rushed across the open space in front of us. They had waited until the last minute, and now were coming from all sides. They were the individual animals who had lost their herds and were now in the rear guard of the fleeing wild



Elephants, with ears extended, ran across the bare space as they fled from the oncoming fire.

animals.

Finally the fire reached the edge of the jungle. Great old thorn trees caught fire almost instantly, and heavy thorn thickets burned like dried grass. Vines, which for years had grown from the branches of dead trees and had built heavy curtains in the jungle, burned away in a few minutes.

The strong webs of enormous poison-

(Please turn to page 178.)

JUNGLE FIRE

(Continued from page 169)

ous spiders crumbled in the heat, and the spiders were killed without mercy, as they had killed helpless insects and birds. Swarms of mosquitoes flew up and became easy prey for the birds. When a cloud of smoke covered the tree tops, the small birds were paralyzed and dropped into the flames which quickly burned them.

I noticed a scraggly old "monkey tree" with a peculiar short trunk which stood at the edge of the plain. The branches stretched out wide on both sides. Groups of small monkeys were sitting chattering on the branches looking at the coming fire. This old home of many monkey families became the victim of the flames in less than five minutes. The screaming, chattering monkeys jumped and fled. After the branches had burned away, the great trunk continued to burn like a torch.

The fire had burned rapidly through the jungle, although great trees and green branches and leaves had slowed its passage somewhat. When the fire reached the high dried grass of the plains, nothing impeded the progress of the flames. They ran through

the grass with the speed of a demon, burning everything. The terrified animals of the jungle were joined by those of the plains, and they all ran for their lives.

Rhinoceroses, using the horns on their noses, cleared for themselves a free path through the herds of smaller and weaker animals. Zebras were run down, and lions were trampled under the heavy feet of great elephants. The smaller plainbucks and antelopes were soon killed under the hoofs of buffalo herds. Panic had stricken all animals and they had to run. Should they become tired and drop behind, the flames would catch them. It was a terrified, running, screaming, roaring, trumpeting herd of wild animals of East Africa such as a person may see only once in a lifetime.

My friend and I were astonished at this gigantic theater of destruction where there had been a green and living landscape less than an hour before. Now it had become a quiet, black, charred place of death. For a long time we stood and watched the fire run over the wide, grassy plain. Nothing was left after the red horror of the flames passed.

After the fire had burned itself out, through our field

glasses we saw hundreds of smoking remains of animals and reptiles scattered over the plain. There lay the blackened bodies of elephants, rhinoceroses, lions, zebras, and numerous others of the East African country. But nothing is ever wasted in the jungles and plains of East Africa. Soon flocks of vultures and buzzards came to the charred plains and started to clean up the dead carcasses of those savage animals. Soon nothing but bare bones would be left to mark the tragedy of a great jungle fire which I had witnessed.

REVIEW

1. Name the two most important places mentioned in this story.
2. Read about each in the encyclopedia, and then tell all you remember.
3. Make a list of the animals named.
4. In the encyclopedia read about each one and then tell all you remember.
5. Have you ever seen or read of a forest fire? Tell about it.
6. When and where are forest fires apt to occur in the Philippines? (In the mountains during the dry season.)
7. When the wild animals were running from the fire, why did they not attack each other?