

Deux Ans à Natal

The Reminiscences of a Traveller

by M. Bourbon

*Translated from the French by Fleur Webb
with an introduction by Colin Webb*

Introduction

This third and final instalment of M. Bourbon's book *Deux Ans à Natal* provides a new angle on the mysterious French Mauritian whose whimsical anecdotes, fabulous tales and plagiarized accounts of people and events the reader has already encountered in the two previous issues of *Natalia*. In this latter section, Bourbon's delight in telling a good story remains undiminished — indeed, it reaches an all-time high in his tale of the doings of a troop of drunken elephants — but less frivolous themes appear as the book moves towards its conclusion. In contrast to Adulphe Delegogue (whose *Voyage dans l'Afrique Australe* was one of the sources he plundered most brazenly) Bourbon regarded hunters as men 'without pity', and noted the irony that they 'would condemn as barbaric the . . . inhabitants of the African forest, who kill in order to live, not just for the pleasure of killing!' In the same serious vein are the final pages of the book, which carry an embittered and disillusioned description of conditions and prospects in the infant colony of Natal, accompanied by dire warnings to young Mauritians not to set course for the shores of the colony in search of their eldorado. The links that survive to this day between Mauritius and Natal were already being formed when Bourbon wrote; but it is evident that he did not contribute constructively to their shaping. On the contrary, he was unreservedly sceptical about their value.

Was he, then, the M. Bourbon alluded to in the introduction to the first instalment of *Deux Ans* (*Natalia* 18) — the M. Bourbon who died on Mauritius in 1881, and whose love of the island was extolled in obituaries? There are hints, though nothing more, that he might have been. The M. Bourbon who died in 1881 was well-educated, and founded a school on Mauritius whose pupils took pleasure in his cheerful disposition and amusing discourse. That same M. Bourbon was also a journalist, who took over for a time the direction of the paper, the *Mauricien*. He 'wrote easily', we are told, in a style 'characterized by lightness of phrase'. He was the author of 'a number of entertaining plays', and he was 'always witty and eloquent'. A warmhearted man, he loved Mauritius, and he loved the young. Indeed, he himself 'never ceased to be young at heart'. Most of those who had been his pupils remained his friends. He was good-humoured and mischievous, and 'he would laugh when reminded that, in his youth, he had been a Carbonaro alongside Armand Carrel.*'

Such evidence is insufficient to establish that the Bourbon of *Deux Ans* was the Bourbon of the 1881 obituaries. However, on the basis of that evidence, one thing is certain: if they were not the same man, the two had a great deal in common. Both had a taste for adventure, both were strongly loyal to Mauritius, both had literary aspirations, both were by nature entertainers, and both lived life with Gallic zest. Thus, if the Bourbon of the obituaries would chuckle with delight

* *Le Sentinelle de Maurice*, 16.9.1881; *Le Cernéen*, 16.9.1881; *The Mercantile Record and Commercial Gazette*, 17.9.1881; *Mauritius Argus*, 19.9.1881; *Le Progrès Colonial*, 19.9.1881.

when reminded that he had once been a Carbonaro, the Bourbon of *Deux Ans* would, without doubt, have chuckled with equal glee had he been told that, in time, he would become one of the minor mystery-men of Natal's colonial past.

C. DE B. WEBB

The Cafres dearly love powdered tobacco: it is the greatest gift one can give them. They snuff it with delight and heaven help you if you disturb them in the joys of sneezing. Just imagine a dog which is disturbed while it is busy gnawing a bone.

The cigar, which I do not wish to vilify although I rarely indulge myself, is completely unknown to the Cafres. I was therefore more than mildly surprised to learn that certain traders had despatched a whole cargo of them to Natal, rather in the manner of those who sent out English razors. English razors are no doubt excellent for those who have beards, but the Cafres have none. The pedlar in general — for there are honourable exceptions as they say — is a creature apart, rather like the commercial traveller in France. He judges everyone by himself; he cannot do without cigars, so nobody else can do without them. If they would only ask for advice one would give it to them, but they believe that no one is more shrewd than they are. They say to themselves: If I make my business known, a thousand others will step in and cut the grass from under my feet. In short they say nothing to anyone and arrive in Natal or wherever with stovepipes or skates when there are neither chimneys nor ice. Some come with razors where there are no beards to trim; others again bring hats in the latest Paris fashion where the women go bare-headed, or corsets when the most elegant women, even princesses of the blood royal, wear nothing more than a narrow belt barely two inches wide as their only clothing; they even bring feeding-bottles for mothers who all suckle their infants. But this is not my business, so let us move on to other matters. As I already said, I do not write for pedlars.

I have good news for serious smokers, pipe smokers that is, who are the only real smokers after all, for the others, the cigar (Havana or Manilla) and cigarette smokers, can only be considered as amateurs. I must beg the reader's pardon, but I cannot resist the pleasure of recounting my first impressions of the *Estaminet Hollandais* in Paris. Although at first sight this might appear to be a digression from my account of a voyage to Natal, I hope that those of my readers who are not acquainted with the hierarchy of smoking, will not condemn me for initiating them into its shameful mysteries. I was young and inexperienced at the time and inclined to agree with the young lady who said, 'I do not go into society any more; the smell of pipes upsets me.' To refrain from smoking is permissible, but to be upset by the smell of a pipe or a cigar is to go too far. I resolved to cure myself at any price of this awful defect. One fine evening, I bravely made up my mind and entered the *Estaminet Hollandais* at Palais Royal. Imagine 500 pipes all smoking together in the same room, in the midst of a thick fog and an infernal din.

'God, to make himself heard there, would thunder in vain.' As soon as I was inside I thought I would be asphyxiated. I walked blindly forward, seeing no more than if I were in an oven. Finally I collided against something which I had not seen; it was the counter on which were sitting, as though on a smoky throne, two very pretty young women, one of whom offered me, with the best grace in the world, a pipe which I refused.

Once acclimatized to the horrible atmosphere, I walked around the room, admiring the monster pipes hanging on the walls and displayed in cases, as well as those being used around the tables laden with enormous pots of beer.

Well, among all these gigantic pipes, I did not see one to compare with the one I saw in Natal, an edifice of a pipe in fact. Here is the recipe for making it and the method of using it.

I presume that you have to hand a little potter's clay, or rather lots of clay, which you will form into a sphere and then thrust into a hole. You next take two straws of *Tambouki* grass, if you can find some; you insert them diagonally into your clay sphere, so that the tips of the straws meet. Once these two straws are joined, you place one end over burning coals with your leaves of tobacco, or hemp if you have Cafre tastes, and through the other end, which terminates in a teat, you inhale with delight (if you are a true amateur!) the thick smoke which escapes, experiencing the double joy of the smoker and the snuff-taker admirably combined. You kill two birds with one stone; but it is all a matter of taste.

I hope you have not forgotten the two travellers I met in the wilderness and for whose entertainment I slaughtered one of my draught oxen. By the greatest chance we were soon joined by a poor devil, a European like ourselves, whom we did not know from Adam, but who was none the less welcome to partake of the feast at which I played Amphitryon¹. I judged by his manner of eating that he had not partaken of such a feast for a long time. He did not simply eat; he devoured. I waited until his appetite had been somewhat appeased before I addressed a few questions to him — to have done so sooner would have been quite barbaric. His pale and wan complexion, his sorry garments, his reserved manner, his sad and thoughtful air — everything about the stranger, who was French like myself, inspired a lively interest, mingled with curiosity. One felt that this man had a story to tell.

When he was finally ready to speak, he told us of his latest adventure, which accounted for my having the pleasure of his company.

He was returning on horseback to D'Urban where he had been living for some time when, surprised by nightfall and not wishing to be devoured by hyenas or panthers whose nocturnal habits he well knew, he decided to spend the night, like Master Crow of the fable, perched in a tree². Before climbing the tree in which he had chosen to settle, he wished that he might accommodate his horse in the branches also, but this was quite out of the question. He therefore tied it up at the foot of the tree, praying to God that no unfortunate encounter would deprive him of his mount. The first hour passed quite peacefully — he slept with one eye open, while the horse tried to free itself of its bonds as if it had some presentiment of its fate. Suddenly a rustling was heard in the foliage and two panthers, their eyes glowing, attracted by the smell of fresh meat, arrived upon the scene and, before the very eyes of the poor devil in the tree, who hardly dared to breathe, devoured horse, saddle, bridle and portmanteau, leaving only the four horse shoes as a memento of their visit. Our man meanwhile was more dead than alive. He feared that he might fall in a faint and be eaten up by these terrible creatures of the bush who would have made but one mouthful of his wretched person. He held out, however, and at sunrise he went on his way, like a little St Jean, his night attire

¹ Amphitryon, the central character in the comedy of the same name by Molière, has come to symbolise the rich man who entertains lavishly — Translator.

² *Le Corbeau et le Renard* by La Fontaine — Translator.

his only possession. He had yet a long way to go, when by good fortune he heard the sound of our animals and our servants. He was able to reach us by midday, and find the sustenance he so much needed.

'Past evils are but a dream,' says the proverb; and so, once over his distress, he told us his story. One needs to know something of the world to realize how the least stumbling block may break a man. Those who are born to a quiet, pleasant life, never realize the price that others pay for the privilege. This man was an intelligent fellow, something of a dreamer by nature, who, like many another, realizing that he was getting nowhere in Europe, turned away from civilization, and resolved to live among the savages.

He had penetrated as far as he was able into these desolate lands, passing from one tribe to another without finding the fortune and happiness he was seeking. He had seen the king of the Zoulas, to whom he had a letter of recommendation. Unfortunately Panda cannot read, and this letter, however good it might have been, was no good to him at all. These adversities which would have discouraged many another, only served to increase the expectations of our intrepid adventurer.

'Panda,' he said to himself, 'cannot read. Therefore I can insinuate myself into his service as secretary; teach him to read, even to write. And so my fortune will be made'. It was once again the old story of *Perrette et le Pot au Lait*³.

As he knew enough of the Cafre language to make himself understood, he humbly offered his services to Panda. The latter, much surprised at the suggestion, did not at first understand what it meant, and delayed his reply until the next day in order not to compromise his royal dignity. There happened to be in the neighbourhood an English missionary who enjoyed his favour. He summoned this missionary who, knowing that the king did not like to be kept waiting, took up his pilgrim's staff and presented himself before Panda, whom he found preoccupied and absorbed in deep thought. The missionary knew how quick the king was to take offence. He believed at first that he was to be blamed for some grave error, but Panda reassured him by explaining as best he could the strange proposition of the French traveller. The missionary, who had a whole cargo of Bibles to sell, supported the proposition enthusiastically.

Some days later our two scholars were officially summoned to a private audience with the king, with the object of reaching a decision. Neither Panda nor his chief advisers, whom he consulted in the matter, understood the usefulness of this science, which was quite new to them. 'In order to read, one must have books, and I will give you a hundred cows if you can find a single one in the whole kingdom,' said Panda.

'Books! We will make some for you,' replied the missionary. Panda was right. What is the good of learning to read a language which is only spoken? Ears are quite sufficient and, to do him justice, his were magnificent. However, he had resolved to investigate the matter thoroughly. Accordingly he took up the book, which one of his interlocutors had presented to him, and pointing to the first letter of the alphabet — 'Read me that,' he said to the missionary, putting his finger on the letter A.

'Ay,' said the Englishman.

'And you,' he said to our friend, showing him the same letter.

³ The title of a well-known poem by La Fontaine — Translator.

‘Ah,’ said the Frenchman.

‘The devil! This is not very clear, and you do not agree,’ said Panda, frowning, ‘but let us continue.’ ‘And this one?’ showing the letter E.

‘Ee,’ said the Englishman.

‘Ay,’ said the Frenchman.

‘These people are making fun of me,’ cried Panda furiously to one of his officers. Either they do not know, or one of them at least wishes to deceive me. Let the guilty one be assegaied, if there is but one; if not, let them both perish!’

Take care then when teaching a barbarian king to read, and when trying to spread the light of civilization. It is enough to discourage the most intrepid. As the sentence was to be carried out only the next day, doubtless to allow the guilty one time to confess, our two travellers fled as fast as their legs would carry them, and succeeded in escaping the anger of the king who could not understand that A and E for one should be E and I for the other. These barbarians understand nothing. One lesson was enough for Panda, and I advise those who might contemplate making him a similar proposition, not to be overhasty, for in exchange for their first lesson, they would be sure to receive a good one in return.

Radama, the august husband of Ranavallo Manjaka (that powerful queen whose death is announced regularly twice a year) in similar circumstances, resolved the problem like a man of wit. He too had to consult a Frenchman and an Englishman on the manner of pronouncing the letters of the alphabet; but instead of losing his temper like Panda, and talking of assegaïs, he listened until the end and proposed a solution which was accepted: ‘We will pronounce the vowels in the French manner and the consonants (which are not pronounced) in the English style.’ This was an *entente cordiale* long before such a thing was invented. For those sceptics who doubt everything, I will add that the confirmation is to be found in the preface of an English–Malgasy grammar by Mr Baker, published in Mauritius.

By the end of the meal our man, having unburdened himself, was feeling comforted in body and soul. As the poet says: ‘In recounting our ills oft we relieve them!’ Since his arrival in Natal, he had gone from one disappointment to another, one danger to the next, but he finally agreed with us that there is some good in the civilization against which we so often rail. The poor wretch admitted that his greatest pleasure, after that of meeting us, had been to eat fresh bread again.

It is doubtless a minor detail, but I recount it here for the information of those who, having always lived in comfort, believe that they will always find bread on the table. I can give them, in passing, the means of obtaining bread wherever they may be, provided that they have fire, water and flour, although I have heard that sawdust may replace it to advantage.

I prefer simply to accept this theory rather than being obliged to put it to the test. My recipe is simple and might be useful to hunters who like their comfort and their fresh bread. I can give you this recipe with every confidence. I used it throughout my journey, and no day went by without fresh bread.

I moistened my flour with a little warm water, and I poured into the dough a glass of bubbling soda water to make it rise. I then wrapped the prepared dough in paper or leaves which I surrounded with hot ash. On top and underneath, I placed burning coals. And this was all done out in the open without even a country oven. In less than half an hour, I obtained without

difficulty a loaf cooked to perfection and delicious. Try it and you will agree.

My other two guests had much to tell also, but they had the politeness to wait until the newcomer had said all that he had to say. He told us of many of the eccentricities of old Panda, which had destroyed all his illusions about the joys of the primitive life. I am sure that, since his return to France, he has left the ranks of the Utopians whom, before his departure, he had firmly supported.

One day when Panda was in good humour and wishing to do particular honour to a visitor, he commanded one of his officers to send twenty men in pursuit of a wild bull, which they were to bring back alive to his majesty in order that it might be slain, as etiquette required, before the august personage who was to be received with exceptional honour. Immediately, twenty men were dispatched unarmed, for it was necessary that the bull be brought back unscathed to the appointed place.

Two hours later news was brought to the king that the bull had been caught and bound, but there was a request to bring him back dead because, of the 20 combatants, 15 had fallen and the other five were unable to perform the task alone.

‘Let those who have fallen be replaced,’ cried Panda, ‘and let the bull be brought to me unharmed!’

‘And the lives of your subjects,’ said the visitor humbly, ‘do you not take these into account?’

‘My subjects! What matter? Are they not as numerous as the sands on the sea-shore!’

On another occasion, his fancy was to have a crocodile brought back alive from more than twenty miles distant. In the course of this expedition, 50 men were devoured or put out of action, but the crocodile arrived unharmed, and that was all Panda wished for . . . or rather all that he did not wish for, because hardly had the hideous animal appeared before him when he said gravely: ‘This is enough! Let this horrible creature be returned to the place from whence he came.’

In civilized countries we are less brutal perhaps, but brothers and friends fire point-blank at each other with guns and cannons in the name of beloved liberty. Is the result not the same; is it not often worse?

I was all ears and took a lively interest in all that was said by the travelling companion whom I was to take back to D’Urban with me in my wagon. What pleased me most was to see the transformation which had taken place in him. Instead of a man dying of hunger, sad, disillusioned and disgusted with life, I looked upon a laughing, beaming face, a jovial boy telling with charming naïveté of all the errors of his youth. He had been in the vanguard of all the follies of the century from St Simonism to Cabetism. He was telling of his traveller’s impressions of Icarie, and regretting having forgotten in his portmanteau the social gospel of Monsieur Cabet which the panthers, who respect nothing, had devoured with the rest of his things, when one of our two hunters snatched up his gun. ‘Hush’, he said in a low voice. I looked about me fearing some unforeseen attack, but I saw absolutely nothing. Following with my eyes the direction in which the gun was pointing, I saw above the highest of the surrounding trees, a head on a long neck which was grazing on the highest leaves: it was a giraffe! In Paris one sees giraffes, stuffed ones at least, and I who had had the good fortune to see alive, in all its glory, the one which the Pasha of Egypt had sent to the king of France, imagined myself transported to

the *Jardin des Plantes*.

Hunters are without pity! Ours was aiming at the forehead when I interceded on behalf of the sublime animal to prevent a useless murder. It was too late, the shot had gone off.

'And the one whose head nearly touched the sky' fell at our feet bathed in blood. Our Cafres were delighted with the unexpected bounty, for they prize the flesh and use the skin to make pots and water carriers. I was deeply saddened, but as the harm could not be undone, I approached with the others to admire in detail the expiring giant. Its large eye, which was black and gentle still, seemed to reproach us for our cruelty. It seemed to be full grown, its head reaching a height of twenty feet. Its wide flat neck was five feet long. With a neck this size, one need not fear an apopleptic attack. I contemplated the enormous jaw with its 32 harmless teeth but without upper incisors or canines, and the legs of this innocent colossus which are its only means of salvation, and which remind one, especially the front ones, of seven league boots. I observed that this giraffe, the finest I had ever seen, had lived for at least twenty years unharmed amidst panthers and hyenas, and had just perished at the hand of a man who had killed simply for pleasure, a man who would condemn as barbaric the terrible inhabitants of the African forest, who kill in order to live, not just for the pleasure of killing.

Giraffes usually move about in small herds of six or seven. This one was alone with its baby, if one can use the word to describe a fellow of 11 or 12 feet tall. This baby owed his life to his relatively small size; for if his head, like that of his mother, had appeared above the trees, he also would have been done for, which justifies what the poet says: 'The higher one climbs, the greater the fall.'

Hardly had we returned to the remains of our abandoned feast when above our heads there appeared, as if to reproach us for the death of our unfortunate giraffe, a great flock of flamingoes. It was the first time that I had seen these magnificent birds, and my giraffe-killer whose conscience, in spite of everything, was perfectly easy, soon provided me with the opportunity of admiring them at close quarters. Buckshot fired at 200 paces broke the wing of one and put the rest to flight.

If I, like the scholars, were to say to you, 'The flamingo or phenicopter is to the palmipeds what the secretary bird or serpent-eater is to the bird of prey', you would not be any the wiser. I prefer quite simply to give you my own description, which you will probably understand better. To see the bird in flight, one can hardly make out its body, which is hardly bigger than a domestic duck's. It has a long neck, long feet, long narrow wings which meet at the point of intersection (*sic*). In flight the bird forms a perfect cross five feet long, a strange shape which results in its losing its equilibrium at the slightest disturbance. By a trick of nature all the parts of its body are obviously out of proportion. But there is no finer sight than the flamingo, its wings outstretched, in the air. Its wings are crimson, which is all the more startling, as the plumage of the neck, stomach and back is white as snow. The beak, the feet, the eye and the tongue admirably reflect this crimson hue. The peculiar formation of the beak does not permit the bird to take food otherwise than by throwing its head backwards. All those I saw in flight reminded me of the crows which we used to catch in France as children, by placing bird-lime at the bottom of a paper cone — the bird would fly off with the cone on its head, and soon fall to the ground. Travellers are not in agreement as to the excellence of

the flesh, because it varies according to locality, but the tongue, which delighted more than one Roman emperor, deserves to this day its great reputation. It appears to contain only an oily fat, but believe me, do not be deceived by appearances; it is a most exquisite dish and worthy of Lucullus.

Of the two hunters who had arrived before the poor devil whose horse was killed, one was a Fleming, not one of those flamingoes that I have just described, but a Fleming from Flanders, without crimson wings or alabaster stomach.⁴

He was a serious man, by nature not very entertaining, but saying what he had to say without pretension or unnecessary words. He was an intrepid hunter who had killed more elephants than most European hunters have killed partridges. He had known Panda well and had given him on several occasions gifts of elephant tusks, which earned him in return the favour of the king, whom he had the good fortune one day to see in all his glory, in his finest warrior dress, at one of those feast days of which I have already told you. As he could paint agreeably enough for an amateur, he drew from his boxes some of his sketches in which Panda appeared in various costumes, standing, sitting, with and without a crown. I was most impressed with the one in which the king was represented holding in his left hand four assegais covered by a white shield, four or five feet long. His right hand was adorned with a gauntlet made of monkey tails from which protruded an iron assegai, as the claw protrudes from a lion's paw. His head was encircled by a ring of otter fur with ear-pieces of purple plush, falling on either side to his shoulders. His head-ring was surmounted by an ostrich feather two to three feet long, swaying gracefully in the wind. On the top of his head, and a little towards the back, was fixed a double tuft of red and blue touraco plumes. From his neck hung, in front and behind, tassels of red and green wool placed over ox tails dyed red, which in turn lay on top of a layer of monkey tails. His legs were encircled, garter-like, with white tails, the hair of which hung to the ground. The right arm was adorned, above and below the elbow, and at the wrist, with a triple row of tails. The left arm had a single row of tails. What a lot of tails! The Pashas with only six are quite surpassed. It was a curious and strange outfit, the effect of which should have been admirable. As for the facial resemblance, it was only an approximation. There was hardly even a family likeness. I remarked on this to the amateur artist, who replied that Panda had obstinately refused to condescend to pose for him. 'He wanted his portrait ready-made', said he.

I had almost resolved for the sake of brevity, to spare the reader an elephant hunt. But I cannot resist the pleasure of saying something about it; as little as possible. The reader never entirely believes traveller's tales, I know; and as for hunting stories from faraway lands, it's worse still. 'He who comes from afar tells fine lies', they cry, without realizing that 'truth is sometimes stranger than fiction'. But I have the courage to confront this scepticism. *Honni soit qui mal y pense*. Now quiet please, I am about to begin. You will not believe this, even I could hardly believe my eyes, but this elephant, this serious, calm, well-behaved animal, shares with man the glorious privilege of getting completely, happily drunk.

One day, when I was taking part in an elephant hunt, one of the Cafres who served as guides, said to me, 'Master, do you smell the makanos?' It was the first time that I had heard mention of makanos, but a memory of Mautitius

⁴ 'Fleming' in French is 'Flamand' while 'flamingo' is 'flamant' — Translator.

stirred. I took a deep breath and sniffed on the wind an odour of turpentine which reminded me of mangoes. I slowly made my way towards the smell, for there is not much evidence of roads in the area, and I discovered that the makano is in fact the first cousin of the mango. The skin, which is dark green on the tree, turns to apple green when it has ripened on the ground. The flesh is white and transparent and very acid around the pip, which no human tooth could break open, a real mango pip. I tried to taste some, but I made such a face that my good Cafre who, poor man, did not know the *Figette*,⁵ said to me very seriously, ‘You are difficult to please. The elephants are wild about them and my people prize them greatly.’

But I, who was neither an elephant nor a Cafre, maintained my right to differ. Then came the explanation, which reinstated the elephant completely in my good opinion. When a herd of elephants, in passing, encounters trees laden with makanos ready for picking, these intelligent animals knock them down with their trunks. The fruit when detached from the tree, not only ripens in a few days, but acquires a certain degree of fermentation which pleases the palates of these colossal animals. They never fail to return at the right time to the place where the makanos are lying. Once they have foregathered, they fall upon the fruit and devour thousands of them, down to the very last one and . . . get drunk. Well why not? It is their arrack.

Now imagine a hundred or so intoxicated elephants, gambolling like school children on holiday, and you will have one of the strangest sights imaginable. But woe betide the imprudent hunter whose presence these tipsy giants have scented. Even if he is 600 paces off, they will charge immediately and without hesitation. This animal which is usually so gentle and peaceable that it does not always defend itself even when attacked, pursues, in the blind fury of its drunkenness, the man who has had the misfortune to disturb it in its revels. I had the good fortune, I say *good* fortune, because I was unharmed, to come within a trunk’s length of a troop of elephants engaged in this sort of bacchanalian revel.

We had been, since the previous day, in search of elephants, and we were beginning to despair when at a turning in the forest we suddenly saw a hundred or so ‘long noses’ as the Cafres call them. They were frolicking about, waving their trunks, and almost dancing a sort of polka on the remains of fallen trees which they had uprooted and trampled underfoot. They resembled a bunch of madmen who had escaped from their keepers. I wanted to get closer to enjoy a sight which was quite new to me; but one of my Cafres who knew the danger said, as he pulled my arm, ‘If you take another step you are a dead man.’

In fact at that very moment, one of our companions, imprudent enough to fire a shot into the midst of the joyful band, as yet unaware of us, caused complete confusion, and, by upsetting the celebrations, endangered us all. For the furious elephants made a charge at those of our party who stood near the unfortunate hunter, and would certainly have crushed them all, had the elephant leaders, drunker than the rest, not fallen first and paralysed the attack by forming with their gigantic bodies a living barrier, which the smaller ones, equally intoxicated and staggering, could not cross. Brought to a sudden and unexpected halt, they all fell in a confused heap, higgledy-piggledy, one on top of the other, like a pack of cards; a *mêlée* of heads, trunks and tails

⁵ Apparently a variety of mango—Translator.

tangled in the general confusion. To be brief then, this gave us time to escape and to reach safety upwind in the nearby thickets, heedless of the outcome of these strange events which reminded me, at the sight of the vast bodies, lying dead drunk, of the battle of the Lapithes and the Centaurs in the fable. I realized that elephant hunting is no game and, apart from the exceptional case of complete drunkenness, presents as many dangers as a duel between men.

The following day, I was confirmed in this. One of our Cafres, a fearless hunter, found himself fifteen paces from a female elephant with her calf, which was walking underneath her and whom she led along by lacing her trunk around his, as a mother might guide with her hand the faltering steps of her child.

Our man had not the time to take aim. The furious animal rushed at him, seized him in her trunk, disembowelled him with her tusks, threw him in the air, and trampled him underfoot.

This is enough to deter the bravest; but those long, beautiful ivory tusks are so valuable to the hunter that the prize makes him forgetful of the danger.

By-kruipen means in the language of the South African hunter, to advance or stalk by crawling. This is a useful art in any circumstances, but particularly so in this sort of hunt. It is practised on the open plains, where only the grass hides the hunter from the elephant's sight. This is the procedure: three hunters, always upwind, lie flat on their stomachs, one behind the other and imitate the movements of the snake. The upper part of the body is supported by the hands; the feet and the knees provide the locomotion. The gun is dragged along by the right hand, one step at a time. It must be apparent that this method of travelling, apart from being entirely without charm, is very tiring. Thus it is necessary to rest frequently. Each hunter stops and, in order to breathe more freely, turns on his back.

After a few moments, the snake reforms and makes its way, invisible, under the grass, until it is thirty or thirty-five paces from the enemy, who must be taken by surprise. Then the last two crawlers draw up level with the first to ascertain the position of the animal who, hearing and seeing nothing to harm it, suspects nothing. But at the moment when the elephant turns broadside on to them, the hunters rise up as a single man, take aim at the concavity near the eye and . . . bang, bang, bang, the crawlers flee and the colossus staggers and falls; it is the downfall of a giant surprised by pygmies.

This is the successful outcome, but the opposite occurs more often. If the outcome were always successful, the price of ivory would drop, and women would take up elephant hunting to give their husbands a rest. The tactics are excellent when used against a lone elephant, but when the hunters find themselves, as we often did, up against 30, 50, 80, a 100 or even 200 elephants, the chances of success are far from being the same. I will not go so far as to claim, as some do, that the elephant is intelligent enough to post sentries to watch over the safety of the herd, and to give the warning at the approach of danger. But inevitably where there are more animals the sum of their awareness must be greater, with the result that the approach of hunters, which would go unnoticed by a small group, would attract attention in a large herd, one of whose number would trumpet noisily to warn his companions. They would then move off, or, as sometimes happens, stand up to their attackers. If the gigantic battalion accepts the challenge, if some sentinel raises his trunk threateningly, if he does not turn his weak spot to the hunter, then it is all over for any man who is not mounted on an Arab horse which can whisk him from

danger in a flash. To fire at the chest is like firing at a wall; the bullet rebounds and may come back at the hunter. It is essential to fire, however, if only to frighten the elephant and to force him to flee; but if he holds his ground, it is war to the death, for nothing can resist the onslaught of this colossus when irritated. A few hunters in such circumstances have tried, in their fear, to climb into trees. A useless attempt! The relentless elephant approaches, overturns the tree, even if it is 50 feet high, and tramples underfoot his impotent adversary.

Several times I witnessed the hasty retreat of a troop of elephants, who were withdrawing from the fray. The destruction is unbelievable; nature, in twenty years, cannot repair such damage.

The hunters sometimes succeed in cornering elephants in the valleys where there are steep rocky inclines, woods and ravines. It is curious to see how these animals manoeuvre. Tracked down and surrounded, they are imprisoned and observed on all sides. If they try to force a way out, a line of hunters armed with shields used as drums, frightens them off and forces them to climb up the narrow gorges where a mere handful of men is sufficient to bar their way. Then the most intrepid hunters rush forward like Roman gladiators into the arena, fire at one, slip past another, return to the attack, flee, hide in a ravine or climb the rocky incline, and if they are seized and thrown to the ground, never rise again, or, if luck is with them, after incredible efforts, emerge victorious.

The male elephants are generally better-natured than the female. They are philosophers of a sort, cool and calm, who appear to reflect wisely before making a decision. The females have warmer passions and are more easily roused to anger, especially when they fear for the lives of their offspring. But the males, when the fermented makano has heated their brains, become as dangerous as the females. There are also elephants without tusks and these, whom the hunter spares, because there is no gain to be made from the ivory, are the most feared. They charge with lowered head, either from an excess of fear, which they cannot control, or because, like certain cowards, they attempt to intimidate the adversary into believing that they are to be feared. With these there is no quarter: if you do not kill them, they will kill you.

The natives of central Africa find no use for the elephant, whose flesh defies any sort of culinary preparation. But the incessant demand for ivory from European traders has given them a taste for elephant hunting. Those of them who knew how to use guns, did so, but they were few. They had the idea of digging wide trenches, filled with pointed stakes, and covered over with dry grass, towards which they tried to drive the elephants. But once the trap was discovered, the elephants would not allow themselves to be caught. This system is not much used today. The present system is of the simplest sort and requires cool-headedness, skill and strength. Forty men, standing in single file, approach to within 50 paces of the elephant. The leader of the line, armed with a two-edged assegai, moves boldly forward, and advances to within ten paces, often closer. From this position, he throws his weapon horizontally at the fetlocks of the animal, which, no longer able to flee, is immediately set upon by the other assailants who shower him with arrows. After a hopeless struggle and exhausted by the loss of blood, the elephant finally falls to the ground, never to rise again.

Other less dangerous methods have been tried. One of these was to plant a number of stakes, on the banks of rivers for example, at the bottom of steep

slopes where elephants might be expected to pass; but these stakes, in which travellers were sometimes caught, were soon abandoned as too crude a method for such intelligent animals. The preference remained for the favourite weapon of the Zoulas, the assegai.

This is how Panda, like Djaka and Dingaan, his predecessors, today procures the ivory he needs to fill the royal coffers which are too often empty. But *he* does things on a grand scale as you will see!

When a big hunt is decided upon, heralds-at-arms, a week in advance, move through the country, from the banks of the Ompongala to the banks of the Tonguela, and from the coast to the mountains of Quathlamène, enjoining all those subjects capable of bearing arms, to foregather at the pyramid mountain of Om-Grooty (800 feet high). No one dares disobey, for Panda, as the reader already knows, has irresistible arguments to any objection.

At the appointed hour, 20 000 men (a constitutional monarch or a republican president would not have got ten or perhaps even one) arrive from 50 leagues around, and gather on top of the mountain, where the great captains squat on their heels, listening to the orders of Panda, who is seated in their midst on a rough arm-chair, which he uses as a throne.

Orders are given, each man is at his post. the army is divided into 20 platoons of a 1 000 men each, and these, on the plain, are to form a huge network designed to drive the elephants *en masse* to the foot of the mountain. To surround the enemy is the basis of all Zoula strategy, in hunting as in war.

The platoons move off, led by their captains, and the mountain, so recently covered with naked men carrying their striped shields, is suddenly deserted. Panda alone, who has had 30 of his 500 wives and a few choice cattle brought along for his entertainment, remains on the mountain-top to enjoy the spectacle. His subjects, scattered over a dozen leagues, are beating towards the designated place, and Panda, armed with his telescope, the precious gift of an English traveller named Gardener, contemplates with delight the wonderful sight.

When the number of elephants rounded up by the Zoulas is considered to be sufficient, there is a signal from the mountain-top (the king's purple cloak hoisted on a mast) and the attack begins. From all sides masses of men rush towards the elephants, who, surprised by so great a number of assailants attacking all at once, attempt to flee in different directions, imprudently, for the colossus, once isolated, is surrounded and pierced by a thousand assegais. Sometimes the elephants, the better to resist, form 'squares' and charge their attackers, topple them, throw them into the air and crush them underfoot, breaking men, shields and javelins like glass. But the struggle is unequal. What are 10, 20, a 100 men more or less? Others just as brave replace them immediately, and in spite of his courage and his fury, the elephant is on the point of surrendering, when one of the warriors, crawls up to him from behind. The others harrass him from the front, commanding all his attention. The 'crawler' then takes hold of the elephant's tail, clings to it and cuts it off, just as Alexander the Great cut the Gordian knot.

This man, full of joy at his skill, runs off at top speed to lay the bleeding tail at the feet of Panda; a bloody trophy taken from a living enemy. Then Panda says, 'I am pleased; my people are brave! They are more numerous than grasshoppers, more courageous than lions, more strong than elephants! What nation in the world could resist us? It is well, let him be killed now, this elephant, for I hold his tail in my hand.'

So says Panda in his joy, and the tail-less elephant is slain. This death is the signal for general carnage. There are many victims, doubtless, among the ranks of the Zoulas, but if the desired object is obtained, what matter? I suppose that many of these brave Zoulas would prefer to stretch out on their sleeping mats rather than do such service; but their sense of duty, and more especially their fear of the assegai, prevail. Danger for them is always present, confronting them or pursuing them. If they retreat before the elephant for fear of being trampled, certain death awaits them, an ignominious death, which Panda reserves for cowards.

This manner of hunting elephants is a royal hunt, or rather more than royal to be exact! Find me a king these days who could exact from his subjects this passive obedience. On the other hand, the most primitive of all the inhabitants of these lands, the Boschjesman, of whom I should say a few words in passing, arrives at the same end by much simpler means.

The Boschjesman seems to occupy in the scale of living creatures a position half-way between man and orang-outang. He is four feet tall, lives like a wild animal in a hole that he has dug himself, and is a match for the best race horse. He is accused, like the Amazinios (a small tribe whom Dingaan exterminated on the pretext that they fed on human flesh), of being inclined to cannibalism, but this is pure supposition. The only evidence quoted so far in support of this opinion, is the story of the Boschjesman convicted, so they say, of having eaten a young child who had (note the extenuating circumstances!) made a face at him and stuck out his tongue. However that may be, the prejudice exists, and however small and harmless he appears, the Boschjesman is much feared, by children especially, who regard him as a sort of ogre who eats everything he sees.

Talking of cannibals, I would like to mention in passing that all the travellers who have visited these parts of Africa, absolutely deny their existence. They all agree that these man-eaters are simply figments of the imagination invented by certain individuals with the object of touching the hearts and pockets of sensitive people.

But let us get back to the Boschjesman as elephant hunter. This little man hunts all alone, crawling on his stomach like an earth-coloured lizard. His little head bristles with poisoned arrows fixed into his hair with the points sticking up. On his back is a quiver of buffalo or ox-hide and a bow in proportion to his size. These are his usual weapons, but for elephant hunting the Boschjesman is provided in addition with a simple stick armed with a little triangular piece of flat iron, fixed in such a way as to be easily detachable. This iron is smeared with a black poison that melts in the heat like the pitch with which his body is smeared.

Thus armed, the Boschjesman crawls along until he is one pace behind the elephant, almost touching his rump, for he never attacks from the front. Then he stands up on his little feet underneath the elephant who has not even seen him, and shoots his poisoned arrow into the stomach or under the leg. If a single drop of blood spurts out, it is certain death for the giant, who has felt only a slight pin-prick. He runs off however at the noise the dwarf makes in escaping, but soon the poison takes effect, and a few hours later this giant among animals expires at the hands of an insignificant pygmy.

So the Boschjesman, all alone, unobserved, with the weapons he has made himself, does what it takes a thousand brave Zoulas to do. I cannot resist the pleasure of telling of another incident which I witnessed from a distance and

which proves that courage cannot always be measured by size. 'For in a small body great courage may reside.'

One day, in the course of a long trip, we met one of these Boschjemans whom our Cafres wished to kill, as they would a wild animal. But thanks to us his life was saved. And we were rewarded by the unusual spectacle which he later offered us.

He walked on alone, for our Cafres would not allow him near, and we followed at a distance. He was armed with a gun bigger than himself, which he handled like a feather. Imagine, not one of those guns for amateurs which one sees at home, but a real cannon which an Austrian corporal could hardly manage.

At a turning in the forest, our little man was making ready for the proper reception of a passing elephant which he had been following since morning for its beautiful ivory tusks, when a lion appeared before him, mane bristling and mouth wide open. What was to be done? The situation would have been embarrassing even for a man six feet tall, but without ado he cocked his monster gun and fired on his terrible enemy. The king of beasts, taking pity on his microscopic opponent, was unsure whether or not to disregard such a low attack. But the instinct of self-preservation triumphed: the lion leaped at the pygmy who, without giving way, thrust the barrel of his gun sideways into the lion's gaping mouth and, holding the two ends firmly in his little hands, paralysed the lion's efforts, while attempting to hypnotize him by staring into his eyes.

The king of beasts, indignant, as you can imagine, at having to fight such an adversary, pulled in all directions to break the obstacle. Roaring, he laid his royal claws upon the shoulders of the poor devil who was more dead than alive, but who refused to let go. After a quarter of an hour of desperate struggle, in which each combatant held his own, one with a gun wedged across his mouth, the other with a lion's claws embedded in his shoulders, they fell at last, one beside the other, the lion dead from loss of blood, the man merely unconscious.

In the same vein, one of our companions told us a story which you will perhaps have difficulty in believing and which I reproduce with reservations, not having been a witness to the event. 'I was one day', he told us (please note — it is not I who am speaking), 'with one of my hunting companions in a vast plain where elephants usually abound. We had, so as not to frighten them, left our wagons some distance away. As it is always necessary to take precautions against hunger, we had been careful to instruct our Cafres to bring us some refreshment in a large wine cask. After having broached the cask on one side, we stood it up on end to serve as a shelter against the breeze which was blowing strongly. We were busy having a quiet meal behind this shelter, when we heard a noise. I got up and what did I see? A lion which seemed to want to partake of our picnic. He leapt and bounded round and round our barrel which boded ill for us, for it was clear that the animal had not eaten. My companion and I succeeded in avoiding a confrontation by running off to the left as he moved to the right. But he soon tired of this innocent game which was not to his taste it seemed. He steadied himself to leap right over the barrel with the intention of reaching us, but he miscalculated and landed right in the middle. As one man, we turned the barrel over on top of him, climbed onto it, and held him prisoner underneath. Yet we also were held prisoner, for how were we to climb down without releasing him? However, providence comes to

the rescue in desperate circumstances . . . while reflecting on the danger of the situation and looking around for some assistance, I happened to notice, oh joy, the lion's tail, a rather mangy tail fortunately, sticking out of the bung which had miraculously been left open! I leapt to the ground, and taking hold of this blessed tail which saved our lives, I made an enormous knot in it. In spite of the efforts of our terrible adversary he was unable to withdraw his tail and was obliged to abandon his prey. So we had the pleasure of seeing him disappear out of sight over hill and dale, dragging the enormous cask after him'.

You will perhaps find this a little difficult to believe. I cannot blame you. I only regret that I was not an eye witness, and cannot swear to the truth of it.

But let us return to Natal! I will not be accused, I hope, of trying to denigrate Natal and of painting a gloomy picture with intent to discourage emigration from Mauritius, and thus do harm to the infant colony. I appeal to the impartial reader — have I said anything that might deter a single immigrant who had made up his mind to try his fortune in Natal? With what object would I have conceived such a thought? Have I, here or elsewhere, land to cut up and sell to adventurers? Alas! those who know me, know too well that I have absolutely nothing to sell, and no wherewithal to buy.

I have said, and I repeat, that Natal, like all other infant colonies, is a land where with money, one may succeed, provided one is not in a hurry and can afford to wait.

I have tried as far as I have been able, in the face of all the fabulous accounts of this eldorado, to moderate the infatuation which could cause much disappointment to many immigrants, and in this I believe that I have done a useful thing, conscious at least that I have said nothing that was not scrupulously exact.

The only possible enterprise in Natal, as I have stated, is to buy up land cheaply (two, three or four shillings an acre), eventually to resell when the number of inhabitants has doubled or quadrupled, at twice or four times the cost price, and to cover this waste land with flocks and herds bought at a very low price in the interior, to fatten them cheaply, and to sell them to the traders at Port Natal for export. But one must not forget the possibility of the re-opening of the ports in Madagascar which would deal a death-blow to the only industry possible in Natal.

Immigrants from England are numerous, too numerous perhaps, and if the population continues to grow as it is doing, they say that before long the domestic market will be large enough to absorb the products of the colony. This is another misapprehension which must be pointed out. Who are the immigrants who arrive in Natal from England? Poor people in general who, lacking a livelihood at home, embark joyfully, believing that they leave poverty behind them, and confident in the promises made them of 50 acres of land when they disembark in Natal.

But what disappointment awaits them when they discover instead of the promised land they have dreamed of, only arid, uncultivated wastes, where they can find neither food nor shelter. How many of these poor immigrants have I not seen, complaining of having been cruelly deceived. 'Fifty acres of land,' they say, 'that is a fortune at home, but what does it mean here? Sterile soil and not enough labour to make anything of it.'

At one time, complaints became so numerous and so pressing that it was decided to assign portions of land in the interior to the immigrants, who set off

joyfully, hoping to find at last what had been promised them — fertile land. But not one of these unfortunates returned or sent word. This led the others at Natal to conclude that they had been a prey to wild animals, and so not one of the new arrivals would follow in their footsteps. And nowadays, complaining that they have been the victims of deception, they wait in D'Urban until the government provides them with means of subsistence — the first signs of trouble to come. Nor is that all. As you can imagine, not all of these immigrants are saints. Many of them are what you might call voluntary exiles, who are sent off before conviction to prevent overcrowding of the jails, and who are virtually told, 'Go and get hanged somewhere else.' You can picture what is likely to happen amongst such a collection of individuals in a new country where the law is almost silent. There is talk also of the part played by certain persons who were forced to leave the Cape for grave misdemeanours. I know this is how Rome was founded, but for my part I would have preferred to have lived under Augustus rather than under Romulus.

I have seen something that resembled a judge, but a conciliatory judge, so to speak, before whom anyone could present himself, and whose sentences were carried out at the pleasure of the condemned. He was a former advocate from the Cape, who had appointed himself to judge the cases which were referred to his obliging decisions. This is justice in an embryonic state. And it was the same with the post. An individual set himself up in an office, and called himself 'Director of Posts', in the hope of being later confirmed in his capacity by the competent authorities.

The native population, composed of Cafres who have fled from Panda's domination, have recently felt one of the first benefits of civilization, that of regular and rigorous taxation! This tax of seven shillings and six pence per hut per annum seems very heavy to these children of nature who are in the habit of settling where they choose, accountable to no one. Each *mouzi* is, in addition, subject to taxation of £1 paid by the *om-douna* or head-man.

This double taxation has provoked much discontent among the native population, who have been further dismayed by a recent ruling which forbids entry into the principal town by any naked Cafre under pain of severe penalty. Apart from the inconvenience of wearing clothes when one is in the habit of going naked, this creates yet another expense for the Cafres, and one can understand that they miss their old ways which were infinitely more economical.

At the seat of government in Pietermarisburg, they have even tried corporal punishment on the Cafres, but it does not appear to have had a good effect on the morale of the population. And could you expect otherwise? Each nation has its own tastes and customs. The Cafre is quite prepared to be assailed, but is not prepared to be whipped!

The Cafres who are not employed by the farmers, are exempt from the 7s 6d tax. The government has conceded to them a little *mouzi* on the outskirts of D'Urban, called Landa, where they live free of all dues. It is a kind of depot where the farmers go when they need to recruit labour. An attempt has been made to register them but in vain.

Although Panda lives on good terms with the young colony, he watches with some trepidation the emergence on his frontier of a new people whom he sees as a threat. He has already sent several protests to the governor, which gives some indication of his uneasiness. Panda complains that the proximity of the colony of Natal encourages the desertion of his subjects, and makes it

impossible to punish cattle thieving. As a last resort he has asked permission to send his agents into Natal to make investigations and to bring back Zoulas and cattle which they recognize as belonging to him.

You can readily believe that his demands were rejected; but the mere rumour of them made all the deserting Cafres tremble (and they are all deserters). Their death, they said, was certain if they set foot in the king's territory. There is thus some anxiety in Natal; they fear an invasion, a real invasion of barbarians, the impact of which would be irresistible.

Fortunately there is only one access to Natal for Panda's troops over the boundary river of the Tonguela, a well-guarded passage which would be defended in case of attack. However, it is feared that even if Panda does not openly declare war on the infant colony, he might engage in veiled hostilities by forbidding cattle trading in his kingdom. This would cut off Natal's food supply and deprive it of its only industry, agriculture being still largely undeveloped.

Judge for yourself then whether a colony with such internal difficulties and such an uncertain future, may be considered a land of milk and honey on which one need only set foot in order to be happy. Doubtless, this colony, after years of trial and tribulation common to all infant enterprises, might eventually acquire some importance, and muster a population numerous enough to resist the Zoula invasions. But this can only be the work of time, and I predict that all those who believe that they will find in Natal the realization of their dreams, are doomed to disappointment.

Another cause of possible future conflict is the steady growth beyond the mountains in the rich fertile plains, of the patriarchal Boer colonies whose prosperity is already beginning to excite the envy of neighbours. Already the Cape newspapers have regaled us with stories of arrests and arbitrary imprisonments of her majesty's subjects carried out by the Boers, whom they call rebels, as well as of plans to ensure for themselves possession of that famous inland lake of which wonderful tales are told.

Some of the many disappointed immigrants go as far as saying that emigration to Natal is encouraged in England with the sole intention of establishing an English population numerous enough to stand up to the Boers, should the necessity arise, and, if possible, to push them further into the interior. Consequently, I have seen few immigrants from England or elsewhere, who are satisfied with their present lot and confident of the future.

But the human heart is such that people in general find it difficult to admit publicly that they have been duped; that they have quite simply made a mistake. Having foolishly fallen into a trap, they are ashamed to admit it frankly as they ought to do, if only to warn others of the danger. Instead, they maintain that they were right to have done what they did and, to escape the jibes, they seek refuge in numbers, wishing for more companions in misfortune.

As for me, I see things otherwise. I freely admit that I was deceived, and I say, moreover, that all the immigrants I met in Natal, who had come there to seek their fortune, regretted having done so.

If I succeed in preventing even one single family from wrecking itself on this same reef, I shall not regret having written these *Two Years in Natal*.

FLEUR WEBB
Translator