

FREDERICK COURTENAY SELOUS.

ALTHOUGH exactly fifty-one years ago, the recollection of my first sight of Selous remains as fresh and as striking as though of yesterday. It was at Rugby, in January 1866—a big boy, looking twice as big as his fellow-boys, with a big round face, already slightly hirsute. And Selous *was* big, even then; big not only in physique but in mentality, energy and strength of individual character. It was not long before everyone in the *kosmos* which a great Public School represents—from Headmaster down to tiniest imps in “Lower School”—recognised that something exceptional, something phenomenal, had appeared on our stage. Soon rumours of Selous’s daring exploits awed the boldest—the classic feats of Tom Brown and “Scud East” by comparison seemed child’s play. It would be strictly inaccurate to regard these wild ventures as breaches of school rules; since no rules that ever were framed quite contemplated the contingency of such heroic deeds. Long years later I was present at an Old Rugbeian dinner in London, when the honoured guests of the evening were our former Headmaster, Dr. Temple (then, I think, Bishop of London) and Selous. In his speech, the latter referred to one of his raids on the heronry at Combe Abbey—a place which, if I remember aright, was quite ten or a dozen miles distant from Rugby and therefore quite outside all conceivable schoolboy range. Then he told how, on the way home (his pockets bulging with Herons’ eggs and other oological plunder), having recognised afar the tall figure and striking gait of our austere Headmaster—his fellow-guest—he took prompt cover behind a friendly bush and watched the dreaded “Doctor” pass within a yard! Well I remember how the Bishop—soon to become Archbishop—joined in the laugh.

On the other hand, if Selous did break a few rules, at least he fairly forced the school to break its own rules in his favour. Despite the hardest, most honest and conscientious school-work, the faculty of mastering classics had been omitted from his constitution—proving that that is no complete criterion of ability—and at times he fell below the arbitrary standard that fixes a definite relation between a boy’s age and his position in the schools. To meet the exceptional case “superannuation rules” had to go by the board! The same thing occurred in the field of sport. At football, Selous *had* to be given his “Cap” in his first season—a breach of all those unwritten laws that are the stronger by virtue of their

purely traditional character. It was the only such "breach" perpetrated during my five years at Rugby!

Soon after his school-days—I think both Dr. Temple and Selous (with the present writer) left Rugby together, at Christmas 1869—Selous plunged into Africa and our ways for awhile lay apart. But the chronicles of his wild adventures of that period, his ceaseless struggles during twenty years with savage men and more savage beasts, are they not all written in his own unequalled volumes? Let those who possess them cherish them as pure gold. No such books existed before nor, with a transformed Africa, can such ever be written again. I am not forgetting that other explorers had preceded Selous—splendid men, too, typical of the best of our race. These stalwart pioneers—such as bluff and breezy Baldwin, Gordon Cumming, Cornwallis Harris and the rest—also wrote, and their narratives, gloriously rough and inspiring (I know them by heart!) have a true historic value, since much that they told can never be told again. But in them "natural history" only blurts out as it were by accident—unconsciously. The advent of Selous on the African stage changed all that. Merely as a hunter, none of his predecessors surpassed him*: but far more than that, Selous was a born field-naturalist and a trained observer whose keen eye missed little, nor—to a marvel—did his pen fail to record. How and when in those strenuous decades of forest-life in the far interior he found time to keep in touch with contemporary knowledge, to preserve with his own hands a multitude of mighty specimens, and to record day by day each and every observation, great or small, in notes written under such conditions, taxes our imagination—but he did it. That fact evidences an aptitude for hard work—superadded to the hardest of lives—and a resolution that never faltered or wasted a single hour.

Among his published works, fain would I mention one—a book that breathes the spirit of the naturalist on every page, an analysis of carefully tested observation, and of that cautious deduction that never overpasses its proved bases by an inch. I refer to his *African Nature Notes and Reminiscences*, written in 1908 on the suggestion of President Roosevelt.

In Africa Selous paid comparatively little special attention to birds, though butterflies attracted him to the very last.

* In one of the weekly journals appeared a paragraph implying that Selous was only a moderate shot. Surely it is common knowledge that he was one of the safest and most brilliant rifle-shots the world has ever produced; besides being a dashing rough-rider after every class of game, from elephants, giraffe, sable and oryx, down to cheetahs and wild dogs.

But no sooner had he settled in Surrey—so far as such a wanderer settles anywhere—than the attraction of bird-study at once leaped to his mind and he threw himself into it with all the zeal and fierce energy of his nature. I remember him declaring that the field-craft involved in “spotting” the nest of a single and scarce bird rivalled that of puzzling out a difficult spoor on African velt. One of those earlier springs, when he was coming to me here, he had written months beforehand fixing the precise dates and also specifying the birds whose nests he wished me to “mark” for him in advance, though not an egg was to be taken save by his own hand alone. I wish I could find that letter! It set forth in precise detail his programme from March to July, the pre-ordained routes including flying journeys to and fro across these islands from Orkney and Shetland, Caithness and Kent, Nottinghamshire, Northumberland and Norfolk—and I know not where else. The first bird we tried for here was the Wood-Wren. Howard Saunders happened to be staying with me and our trio set forth to the spot where, as instructed, I had previously located a breeding-pair, though the date (May 27) was rather too early for a nest. The locality was a steep slope heavily wooded with tall trees (ash, oak, wych-elm and birch), mostly in full leaf, amidst which it was difficult enough to keep an eye on a tiny warbler trilling in the topmost summits. Yet I don’t believe that Selous ever lost sight, save for transient seconds, and at the end of half-an-hour he came up and pointed to a hazel-bush growing on a ledge far above us and nearly 100 yards to the west. What he said was, “Beyond that hazel there must be a dip in the ground and in that dip about 6 or 8 feet beyond the bush, I think is the nest.” Incidentally he also mentioned that on the intervening slope a Robin was feeding young and a Wren was building. Having verified these minor facts as we ascended, we presently stood by the hazel. Beyond it was the dip foretold; but that dip was choked with fallen boughs, long dead grass and the wreck of last year’s bracken. Within brief seconds Selous said, “I see it.” Now Saunders and I had practised this sort of quest for many a year; yet *we* saw nothing. What Selous saw was—in effect—a mouse-hole deeply concealed behind six feet of obstructing grass and fern. But it *was* the nest of the Wood-Wren and a week later contained six eggs—now housed at Worplesdon. Presently Selous called to me that he had found another nest but had failed to identify the owner as she skulked off through the scrub. Before him grew a bed of rank nettles full 3 feet high. I asked him how he knew exactly where the nest was. He

pointed out *one* displaced nettle-leaf, and it wasn't in the top storey either! The nest belonged to a Blackcap and was more than a foot beneath the tell-tale leaf. I can recall dozens of such instances. No sign, however insignificant, eluded his eye. In this way within a few years (aided by visits to Spain, Transylvania, Bosnia, AsiaMinor, Iceland, etc.), he amassed an amazing collection of eggs of the rarer British birds and the methodical neatness of the collection was no less amazing than its amount. He collected solely in "clutches" and always insisted on having the full number in each selected clutch.

On one occasion when grouse-driving, Selous saw two Peregrine Falcons pass over, very high, mere specks in air. None of the other six guns had noticed them; our gaze was presumably limited to the level of game-flight. Selous scanned the whole arc of Heaven. His observation, however, was soon verified by the keeper who, a mile away, had seen the "hunting hawks" and subsequently they were observed frequenting those moors for a month or more.

These local incidents may seem trivial; so I turn to Newfoundland where on a preliminary visit (in 1900) Selous was repelled (as I was) by the traditional but unenterprising—not to say unsportsmanlike—method of shooting the caribou on their migrations. He struck straight away from beaten tracks and at once his quick observation discovered evidence that these splendid deer frequent regions further south than had hitherto been suspected. That discovery of Selous has practically revolutionized the more intelligent pursuit of deer-stalking in our oldest colony. Nothing in this marvellous man's career strikes me more strongly than the fact that, after spending the best of a lifetime in Africa, he yet developed such superabundant energy as to accomplish almost equal feats of exploration, endurance and hunting-craft, not only in Newfoundland, but right across British North America to the Yukon, as well as in Sudan and Asia Minor. His superb big-game trophies from each of these regions would alone have earned separate recognition were they not, as it were, eclipsed by his own still greater deeds in Africa. Ere war broke out, we had already booked passages together for another African voyage (to Sudan) and his letters since insist on that plan being carried out—"if we're both alive when war ends."

As a typical example of Selous's marked ornithological acumen, may well be recalled a series of short articles contributed by him to the first volume of this magazine. I have just re-read them and regard them as models of skilled and careful work. Then as regards entomology, it merits record

that only last summer (1916), when invalided home from East Africa, he brought back a notable collection, all captured during the brief interval of midday rest when all, save he, were seeking relief from incessant hard work and the appalling heat of an equatorial sun.

By merest chance I to-day came across a letter written from Scotland in the autumn of 1913, wherein occurs this sentence :—" A collecting trip that includes birds, beasts, insects, etc., is infinitely more interesting than any merely shooting trip. Here, during the long waits between grouse-drives, I was always wishing myself back in the forests under Mount Kenia, collecting butterflies, for there every moment was full of excitement."

At the January meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club, it was resolved to initiate, in co-operation with other learned societies of which Selous was a member, a fitting memorial to our gallant friend. A Committee under the Chairmanship of Mr. H. J. Elwes, F.R.S., was appointed and that assured success awaits the proposal can confidently be foretold.

Upon those who enjoyed it, Selous's friendship exerted a magnetic influence—strengthening, stimulating, straightening. Beneath that modest and gentle exterior—devoid of self-assertion, disdainful of pride or pretence—none but realized the forcefulness of the soul within, whole-hearted, true, and of single purpose—to "make good." His very death—"killed in action" at 65—epitomizes his whole career. Maybe it formed an appropriate climax, but alas! that never again shall we look into those straight blue eyes.

ABEL CHAPMAN.