

## A JOURNEY IN ABYSSINIA. VIII<sup>1</sup>

BY JEAN D'ESME

For eight days we skirted the banks of Lake Tsana, the enormous body of water from which the flow of the River Nile can be regulated. It is bordered with trees, rocks, and vast fields of papyrus, on which the sun glistens in many colors.

In the plain that surrounded our encampment we found traces of the activities of the English mission that had been there eighteen months before, studying the water supply and preparing to control it. We spent all this time close to the waters of the lake, either on the rocks or on the banks, where dams that will change the formation of this body of water will be erected. All along our pathway were black crosses and symbols engraved with a cold chisel to mark the spot where a mine will be laid. On the little plateau outside the village of Bar-Dhar stood an abandoned mission station.

Two kinds of people inhabit this little settlement. On the shores of the lake are the Abyssinians in their native huts, clustered about the church, and farther out in the plain, where there is no shade, are the Weitos, skinny and nervous, living in a confused group of hovels so low that you had to enter them on your hands and knees and were unable to stand up when you got inside. The Weitos are not liked by the savage, proud Abyssinians, but they reminded me of my beloved Somalis in the Dankali desert.

<sup>1</sup> From *L'Écho de Paris* (Clerical daily), October 12, November 10

Half-naked, carrying lances in their hands, they wander the whole length of the Abbai in little groups, hunting for hippopotamuses and killing them with their lances or with dilapidated guns, forty or fifty years old, that even have no sights on them. When they succeed in bagging a hippopotamus they join in a Pantagruelian feast on the very spot where they have killed their prey.

'Yes,' as the Abyssinians say with a disgust heightened by religious prejudice, 'they are hippopotamus-eaters.'

And what eaters! To appreciate them fully we must witness one of these banquets. To understand also all they have told us about the hippopotamus we must ourselves be heroes in one of the most bizarre hunting parties in which we have ever participated.

For six days we tried to get near a hippopotamus. Hidden in blinds on the banks of the Blue Nile, we saw these animals in troops of five or six bathing in the river, but always out of range. In spite of our tricks, we never could get nearer than two hundred and fifty or three hundred yards to these groaning, snorting, plunging animals, who now and then stuck their large snouts above the water for a few seconds, and wiggled their ears.

Tired of this inactivity, we had decided to depart the next day and leave these defiant beasts to themselves. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, and I was surrounded by cases and bales that my servants were

packing up, when my boy rushed upon the scene.

'A Weito wants to speak to Monsieur.'

'Bring him over.'

The man appeared before me and bowed. 'I know that you want to kill a hippopotamus. I know where there are some, and can take you there. I can guarantee that you will get a good shot at them.'

I hesitated, for I had often heard this phrase before. The man shrugged his shoulders, got up, and pointed his lance in the direction of a little island about forty yards away. 'They will be as near you as that island there.'

I got up too. 'Where is the place?'

He pointed his lance toward the Nile. 'On the edge of the Abbai two hours and a half away.'

'How long does it take on horseback?'

'An hour at top speed.'

'Good! We will go on horseback. One shall be saddled for you.'

He shook his head. 'No, I shall go on foot, and shall not hold you up at all. You'll see.'

Half an hour later we set forth, and in an hour and a quarter we had arrived. Up to that point the man had not deceived us. It took us sixty-five minutes to get to the place he had told us of, though we had to gallop and trot without stopping. The man, true to his promise, had not held us up; for sixty-five minutes he had run in front of my horse with his lance in his right hand. A quarter of an hour later we swung in view of the river.

Five or six Weitos leaped out of the underbrush around us and joined our troop. In front was a growth of papyrus with two rocks on either side of it, and the Nile beyond pursued its silent course, blue and peaceful. Hidden by one of the rocks, a hippopotamus was grunting in the water. My guide signaled me to follow him. We slipped

through the papyrus, treading it under our feet, and advanced slowly into the water until it came up to our knees. From the edge of the river we gradually distinguished our hippopotamus, slightly to the right. He was bobbing up and down in the water about a hundred yards away. Again it was too far off. My guide saw my motion of disgust. He smiled and signaled me to wait, taking his place beside me. Behind him the five or six Weitos had gathered mysteriously together, while I stood motionless and silent. Suddenly my guide raised his voice, bursting into a strange, low, monotonous song, rather sad, and ending on a minor note. The group behind us took up the refrain in chorus. I looked at them curiously, but my guide poked me and insisted on my watching the hippopotamus sharply. Headed downstream, the animal was swimming farther away, when suddenly he stopped. Poking his head out of the water, he fixed his eyes on us and remained in this position for ten or twelve seconds, motionless, and holding his own in the current. He then plunged. At this moment the chorus subsided and my guide took up his solo part again, looking all the time at the spot where the beast dove, until the animal rose again still nearer, and swam slowly toward us for about twenty yards before diving once more. The chorus took up its refrain, and the animal reappeared nearer still. Unquestionably it heard the song and was coming toward us. There it was, sixty, fifty yards away! I put my gun to my shoulder, but my guide signaled me to wait.

He resumed his hymn in a higher, stronger voice. The animal dove again, and suddenly popped up thirty-five yards away. I saw his profile, his little quivering ear, and slowly he turned his face directly toward us. At

this moment my guide ended his song with these words: —

*'Goumaré, goumaré, goumaré.'*

I fired, and the animal sank. Shortly afterward, in the midst of bloody water, he showed himself again, plunging and snorting, his back, his snout, and his feet successively emerging.

The Weitos all jumped up, screaming with delight, while the animal, mortally wounded, writhed in tumultuous agony. Up to their chests in water, tumbling, falling, holding on to each other, the Weitos danced about on their uncertain foundation of papyrus. My guide spat in the muzzle of my gun and kissed my hands. Twilight was falling, and the hippopotamus had disappeared. The water of the river became quiet again, and on the grassy bottom of the Nile lay the hippopotamus. The next day he would swell up and float on the surface, while a hundred Weitos would gorge themselves on his succulent flesh, to which they have dedicated their prophetic song: *'Goumaré, O Goumaré, whom we love and who nourishes us, come, come to your children.'*

More than six months have elapsed since we entered Ethiopia on September 15, 1925, and to-day, the second of April, 1926, we cross the frontier into Italy's province of Eritrea. We have made more than six months' sojourn in the empire of the Queen of Kings, traversing it by caravan from the west to the east, and from the south to the north. We have visited the principal tribes that populate it, from the Adal Mohammedans to the Tigréan Christians, whose ancestors have knelt before the Cross for more than a thousand years. We have lived side by side with the Gallas, the people of Shoa and Gojam, with the proud and savage Somalis, and with the weird Weitos or 'hippopotamus-eaters.' We have been

received in the feudal castles of the great lords of the empire and in the humble cabins of the peasants. We have talked with the Ras and we have gossiped with the man on the street. Far behind us lies Addis Ababa, the 'New Flower,' with her blue columns of pungent eucalyptus smoke ascending through the tranquil twilight. Far behind us lies the yellow desert where we chased the antelope, and the rivers in whose turgid water the clumsy hippopotamuses play.

I have seen a country isolated for ages and still hemmed in by the possessions of three great neighbors — France, England, and Italy. Of these, one, France, has always frankly extended the hand of good-will to Ethiopia and has honestly respected her millennial independence. Her two other neighbors, knowing her less well, have attacked her and encroached upon her territories — England successfully at Magdala, Italy disastrously at Adowa.

Within this empire ever on the defensive against its neighbors, and cut off from the sea, lives a strong, warlike, high-spirited nation, a nation proud of its past and distrustful of its future, but now resolved to open its frontiers to the science and the progress of the West. I often hear Europeans say: 'You can't expect much of these Abyssinians. See how backward they are. Observe their feudal customs. They are an anachronism in our twentieth century.'

That is an easy and specious judgment. Can we expect a country to modernize itself in ten or twenty, or even fifty, years? Do you ask a youth to become a man overnight? Compared with the great nations of Europe the Ethiopians are an infant people. The essential thing is that they are earnestly intent upon lifting their country to the same level as that of their more highly civilized neighbors.

# THE FIG LEAF PRESS<sup>1</sup>

BY GORDON PHILLIPS

ONE of the several awkward results of being a journalist is a liability to be mistaken for a literary person. One is therefore much exposed, not only — as is common to all people with a permanent home address — to the printed matter of money-lenders, Dutch bulb-growers, promoters of ‘charity ballots,’ and American citizens who wish to dispose of very small portions of richly oil-bearing land in backward states of the Union, but also to publishers’ lists and announcements, order forms for limited editions, and prospectuses of new periodicals or presses of the more considered and esoteric sort. These arrive in some number, and I cannot now be quite sure whether I ever received, or only dreamed, the manifesto from which the following extracts are borrowed. If I did dream it, I at least dreamed pretty closely to existing models. And, if I did not dream it, there can surely be no harm in now giving an authentic puff a little wider publicity than it would otherwise receive.

It is indeed a real tragedy that the type here available can give no idea whatsoever of the artful and exquisite proportions of the font used for printing this manifesto; nor, alas, is it possible to reproduce the ideally Neo-Georgian woodcut which serves as a preliminary decoration to the pamphlet and which depicts, so far as can be guessed, an ebony Adam embracing a Negroid and vastly abdominal Eve

under the shadow of a pitch-black stick of celery. But, with these inevitable apologies, let us hurry to our extracts: —

‘Established, then, as a Press of Distinction on the technical side, the Fig Leaf Press inevitably attracts to itself the Writers of Distinction. In Fiction, in Poetry, in Criticism, its authors are supreme. Names like Miss Amelia Poop, Mr. Hector MacStrafe, Mr. O’Farrell Flipshaw, Mrs. Lavinia Starke, Mr. Gumbert Goof, Mr. Aloysius Stinklebat, the eminent art expert Mr. Golly Golightly, and the talented American authoress Miss Alice Egg — these, and others too numerous to mention, are (in Bloomsbury) household words. All of them will be found represented in the lists of past or forthcoming Fig Leaf publications. . . .

‘There is richness here and diversity; but there is one quality which all Fig Leaf authors have in common. It was put with equal modesty and grace by Mr. Goof in the preface to his last collection of *Preludes to Prophecy*: “For my own part, I will claim nothing for the pages which follow save that every line bears the impress of a personal and unqualified reaction to a mood and a moment. All has been set down as I wished it and because I wished it; here is the candor which seeks neither to conciliate nor to cajole. The Urge of the Ultimate Ego has been All-sufficient.”

‘This is finely said, and the result may be considered in the light of

<sup>1</sup> From the *Manchester Guardian* (Independent Liberal daily), October 12