



LION SPEARING

by
CARL E AKELEY

SPECIAL
ZOOLOGY LEAFLET
No 1

FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
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LION SPEARING. GROUP I.
BRONZE BY CARL E. AKELEY.
PRESENTED TO FIELD MUSEUM BY R. T. CRANE, JR.

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DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY

SPECIAL LEAFLET NO. 1

LION SPEARING*

BY CARL E. AKELEY

The story of lion spearing is the sort of thing that is worthy of being recorded in bronze. It is a story of red blood and courage, of the efficiency of primitive men using primitive weapons, weapons made by themselves as they have been made from time immemorial. The story in brief is this: a naked man, by twirling a stick between the palms of his hands, with the end of the stick pressed against another of softer wood, produces fire through friction. Charcoal is then made, and in a crude retort of clay he smelts the iron ore. On a block of granite serving as an anvil, with a smaller stone as a hammer, he fashions crude hammers from the iron. With these as his only tools he shapes a spear which is to be sharpened finally on native stones. Thus he makes a beautifully balanced weapon, with which he goes forth to kill the lion that has raided his flocks and herds. He takes a great pride in the achievement, for he will make a headdress from the mane which his exploit entitles him to wear. This badge of distinction will forever command the respect of his fellows.

When lions are to be killed, as they must if civilization is to replace primitive life, the most humane method yet devised, as well as the most sporting, is that of spearing. The time elapsing between the first spear thrust and the end may be counted in seconds. There is small chance of the lion's escaping to die a lingering death from his wound, as so often happens when he is hunted with guns. If there are two or three natives together, it is reasonably certain that they will come out of it without a scratch. Shooting is not nearly as safe for the hunter. Moreover, spearing involves a fair combat between man and beast.

In the spring of 1910, after several strenuous months on elephant trails in Uganda, I went back to the Uashin Gishu Plateau for a lion hunt with Nandi spearmen. I had no difficulty in securing one hundred men, for they were to be paid and fed for playing the game they loved. In the twenty days devoted to the work there were many tense and thrilling moments. My band of sportsmen killed ten lions and five leopards. Only two men were injured. The first day out a leopard was surrounded in a patch of bush, and while I waited in the open for what was supposed to be a lion—as it should be driven out in front of the camera before being speared—there was a great commotion. A few minutes later the beaters brought out a leopard with sixty spear holes in his skin and one of the Nandi with his scalp hanging over his eyes. The leopard had refused to be driven and had given a good account of himself. Prompt surgical attention to the wounded Nandi resulted in a speedy recovery.

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Two days later a single lion was brought to bay in a strip of forest and speared before the camera could be brought up within view of the direction he unexpectedly took. Then for several days we hunted for lions without success until one morning, as the white members of the party were riding along in front and were just entering the bush that fringed a donga, we met face to face a band of lions that promptly took to cover as the alarm was given. In whatever direction a lion tried to escape a spearman bobbed up in the grass in front of him. The lions were forced to fight it out. Pandemonium reigned as the Nandi, shouting, and lions, grunting and growling, ran helter-skelter among the trees and high grass while I tried desperately to find a point of vantage for the motion picture camera. When it was all over, and we took stock, we found that we had the memory of a few glimpses of tawny skins but no pictures. There were, however, three lions to be skinned, and we had reason to believe that two had escaped.

Again as we rode beside a wooded donga a boy in front of me held up his hand in warning. As I swung off my horse a lion grunted close by, and as I was adjusting the camera a lioness came straight toward me, within ten feet, swerved and passed, then turned and plunged into the donga—all before the camera could be adjusted. Then I responded to a call from the left flank and hurried the camera to a point overlooking the part of the donga where a lion had taken cover in the high grass at the bottom. I had begun cranking the camera when the first spear was thrown. The spear hit the target, other spears followed quickly, and the lion never left his tracks. It was all over in less time than it takes to tell it. The film shows not only the falling spears but also the movements of the lion in the grass. Immediately I was summoned to another group of spearmen who were holding another lion at bay until I could have my camera brought into position. Again a film record was made.

As we were making camp near by and the two kills were being brought in to be skinned, the Nandi brought in a third lion from down the donga. We learned that one of the spearmen, a youth who had been loitering behind when the lions were located, had been charged by a lioness as he was running past her. He had killed her, but she had bitten his leg before she died. The boy's wounds were not serious and he was hunting with the rest a few days later. He was now entitled to wear a lion's skin headdress since he had killed a lioness alone.

It was perhaps a week later that we were riding along the slope of a hill overlooking a valley when I detected a moving object in the grass at the bottom of the valley. We soon found that five lions were leisurely making their way up the opposite hill. Four of them succeeded in reaching the bush along the banks of a small stream on the other side of the hill before being brought to bay by the Nandi. One had turned back and was rounded up in a small patch of high grass near the crest of the hill. This was a splendid chance for a picture, for the men could have held him there almost indefinitely as they awaited the camera.

As I was breathlessly adjusting the awkward thing, one spearman, more excitable than the others, threw his spear. Of course, the rest followed and the job was finished before the camera was ready. Again three of the five lions had been taken, but no film. This was our last encounter. I was not pleased with the results, as the film made seemed an inadequate record. Had I, however, at this time planned to make a sculptural record of lion spearing, I should not have regarded the film as unworthy, for the pictures and other data were highly valuable for that purpose.

The following graphic account of lion spearing is given by Theodore Roosevelt:*—

“At Sergoi Lake there is a store kept by Mr. Kirke, a South African of Scotch blood. With a kind courtesy which I cannot too highly appreciate he, with the equally cordial help of another settler, Mr. Skally—also a South African, but of Irish birth—and of the district commissioner, Mr. Corbett, had arranged for a party of Nandi warriors to come over and show me how they hunted the lion. Two Dutch farmers, Boers, from the neighborhood, had also come; they were Messrs. Mouton and Jordaan, fine fellows both, the former having served with De Wet during the war. Mr. and Mrs. Corbett—who were hospitality itself—had also come to see the sport; and so had Captain Chapman, an English army officer who was taking a rest after several years’ service in Northern Nigeria.

“The Nandi are a warlike pastoral tribe, close kin to the Masai in blood and tongue, in weapons and in manner of life. They have long been accustomed to kill with the spear lions which have become man-eaters or which molest their cattle overmuch; and the peace which British rule has imposed upon them—a peace so welcome to the weaker, so irksome to the predatory, tribes—has left lion killing one of the few pursuits in which glory can be won by a young warrior. When it was told them that if they wished they could come to hunt lions at Sergoi eight hundred warriors volunteered, and much heart-burning was caused in choosing the sixty or seventy who were allowed the privilege. They stipulated, however, that they should not be used merely as beaters, but should kill the lion themselves, and refused to come unless with this understanding.

“The day before we reached Sergoi they had gone out, and had killed a lion and lioness; the beasts were put up from a small covert and despatched with the heavy throwing spears on the instant, before they offered, or indeed had the chance to offer, any resistance. The day after our arrival there was mist and cold rain, and we found no lions. Next day, November 20th, we were successful.

“We started immediately after breakfast. Kirke, Skally, Mouton, Jordaan, Mr. and Mrs. Corbett, Captain Chapman, and our party, were on horseback; of course we carried our rifles, but our duty was merely to round up the lion and hold him, if he went off so far in advance that even the Nandi runners could not overtake him. We intended to beat the country toward some shallow, swampy valleys twelve miles distant.

*From *African Game Trails*; copyright 1909, 1910, by Charles Scribner’s Sons. By permission of the publishers.

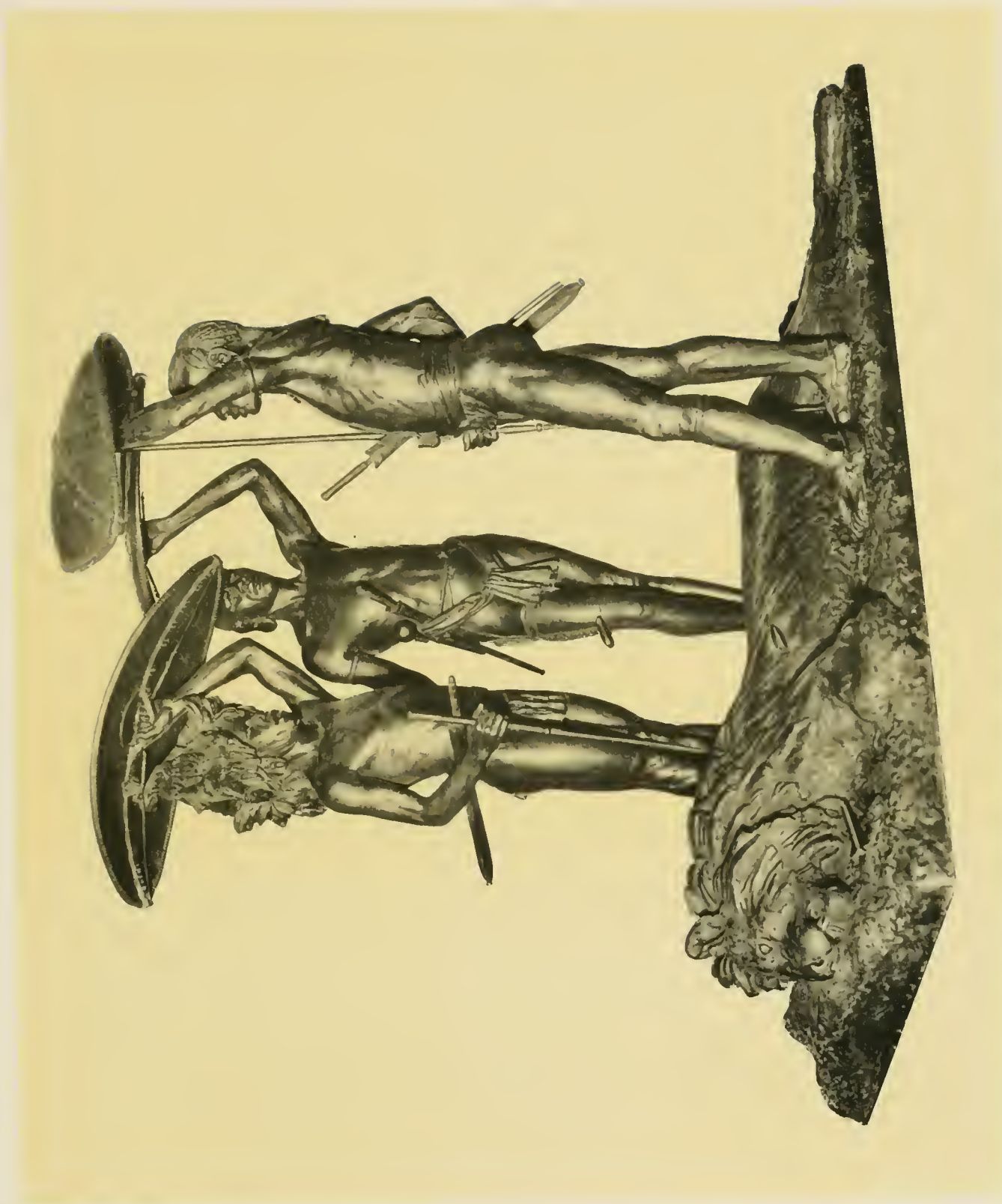
"In an hour we overtook the Nandi warriors, who were advancing across the rolling, grassy plains in a long line, with intervals of six or eight yards between the men. They were splendid savages, stark naked, lithe as panthers, the muscles rippling under their smooth dark skins; all their lives they had lived on nothing but animal food, milk, blood, and flesh, and they were fit for any fatigue or danger. Their faces were proud, cruel, fearless; as they ran they moved with long springy strides. Their head-dresses were fantastic; they carried ox-hide shields painted with strange devices; and each bore in his right hand the formidable war spear, used both for stabbing and for throwing at close quarters. The narrow spear heads of soft iron were burnished till they shone like silver; they were four feet long, and the point and edges were razor sharp. The wooden haft appeared for but a few inches; the long butt was also of iron, ending in a spike, so that the spear looked almost solid metal. Yet each sinewy warrior carried his heavy weapon as if it were a toy, twirling it till it glinted in the sun rays. Herds of game, red hartebeest and striped zebra and wild swine, fled right and left before the advance of the line.

"It was noon before we reached a wide, shallow valley, with beds of rushes here and there in the middle, and on either side high grass and dwarfed and scattered thorn-trees. Down this we beat for a couple of miles. Then, suddenly, a maned lion rose a quarter of a mile ahead of the line and galloped off through the high grass to the right; and all of us on horseback tore after him.

"He was a magnificent beast, with a black and tawny mane; in his prime, teeth and claws perfect, with mighty thews, and a savage heart. He was lying near a hartebeest on which he had been feasting; his life had been one unbroken career of rapine and violence; and now the maned master of the wilderness, the terror that stalked by night, the grim lord of slaughter, was to meet his doom at the hands of the only foes who dared molest him.

"It was a mile before we brought him to bay. Then the Dutch farmer, Mouton, who had not even a rifle, but who rode foremost, was almost on him; he halted and turned under a low thorn-tree, and we galloped past him to the opposite side, to hold him until the spearmen could come. It was a sore temptation to shoot him; but of course we could not break faith with our Nandi friends. We were only some sixty yards from him, and we watched him with our rifles ready, lest he should charge either of us, or the first two or three spearmen, before their companions arrived.

"One by one the spearmen came up, at a run, and gradually began to form a ring round him. Each, when he came near enough, crouched behind his shield, his spear in his right hand, his fierce, eager face peering over the shield rim. As man followed man, the lion rose to his feet. His mane bristled, his tail lashed, he held his head low, the upper lip now drooping over the jaws, now drawn up so as to show the gleam of the long fangs. He faced first one way and then another, and never ceased to utter his murderous grunting roars. It was a wild sight; the ring of spearmen, intent, silent, bent on blood, and in the centre the great man-killing beast, his thunderous wrath growing ever more dangerous.



LION SPEARING. GROUP III.
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“At last the tense ring was complete, and the spearmen rose and closed in. The lion looked quickly from side to side, saw where the line was thinnest, and charged at his topmost speed. The crowded moment began. With shields held steady, and quivering spears poised, the men in front braced themselves for the rush and the shock; and from either hand the warriors sprang forward to take their foe in flank. Bounding ahead of his fellows, the leader reached throwing distance; the long spear flickered and plunged; as the lion felt the wound he half turned, and then flung himself on the man in front. The warrior threw his spear; it drove deep into the life, for entering at one shoulder it came out of the opposite flank, near the thigh, a yard of steel through the great body. Rearing, the lion struck the man, bearing down the shield, his back arched; and for a moment he slaked his fury with fang and talon. But on the instant I saw another spear driven clear through his body from side to side; and as the lion turned again the bright spear blades darting toward him were flashes of white flame. The end had come. He seized another man, who stabbed him and wrenched loose. As he fell he gripped a spear-head in his jaws with such tremendous force that he bent it double. Then the warriors were round and over him, stabbing and shouting, wild with furious exultation.

“From the moment when he charged until his death I doubt whether ten seconds had elapsed, perhaps less; but what a ten seconds! The first half-dozen spears had done the work. Three of the spear blades had gone clear through the body, the points projecting several inches; and these, and one or two others, including the one he had seized in his jaws, had been twisted out of shape in the terrible death struggle.

“We at once attended to the two wounded men. Treating their wounds with antiseptic was painful, and so, while the operation was in progress, I told them, through Kirke, that I would give each a heifer. A Nandi prizes his cattle rather more than his wives; and each sufferer smiled broadly at the news, and forgot all about the pain of his wounds.

“Then the warriors, raising their shields above their heads, and chanting the deep-toned victory song, marched with a slow, dancing step around the dead body of the lion; and this savage dance of triumph ended a scene of as fierce interest and excitement as I ever hope to see.

“The Nandi marched back by themselves, carrying the two wounded men on their shields. We rode to camp by a roundabout way, on the chance that we might see another lion. The afternoon waned and we cast long shadows before us as we rode across the vast lonely plain. The game stared at us as we passed; a cold wind blew in our faces, and the tall grass waved ceaselessly; the sun set behind a sullen cloud bank; and then, just at nightfall, the tents glimmered white through the dusk.”

The three bronze groups illustrated in this leaflet are exhibited in Stanley Field Hall near the south entrance to Field Museum. They were presented to the Museum by Mr. Richard T. Crane, Jr., and form one of the two existing sets, the other being in the American Museum of Natural History, New York.

