

**A transcription of Chapter One of Robert Stordy's account of his mission to the Abyssinian government to open up trading in livestock between Kenya and Ethiopia**

Stordy, Robert John (191?) *From Nairobi to the Red Sea through Ethiopia: being an account of a mission to the Abyssinian government and a visit of inspection to the northern frontier district of British East Africa* [22576 -1]

Chapter 1 Nairobi to Guaso Nyero

With the opening up of the Northern Frontier District of British East Africa, the establishing of a stock road through it to the Anglo-Abyssinian border, and the prevalence of contagious disease among stock, it was found necessary to place a Veterinary Officer at Marsabit.

Owing to pressure of work at headquarters entailed in combating rinderpest and instituting measures for the suppression of East Coast fever, it had been impossible for me to pay a visit of inspection to this new Veterinary Station, but towards the end of February, 1911, the schemes to cope with contagious disease being in working order, I felt justified in asking for my leave, which was then some months overdue.

His Excellency the Governor had already expressed a desire for me to visit the Northern Frontier District, and I personally was particularly anxious to visit Marsabit Station before proceeding to England.

The embargo placed on Abyssinian cattle in consequence of rinderpest was still in force, and as demand for the work oxen was very great, I wished also to visit Abyssinia with a view to obtaining information as to the prevalence of contagious disease in that country, and if possible to raise quarantine restrictions so as to permit of cattle being brought South.

In 1910 the Abyssinian Authorities had prohibited the exportation of mules and horses, and although correspondence had passed between the two Governments with a view to opening up this trade, nothing definite had been settled.

When visiting, therefore the Northern Frontier Stations, I asked permission to proceed through Abyssinia and discuss with the Government at Addis Ababa the best means of facilitating trade between Ethiopia and the East African Protectorate.

This visit would further afford me an opportunity of inspecting the live-stock in Boran Country and Southern Abyssinia – the two districts from which East Africa traders would principally draw their animals.

In a letter addressed to the Honourable Director of Agriculture, I placed these views before him. These were laid in due time before His Excellency the Governor, who was pleased to grant permission for the journey.

It was first proposed to leave Nairobi in May, 1911, but the following cable from the British Minister, the Hon. Wilfred Thesiger, necessitated a postponement till towards the end of August: "Owing to heavy rain between June and September, roads impassable. Suggest Stordy postpone visit till September. Despatch follows"

I had applied for an Officer to accompany me, for a while I was prepared to perform the journey alone, it was really not one to be undertaken single-handed. It was found impossible to spare another Officer, but it was my good fortune to find that Lord Cranworth was willing to undertake the journey with me, and to this arrangement His Excellency gave his sanction.

Considerable preparation had to be made for the long "safari" of close on 1,500 miles. Passports were cabled for, stores obtained, servants engaged, transport arranged, advance food supplies for the caravan forwarded to the Government Post on the Northern Guaso Nyero, and trade goods selected for presents and barter with the native tribes and the Abyssinians.

Passports signed by the Minister for the Interior, Dajjasmach Katama (Dajjasmach, used as a rule in the abbreviated form, Dajjaz, denoting the officer who commands what is equivalent to our main body of an army), were obtained from the Abyssinian Government; stores for three months – to last until Adis Ababa was reached – were packed into chop boxes; two Abyssinians, who had served in the King's African Rifles, were engaged as interpreters. Our retinue, consisting of twenty-one porters, servants, cooks, gun bearers, syces, collectors and headman, included Somalis, Swahili, Akikuyu, Wakamba, Waganda and Wanyamwezi.

Transport had to be arranged to carry the stores and camp equipment to the Post on the Northern Guaso Nyero, and thence across the desert country to Marsabit and Moyale. From Moyale to Gatelo, a market place South East of Lake Margherita, we relied on obtaining camels at the border station, and for the further journey from Gatelo to Adis Ababa, we were led to believe that mule transport was easily obtained at the former place.

Food supplies for the caravan, consisting of maize and salt, were dispatched to the Northern Guaso Nyero to await our arrival. Trade goods, consisting of white and black and red and black beads, maraduf (an unbleached calico), tobacco from Meru, pipes, and brass wire, were packed into porters' loads, while a number of terai hats, sheath knives, pistols, wristlet watches and automatic cigarette lighters were purchased to present to the Abyssinians whom we would pass on the way.

A good selection of medicines, scientific instruments, botanical and entomological collecting material, maps and photographic apparatus, together with camp equipment, sporting battery, and 1,000 Maria Theresa dollars, completed our outfit.

A few days before leaving Nairobi a cable was sent to Adis Ababa requesting the Abyssinian Government to provide us with an escort from Moyale, but as no reply was received, I

approached His Excellency for the loan of rifles and ammunition with which to arm the caravan. My request was granted, and through the courtesy of Colonel Breathing, D.S.O., thirty .303 rifles and two boxes of ammunition were obtained.

These were served out to the headman, porters, syces and servants. One of the porters professing to be able to blow the bugle, an instrument was served out to him, and while he lipped the bugle lustily throughout the long safari, many were the weird noises we were destined to hear at all hours of the night and day from this tone deaf musician.

On Saturday, the 19<sup>th</sup> August, the porters and syces with the mules were started off for Nyeri, with instructions to await our arrival there, and as the road between Nairobi and Nyeri was reported to be in good condition, we arranged to motor to Nyeri with our personal servants and baggage.

On the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> August we started off, the motor wagon carrying twelve passengers and three tons of luggage. A number of friends came to the Norfolk Hotel to bid us good-bye, and the natives turned out in hundreds to give us a hearty send off. The journey to the Chania River was accomplished without incident. Mr and Mrs Greswolde Williams met us on our arrival and entertained us to lunch, after which we adjourned to the Blue Post Hotel to make our adieux to Jim Elkington, M.F.H.

Leaving again at 2.30, we found the road good for ten miles, but owing to a heavy rainfall our difficulties began by the wheels of the heavily laden motor sinking into soft portions of the road. Ropes were got out and fixed to the front axles, and with the assistance of a number of natives whom we collected on the roadside, we managed to pull the motor out.

The worst part of the road was at Saba Saba, and the newly laid culvert on the Maragua hill fared badly as our heavily laden vehicle lumbered across it.

By the time the Maragua bridge was reached, darkness had set in, and with only a small hurricane lamp dangling from the front spring of the car and dimly lighting our way, the journey up the zig-zag ascent to Fort Hall was full of risk and danger.

On our arrival at Fort Hall the heartiest of welcomes was accorded us by the Provincial Commissioner and Mrs McCleelan and Dr and Mrs Pritchard, and right glad were we to turn in early after our somewhat arduous day.

The next morning after bidding the good folks at Fort Hall good-bye, we started off for Nyeri, a distance of thirty-seven miles.

We had considerable trouble in descending to the valley of the Mathioya, for the narrowness of the road made its sharp and precipitous corners extremely difficult to negotiate. On nearing the bottom of the hill we ran into a soft piece of road, and down went the motor to its axles. Purchasing several bundles of firewood from some Akikuyu women, we attempted to corduroy the road, and a couple of hours were spent extricating the car. Once more on the move, we safely crossed the bridge spanning the river, but the ascent on the other side proved so steep that the assistance of thirty natives was necessary to enable the car to reach the top, and no sooner were we on the level than the car in crossing a shallow stream was suddenly brought to a standstill by the two wheels on the

near side becoming firmly embedded in tenacious mud, tilting the car and nearly overturning it.

The car was unloaded, the baggage stacked on the roadside, and after much jacking up, hauling and pushing, she was got on to firm ground.

It was then proposed to endeavour to make Nyeri in the empty wagon, carrying with us only a few personal belongings, but after proceeding about two miles, the road became so narrow, and the faults across it so treacherous, that we had to own ourselves defeated.

How to turn the enormous car in the narrow way was the next problem, and to add to our misfortunes, the starting handle had been broken off by the car dipping in soft ground. This meant that Sexton, the Chauffeur, had to keep the engine going continuously. After cutting away the bank, by Sexton's dexterous driving the car was ultimately got round and we were back again in Fort Hall shortly after 4pm, having covered five miles in five hours.

A telegram was at once dispatched to Nyeri to send our Wanyamwezi, together with the Akinkuyu porters who had been collected pending our arrival at Nyeri, back to Fort Hall. Ninety-seven porters arrived the next morning, and the following day, Monday, 28<sup>th</sup> August, another start was made. The loads which we had left on the roadside were collected, Wambogo's Camp reached at 2pm, and at 10.30 on Tuesday morning, we arrive safely Nyeri.

The Kikuyu country was looking its best, and the shambas of the natives had considerably increased since my last visit to these parts; above all, an air of prosperity prevailed, the beautifully situated Station of Nyeri, with its well laid out gardens and nice golf course, giving a touch of civilization to the landscape.

The day was spent in arranging our baggage into porters' load, and in the evening rations of maize and beans were served out. Our supply of flour had been much reduced by the porters consuming, during their march to Nyeri, five loads of flour over and above the rations issued to them at Nairobi, and it was absolutely necessary to save the flour for the trying journey across the barren Frontier district.

The Wanyamwezi refused to eat the maize and beans, and as issue of these had been necessary on account of their stealing the flour, I insisted upon their taking their rations and it was a lesson they did not readily forget.

On the following morning the entire caravan was drawn up, the extent and difficulties of the long safari we were about to undertake explained to them, and those who were afraid to risk the journey with us were advised to return to Nairobi before it was too late; all however agreed to go on.

We were delayed a day as arrangements had to be made for the grinding of an additional supply of flour. Several loads of rice were also purchased, and forty-six extra porters were engaged to assist in transporting food supplies for the caravan.

This brought up our complement of porters to one hundred and fifty-two, and imposing but very trying retinue.

On the eve of our departure we played a round of golf, in which Nairobi fell to the Nyeri exponents. We were then entertained to dinner by Jackson of the Forest Department, when we partook of our first East Africa trout caught in a stream of the Aberdare range – a three pound fish of excellent quality.

The morning of the 31<sup>st</sup> August opened bitterly cold and wet. The camp was astir shortly before six; blankets and posho (rations) were distributed to the porters, and by 8.30 all were on the road, the old flag, fixed to a slender bamboo and carried by a Wanyamwezi, flying at the head of the caravan.

The porters under way, Cranworth and I repaired to the Boma to bid goodbye to Le Breton, the Assistant District Commissioner, who had been most helpful and kind.

Camp on the Rongai River, some fourteen miles from Nyeri, was reached by 1.30. On the road several herds of sleek, healthy cattle, belonging to the Akikuyu, were passed. On the plains between the Amboni River and the Rongai, few cattle were to be seen, as the Nyeri Masai had moved their stock towards Laikipia.

Two days marching across the plains which lie under the shadow of the snow clad peaks of Mount Kenya, brought us to camp on the Kitoloswa stream.

These plains are undulating, covered with beautiful sweet grass, and are well watered by Kenya's clear cold rivulets whose banks are clothed with the handsome cedar.

The whole of this portion of East Africa is now open for settlement, indeed, the greater part is already allotted, and is destined to become in time a great stock-raising centre.

The march from Kitoloswa to Makindu is close on twenty miles in an Easterly direction.

For the first four hours the march is through beautiful country, with thick green short grass, but entering a dense belt of forest, one rapidly descends some 1000 feet to the camp on the Makindu River.

The track through the forest shows the many cuttings made by Dutchmen for the passage of their wagons, and credit is due to them for making the steep descent possible for wheeled transport.

During the march herds of oryx, zebra and Grant's gazelle, two rhinoceroses, several wart-hog and the fresh spoor of buffalo were seen, while a small family of cheetah were carefully stalked by Cranworth, without, however, the offer of a fair shot.

The removal of the Masai from the Northern Reserve with their large flocks and herds has emboldened the game to return to these extensive pasturelands.

At Makindu the temperature is warmer, mimosa scrub and thorn bush replace the cedars of the higher altitude, and palm trees flourish on the banks of the river.

On reaching camp I went out with the hope of getting meat for the porters, but without success. Cranworth was fortunate, however, in bagging an oryx. He wounded the animal a

short distance from camp, but ere he gave the coup de grâce his quarry had led him a long way. Owing to darkness setting in and the low lying nature of the ground in which our camp was pitched, it was found necessary to send up rockets to enable Cranworth to locate its position.

Another three days marching brought us to the Government Post on the Northern Guaso Nyero. During this part of the journey the grazing became so scarce that grain had to be served out for the mules.

The banks of the Issiolo River were extremely hot, 96° in the shade, and to add to this discomfort the road lay through black cotton soil which was very stony and faulty; even the game found the going heavy, sinking to their hocks as they cantered away scenting the caravan.

The following species of game were noted as we marched North to the Guaso Nyero:- Rhinoceros, eland, giraffe, gerenuk, Grant's gazelle, oryx, Burchell and Grevy zebra, and lions were heard in two directions.

The amount of bird life to be found on the banks of the Morania stream and Issiolo River is simply wonderful, spurwing and guinea fowl rising on all sides in large numbers. One lot must have numbered close on 200 birds.

Biting flies were both numerous and troublesome, and many haematopota were added to my collection.

The snow clad peaks of Kenya still watched over our destinies, and in the morning sunlight formed a really beautiful sight in the South.