

THE BIRTH OF AN ELEPHANT

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On 21st December, 1956, while on a routine visit to the Nyamasagani area of the Park, I heard a great commotion in the bush and found that it was caused by a herd of elephants. Part of the herd was spread out, but on the left there was a closely packed mass of animals all facing outwards. In the centre of them was a small black slimy object, which turned out to be a new born calf. The birth had clearly just taken place because the mother, easy to identify by her condition, and another cow elephant were removing the membrane covering the calf. This was at 11.15 a.m. For the next four hours the elephants remained under observation.

The maternity group consisted of six adult cows and five young calves, with a young bull elephant looking on about fifteen yards away. Some of them guarded and assisted the new born baby, nudging and pushing the little fellow, using their trunks and feet to try to get him up. Others took the membrane bag, which had been removed from the calf, and threw it into the air so that it spread out like a blanket. Vultures had now appeared, but the cows would chase them to ten or fifteen yards distance and then rejoin the group. Except for one bull, any other elephants which approached were driven off by the cows. The new born calf, a bull, had a thick covering of hair, most noticeably on his head. At this stage he was spread-eagled and unable to stand.

For about ten minutes the trumpeting and screaming went on. After half an hour the herd moved away and disappeared from the scene, leaving one adult cow besides a bull calf about seven years old, obviously also her son. For about fifteen minutes the mother and the other cow continued to coax the baby to its feet; then the other cow left them and followed the rest of the herd.

Two hours after birth the baby elephant took its first stumbling steps; they ended in disaster for it fell forward on its head and rolled over on its back. Its mother and brother gave it no rest but forced it on to its tiny feet. The young bull was very attentive to his new brother, helping the little fellow to stand by passing his trunk round his stomach, both from its side and from between its legs. The baby was still very weak on his pins and fell over time and time again, often giving an alarming grunt.

Two hours after the birth, the mother dropped the placenta. She played with it and even started to eat the outer skin, but the bulk of it remained complete.

Soon the young bull lost interest and, after circling the area emitting the most fearsome sounds—not normal trumpeting and beyond my powers of description—disappeared in the direction of the herd. Perhaps he had become aware of my presence.

During the next two hours the baby elephant covered about a hundred yards. When eventually I left him and his mother to themselves, the pair seemed happy and content. I suspect that in the evening they re-joined the herd which was some distance off drinking at the river.