INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DER - 36
Congo Elephants

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M. David's Hotel
Epulu River Station
Belgian Congo

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The African elephant is one of the meanest and most dangerous animals on earth. There are a number of tombstones in East Africa that bear silent witness to this fact. They decorate the graves of those hunters, or would-be hunters, who either missed or only wounded some old tusker. Other tombstones are for those who were unlucky enough to bump into an elephant accidentally. Cars have also felt the fury of the African elephant. Once I saw a three-ton lorry that had been smashed up by tusk and trunk and then had been sat on by an elephant. It was good only for scrap.

During my 20 months in East Africa, I gained a profound respect for tembo. Except for the occasional photographic foray, I kept as much distance as possible between the elephant and me. The local people said the African elephant would never become a gentleman and I was inclined to agree with them.

It was with some disbelief yesterday that I saw 12 African elephants, each with a blase African riding on its back, coming down the road to the Epulu River here. Two big female elephants, each with ponderous tusks, marched side by side in front. Behind them, in orderly pairs, marched ten younger elephants. The African mahouts were dressed in blue shorts, blue tunics and khaki caps. If an elephant strayed even a foot out of line to nip off a branch going past, his African rider promptly thumped him on the ear with a stick and he got back into line.

The column got to the rickety old bridge over the Epulu, bunched in a little closer, then marched smartly across in military precision. The loose planking on the bridge thundered in protest. A portly European gentleman in a khaki uniform and fancy cap appeared on the road and gave the command to halt. Twelve elephants ground to a stop. They did a left face and kneeled down. The mahouts slid off. The elephants rose again and stood waiting for the next command. It came. They broke ranks and slid down the 20 foot embankment, then turned left and plodded down to the river. They barreled into the water and soon were in midstream.

The two big females appeared to be standing, but it was too deep for the little ones and they had to swim. The whole herd passed beneath the bridge, climbed or swam to shallow water and spent the next 15 minutes drinking and blowing water on themselves. The uniformed gentleman, whose name was Monsieur Jean de Medina, said, "Now they are taking their bath. Every evening they are taking their bath like this and then they are going to sleep for the night."

Only in the Congo does the above scene take place. The Belgians seem to be the only people in Africa who have tamed and trained the fierce African elephant. All of those elephants performing in circuses in the United States and Europe are Indian elephants, smaller and much more gentle than their dyspeptic African cousins. Some African elephants have been sent to zoos abroad, but they are dangerous and have to be guarded closely. It really is not too surprising that the Belgians are doing what no one else ever dreamed of attempting. The Congo is one vast business enterprise, run on efficient and systematic lines, and an effort is made to develop all the resources of the territory. There are elephants aplenty and it was only a matter of time before the industrious Belgians turned their attention to this resource as well.

While the elephants snorted and splashed in the river below, we stood on the bridge with de Medina and he told us about himself and his elephants. His title is Officier de Chasse for the Congo government and he seems to be about 60 years old. He wears big horn rimmed glasses. He was born in the Portuguese West Coast territory of Angola and he studied zoology at the University of Lisbon. He has been in the Congo for 35 years. In addition to supervising the upbringing of elephants, he captures gorillas, okapis (a rare forest buck) and other game. It is a government enterprise and the animals are sold to circuses and zoos abroad. De Medina has nine children, some of whom are still in school, and he lives in a comfortable thatch roofed cottage overlooking the Epulu.

In the old days the elephant business was a big thing. Congo plantation owners bought elephants and used them to pull out stumps and perform similar heavy work. But now? De Medina sighs. "The bulldozer is replacing the elephant. The African elephant, even if we train him, he can be dangerous. So? A bulldozer causes no trouble. The planter buys one instead." De Medina recalls only one planter who sticks to the tried and true method. The rest have switched to bulldozers.

Elephantdozers are becoming a thing of the past, but the Congo government still sells trained elephants to foreign zoos. The idea of training them is to make them a little easier to handle. De Medina's elephants serve another purpose as well: the Congo is eager to attract tourists and they make a good tourist attraction.

For the Congo, elephant training is an old business. In 51 years, 600 elephants have gone through the mill and have been shipped off to plantations and zoos. In former days, full and half grown elephants were captured. But they proved to be too dangerous; there were always a number of fatalities among handlers. These days only young elephants, two to four years old, are caught.

The technique is to stampede a herd. The youngsters are unable to keep up and men move in after them aboard tame elephants. As soon as the fickle youngsters spot the tame females, they follow them away. If the real mother should return to claim her offspring, a man darts in front of her on a horse to provoke a charge. An elephant can do perhaps 20 miles an hour in a short sprint, but a

horse is faster than that. The rider keeps leading the angry mama father away from her baby. Meanwhile the other men take the baby off to the camp.

The captures are made a couple of hundred miles to the northeast and the young elephants are put through the preliminary paces there. Then they are brought to de Medina's camp at the Epulu for further schooling. Some respond quickly and are fully trained in only three weeks. It takes up to six months with others.

Each morning they go out into the Ituri forest with a few African herdsmen and, unchained, they graze all day. Late in the afternoon they are herded back to the road, the mahouts climb aboard and they come down to the river for the bathing and drinking routine. After that, the mahouts call them out, individually and by name, and they march in formation to a nearby grove where they are chained for the night.

We asked de Medina if they ever run away. "Oh, no," he said. "They're afraid of the wild elephants in the forest." It seems that the elephants like living in de Medina's camp. "One time we had a young male who was very mean. Very dangerous. So we chained him to two big elephants and they marched him 100 kilometers (about 60 miles) into the forest. The boys unchained him there and they left him. In a week he was back at my camp. So I said, 'He must go.' This time the two elephants took him 200 kilometers. He was back in a month."

The prodigal came lumbering down the road at that moment, chained to one of the two big tame ones. "He is so dangerous," de Medina said. "Every minute he is looking for a person or another elephant to sink his tusks into."

We went over to de Medina's house. The mahouts came straggling along behind us and lined up in front of a flag pole. "Now we must lower the flag," de Medina said. A bugle sounded. The mahouts snapped to attention, a ragged line of Africans whose uniforms ranged from deep blue to just the suggestion of blue, depending on the number of washings. The bugle sounded again. De Medina saluted from the verandah of his house. The Africans saluted too and the black, yellow and orange flag of Belgium was lowered for the night. "Now," said de Medina, "my day is finished."

A servant brought beer to the verandah. As we talked the night came on. Lightning flashed in the sky, clouds began to gather and the fast muddy waters of the Epulu took on a pink tint. "The reason I am alive today is because of the pigmies," de Medina said. "I went with them on one of their hunts for elephant once. They told me, 'Now you must do everything we do.' When we came to the first fresh elephant dropping, the pigmies rubbed the excrement on their arms, legs, chests. They said, 'You must do it too.' I did not want to---you understand that---but I did. Then an elephant charged us.

She missed me and went crashing around in the brush looking for me. Elephants are very near-sighted and they must go by their sense of smell. She could not find me. Why? Because I was smelling like an elephant."

The storm was moving down the Epulu. The wind increased and the trees along the riverbank swayed back and forth. "The African elephant, he is the most dangerous animal of all," de Medina was saying. "He is all right here because he is in his group. But when he is alone, ah, such trouble. We sent an elephant to a zoo in Antwerp once. The man in charge of the zoo had been dealing with Indian elephants all his life. He knew nothing about our African elephants and he made a mistake, a bad mistake. He assumed they were the same. So he told the attendants to open the crate and he stood in front of it and said, 'Come to me, my jumbo.' Yes, his jumbo came to him---he put a tusk right through the man's chest." After that, the Antwerp zoo magnanimously gave the killer to a French zoo.

"You can never send an African elephant to a circus," de Medina said. "If they are hearing too much noise, they are becoming foolish and they are wanting to wreck things. They usually behave when they are on a plantation or in a zoo---if it is quiet---but you can never be sure. You can never trust them." In all his years of handling African elephants, de Medina suffered only one injury. An elephant picked him up and threw him---"like a tennis ball"---and he broke a finger when he landed.

The rain was splashing on the verandah railing. It was the beginning of a Congo cloudburst. The Epulu, hidden in darkness, roared louder, fed by a thousand swollen rivulets in the upper reaches of the Ituri forest. It would be a wet, wild tropical night. "The African elephant is good for just one thing really, just one thing," de Medina said. "He is made for the charge!" De Medina made a rapier thrust with his finger. "Ears out, trunk up, charging straight at you, coming to kill!"

Sincerely,

David E. Reed

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