



"THE LAST TREK," BY SIR JOHN E. MILLAIS

FREDERICK COURTENAY SELOUS

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

LAST December, just before reaching the age of sixty-five years, Selous, the great hunter-naturalist and explorer, was killed in action against the Germans in East Africa. In the brief press despatches it is stated that he was shot and mortally wounded, but continued to urge forward his men until he was hit a second time and killed. It was a fit and gallant end to a gallant and useful life. In John Guille Millais's delightful "Breath from the Veldt" the frontispiece, by Sir John E. Millais, shows the "Last Trek" of a hunter, dying beside his wagon in the wilderness. The hunter in this picture (reproduced above) is drawn from Selous. Many of us used to think that it was the death he ought to die. But the death he actually met was better still.

Selous was born on the last day of the year 1851. Before he was twenty years old he went to South Africa, and a year or two later he embarked on the career of a professional elephant hunter; a career incredibly wearing and exhausting, in which mortal risk was a daily incident. For a quarter of a century he was a leading figure among the hard-bit men who pushed ever northward the frontier of civilization. His life was one of hazard, hardship, and daring adventure, and was as full of romantic interest and excitement as that of a viking of the tenth century. He hunted the lion and the elephant, the buffalo and the rhinoceros. He knew the extremes of fatigue in following the heavy game, and of thirst when lost in the desert wilderness. He was racked by fever. Strange and evil accidents befell him. He faced death habitually from hostile savages and from the grim quarry he hunted; again and again he escaped by a hair's breadth, thanks only to his cool head and steady hand. Far and wide he wandered through unknown lands, on foot or on horseback, his rifle never out of his grasp,

only his black followers bearing him company. Sometimes his outfit was carried in a huge white-topped wagon drawn by sixteen oxen, while he rode in advance on a tough, shabby horse; sometimes he walked at the head of a line of savage burden-bearers. He camped under the stars, in the vast wastes, with the ominous cries of questing beasts rising from the darkness round about. It was a wild and dangerous life, and could have been led only by a man with a heart of steel and a frame of iron.

There were other men, Dutch and English, who led the same hard life of peril and adventure. Selous was their match in daring and endurance. But, in addition, he was a highly intelligent civilized man, with phenomenal powers of observation and of narration. There is no more foolish cant than to praise the man of action on the ground that he will not or cannot tell of his feats. Of course loquacious boastfulness renders any human being an intolerable nuisance. But, except among the very foremost (and sometimes among these also, as witness innumerable men from Caesar to Marco Polo and Livingstone) the men of action who can tell truthfully, and with power and charm, what they have seen and done add infinitely more to the sum of worthy achievement than do the inarticulate ones, whose deeds are often of value only to themselves. Selous when only thirty published his "Hunter's Wanderings in Africa," than which no better book of the kind has ever been written. It at once put him in the first rank of the men who can both do things worth doing and write of them books worth reading. He had the gift of seeing with extraordinary truthfulness, so that his first-hand observations—as in the case of the "species" of black rhinoceros—are of prime scientific value. He also had the gift of relating in vivid detail his adventures; in speaking he was even

better than in writing, for he entered with voice and gesture so thoroughly into the part that he became alternately the hunter and the lion or buffalo with which he battled.

Elephant hunting in South Africa as a profitable profession became a thing of the past. But Selous worked for various museums as a field collector of the great game; and as the pioneers began to strive northward, he broke the trail for them into Mashonaland, doing the work of the roadmaker, the bridge-builder, the leader of men through the untrodden wilderness; and he continued his hunting and exploration. His next book, "Travel and Adventure in Southeast Africa," was as good as his first. He now stood at the zenith of his fame as the foremost of all hunter naturalists.

Soon after this he left South Africa and returned to live in England. But he was not really in place as a permanent dweller in civilization. He longed overmuch for the lonely wilderness. At home he delivered lectures, rode to hounds, studied birds, and lived in a beautiful part of Sussex. Whenever he got the chance he again took up the life of a roaming hunter. He made trip after trip to Asia Minor, to East Africa, to Newfoundland and the Rockies, to the White Nile. He wrote various books about these trips. One, "African Nature Notes," is of first-class importance, being his most considerable contribution to field science—a branch of scientific work to the importance of which, in contradistinction to purely closet science, we are only just beginning to awake.

The eighteen or twenty years he passed in this manner would of themselves have made a varied and satisfactory career for any ordinary man. But he was not wholly satisfied with them, because he compared them with the life of his greater fame and service in the vanguard of the South African movement. Speaking of the fact that his "Nature Notes" sold only fairly well, he remarked one day, "You see, all the young men think I am dead—at any rate, they think I ought to be dead!" He read much, but only along certain lines. I was much interested, on one occasion, to find him fairly enthralled by the ballad of "Twa Corbies." He himself possessed all the best characteristics of simplicity, directness, and strength which marked the old ballads and ballad heroes.

Then the great war came, and for months he ate his heart out while trying in vain to get to the front. The English did far better than we would have done. But they blundered in various ways—Ireland offers the most melancholy example. The cast-iron quality of the official mind was shown by the

rigid application of certain rules which in time of stress become damaging unless made flexible. The War Office at first refused to use Selous—just as they kept another big-game hunter, Stigand, up the White Nile doing work that many an elderly sportsman could have done, instead of utilizing him in the East African fighting. Selous was as hardy as an old wolf; and, for all his gentleness, as formidable to his foes. He was much stronger and more enduring than the average man of half his age. But with a wooden dullness which reminded me of some of the antics of our own political bureaucracy, the War Office refused him permission to fight and sent him out to East Africa in the transport service—his letters on some of the things that occurred in East Africa were illuminating. However, he speedily pushed his way into the fighting line, and fought so well that the home authorities grudgingly accepted the accomplished fact, and made him a lieutenant. He won his captaincy and the Distinguished Service Order before he died.

It was my good fortune to know Selous fairly well. He spent several days with me at the White House; he got me most of my outfit for my African hunt. He went to Africa on the same boat, and I came across him out there on two or three occasions. I also saw him in his attractive Sussex home, where he had a special building for his extraordinary collection of game trophies. He was exactly what the man of the open, the outdoors man of adventurous life, who is also a cultivated man, should be. He was very quiet and considerate, and without the smallest touch of the braggart or brawler; but he was utterly fearless and self-reliant and able to grapple with any emergency or danger. All men of the open took to him at once; with the Boers he was on terms of close friendship. Indeed, I think that any man of the right type would have found him sympathetic. His keenness of observation made him a delightful companion. He never drank spirits; indeed, his favorite beverage at all times was tea.

It is well for any country to produce men of such a type; and if there are enough of them the nation need fear no decadence. He led a singularly adventurous and fascinating life, with just the right alternations between the wilderness and civilization. He helped spread the borders of his people's land. He added much to the sum of human knowledge and interest. He closed his life exactly as such a life ought to be closed, by dying in battle for his country while rendering her valiant and effective service. Who could wish a better life, or a better death, or desire to leave a more honorable heritage to his family and his nation?