



BOYD ALEXANDER.

XXXIV.—*Boyd Alexander and his Ornithological Work.*
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(Plate XII.)

THE news of the tragic fate of Boyd Alexander, which reached London on the 24th of May, must have caused profound regret over the whole civilised world, as he was well known through his achievements both as a daring traveller and an accomplished writer. By none, however, will his loss be more deeply and truly mourned than by the British Ornithologists' Union, of which he was a distinguished and highly popular member. His charming personality and his character, so delightfully simple and so extraordinarily brave, endeared him to all who knew him, and his useful and valuable life could ill be spared. The first report of his death contained few details, but the news having come through official sources left no room for doubt that he had met with a violent end on the 2nd of April, while travelling on the confines of Wadai to the

north-east of Lake Chad. He had already passed through so many perils unharmed that he appeared to bear a charmed life, and it seems a terrible irony of Fate that the career of this most successful and intrepid traveller should have been cut short by the hand of a boy. The following account of the tragedy has now been received from Lieutenant Childers Thompson, commanding at the British post of Maifoni, in the Lake Chad district, with whom the late explorer stayed for a month.

"You will have received by this time the bare announcement that Boyd Alexander was killed near Darfur. I will now give you the details. He was delayed for a long time at Abeshir, in Wadai, owing to the French reverse at Nassalit having brought about a disturbed condition of the country. Finally, two months ago, leaving Abeshir, he proceeded on his journey, and along with his Portuguese collector José Lopez marched in a north-easterly direction, arriving safely at Tama, a place that is under Ali Dinar of Darfur (presumably a chieftain owing allegiance to the Anglo-Egyptian Government). They reached the place late at night, and on their arrival the local chief or king summoned them to his presence. To this request Alexander replied that he would see the king on the following morning.

"The explorer and his companion were encamped under some trees outside the town, and had just finished their evening meal when they were suddenly surrounded by a band of people, who declared their intention of taking Alexander to their king. One of the men then laid hands on the British officer, who naturally pushed him off. Thereupon a small boy, who was standing by, seized a gun and discharged it at Alexander, who fell instantly, and the crowd then set upon him and despatched him. Four of the natives seized José and proceeded to wrench a ring from his finger. In order to get free José said he would himself remove another ring which they wanted, but the moment he got his hands clear he seized his gun, fired two shots at his assailants, and, jumping on his horse, succeeded in escaping. Before this Alexander was dead, and the

majority of the natives, in their excitement, did not pay much attention to his companion and moved back to the town.

"The bad luck of the whole thing was that two days after the explorer's murder Ali Dinar of Darfur, to whom Alexander had sent his boys (presumably to announce his arrival and to ask for guides), sent back an escort along with the carriers. The latter had been well received by Ali Dinar, who had given them presents and had provided the escort for the British officer, to give him a safe passage across Darfur. Two days later would have made all the difference. The attitude of the Tama people was doubtless due to the fact that they had had trouble with the French before, and hearing of the arrival of an unknown white man at their town, expected further hostilities."

Thus, in the very prime of his life, having already at the early age of 37 covered himself with honour and glory, this splendid man was done to death. All those who had the privilege of knowing him will easily realise that Alexander's place both as a great traveller and as a field-naturalist of exceptional ability will be hard to fill; and to those who could claim him as a friend his loss must seem irreparable.

Boyd Alexander was the eldest son of Lt.-Col. Boyd Francis Alexander, of Swifts Place, Cranbrook. He was one of twin boys, born on the 16th of January, 1873. As it was doubtful whether the younger would survive the early hours of infancy, the Vicar was summoned hastily to christen the children, and the ceremony was performed in an old silver sugar-basin which is a family heirloom. The fears of the doctor, however, were fortunately not fulfilled, so the twins grew up together through childhood and school-days, while their ways did not part till at twenty years of age they entered different battalions of the Rifle Brigade (Militia). It was then that Boyd's taste for travel began to develop, and soon his expeditions kept him the greater part of his time away from England.

From earliest boyhood he shewed an extraordinary keenness for natural history. Perhaps this passion for collecting,

this thirst for excitement in birds-nesting, trapping, or handling the forbidden gun are common more or less to all boys, but young Boyd Alexander's devotion was more than these and shewed itself in his precocious knowledge of such books as White's "Selborne" and "Bewick," in the wonderful neatness and method of the arrangement of his egg-collection, and in a systematic diary of the migrations and habits of the birds in the neighbourhood of his home.

At school he was not particularly fond of games, but, although doubtless he employed many a trick to get off and to range the country-side for birds' nests, he was by no means unathletic or unmanly, for he represented Radley College in the public schools boxing-competition the same year that his twin brother, Robert, was her champion for gymnastics.

An incident of Alexander's boyhood is perhaps worth relating as characteristic of the future explorer and ornithologist, in that it shews in the boy those qualities of pluck and devotion to a hobby which were such conspicuous features in the nature of the man. He could not have been more than eleven at the time when he and his two brothers had come home for the holidays, and all, wild with the joy of their first day of freedom, were scouring the place in an eager search for birds'-eggs. Not much luck had attended their efforts, though many risks of broken limbs had been taken, until evidence of a swallows' nest was discovered inside the roof of a disused barn. The door was locked, and how to force an entrance was the problem still occupying the energies of the brothers outside, when to their surprise an exulting shout came from Boyd up in the roof, and to this day it is not known how he had effected an entrance. But his triumph was not destined to last long, for just as he had reached his hand up into the nest to count the eggs, there was a horrible crash among the rafters, quickly followed by a sickening thud upon the ground. Then for a few moments, that to the brothers outside seemed an age, there followed a dead silence presently broken by moans. Frantically they kicked at the door and tore at the boarding in order to get to his rescuer, but with no success, and to add to

their horror, through a crack in the boards they could see him lying with his head in a pool of blood. Fortunately they sighted a labourer who was working in a neighbouring field, and at length with his help the door was broken open and poor Boyd was brought out and laid upon a heap of straw. Water was fetched from a well near by, and after a little while he revived. It was then seen that in falling he had struck the rafters with his jaw and that three of his teeth were broken off. It was close on lunch-time and they were about half a mile from home. His brothers urged him to let one of them run back and bring the pony cart, but he would not hear of it, fearing that if his mishap became known to the elders, a stop would be put to their independence and all their fun spoilt for the future. So he struggled home in his shaken and crippled state and actually made the attempt to endure his pains through lunch as if nothing had happened. But his dazed condition and battered face at length attracted notice, though not before he had won the day for his brothers and himself, for the serious nature of his accident was never realised by his parents, their chief fear being lest his appearance should be permanently damaged. So this was by no means the last of the adventures the boys had in the pursuit of their pet hobby.

Side by side with his taste for natural history another excellent boyish characteristic was developed in the form of a steadfast hero-worship, the objects of which were never dethroned from his regard, but remained his pattern heroes to the end of his life. These were Napoleon and General Gordon. In viewing the record of Alexander's achievements, so remarkable for so young a man and one that has placed him among the great explorers of history, and remembering this early hero-worship of his, it is interesting to observe how "the child was father to the man." For this was the inspiration which largely helped him in after years to overcome well-nigh insurmountable difficulties. When alone in the midst of dangers, and fighting the leagued forces that Fate arrayed against him, of savage men, and

the no less fearful foes of fever, famine, and flood, like the fighters of old he carried his gods into the battle, and many must have been the times when he took heart from his remembrance and intimate knowledge of the lives of these great ideals, these heroes of his boyhood.

Interesting witnesses to his veneration for these great dead remain round the walls of his museum at Wilsley, in an almost exhaustive collection of their histories and lives and in many fine old Napoleonic engravings.

Although Boyd Alexander's name will go down to posterity pre-eminently as an explorer, from the results of whose travels has been gathered much store of knowledge in various sciences, it must be interesting to ornithologists to know that it was his passion for their own special science that formed the mainspring of all his achievements. In his book, which relates the history of his great journey, 'From the Niger to the Nile,' he writes:—"Every explorer looks upon the map of that part of the world which particularly calls him, and endeavours to find a spot that still affords opportunity for the special powers he may possess for finding out the secrets that it hides. The mountaineer sets his heart upon the ascent of some unconquered height Other travellers distinguish themselves in that form of exploration which depends for its success upon a great knowledge of peoples and languages The humanitarian follows the map as it is expressed by the distribution of the tribes ; while geographers leave the featureless desert on one side and take their ways by hills that make beautiful undulating shadings, and by rivers that embroider with blue veinings, and by lakes that shine like jewels—upon the map All these facts [referring to the little-known region of Lake Chad] attracted me, and there was the character of the fauna to be ascertained, with the hope that a locality, showing geographical peculiarities, might also reveal marked differences in its fauna. This last idea naturally took a strong hold on me, for I will now confess that my ruling passion is ornithology, and all my

exploration might be described as taking the course pointed out by the birds."

At an early age Alexander began to form a local collection of the birds of his native county (Kent), and while his father remained at Swifts Place these occupied a large room, which was known in the household as 'Boyd's Museum.' When some years later Col. Alexander moved into his other house, Wilsley, Boyd found that his rapidly increasing collections necessitated the building of a special museum, and he constructed a capital house in the grounds. Ranged round the walls of this building may be seen a series of cases containing beautifully mounted examples of Kentish Birds, many of them of great local interest and rarity. The middle portion of the building is occupied by cabinets containing all his splendid collection of African bird-skins, and including the priceless type-specimens of the many novelties he has described.

His studies on the birds of Kent were embodied in the section on "Birds" in the Victoria History of Kent, which he wrote during the intervals of his earlier journeys.

Turning now to his work as an ornithologist the following is a brief resumé of his principal writings.

In 1896 we find his first published note in the 'Zoologist,' where he recorded an example of Harcourt's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma castro*), which had been picked up on the beach close to Littlestone, on the coast of Kent. It was the first British example of this species. In the spring and autumn of 1896 much of his time was spent on the coast of Kent studying the nesting-habits of the birds and their migrations, and his observations were published in three papers which appeared in the 'Zoologist' of that year, under the titles "Ornithological Notes from Romney Marsh and its Neighbourhood" (pp. 246-253), "Notes on Birds in Kent" (pp. 344-349), and "Ornithological Notes from Rye" (pp. 408-416). Many of these observations are especially valuable as recording the movements of the various species on that part of the coast of Kent.

In January of the following year he made his first

expedition to the Cape Verde Islands, being accompanied by his friend Mr. John Duncan and two professional taxidermists. The party landed at São Vicente on February the 10th, and spent about four months in exploring the various islands of the group. Materials were thus gathered for his excellent and exhaustive paper on the Avifauna of the Cape Verde Islands which was published in 'The Ibis' for 1898, pp. 74-118. Some new species rewarded the maiden efforts of the explorer, the most important being a curious Lark (*Spizocorys raza*), only met with on the little desert island of Raza, which occupies an area of some three square miles. Other notable species met with were the Desert Lark (*Pyrrhuloxia nigriceps* Gould), the Cape Verde Shearwater (*Puffinus edwardsi* Oustal. = *P. mariæ* Alexander), the White-breasted Frigate-Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina* (Lath.)), and Harcourt's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma castro* Harcourt, = *O. cryptoleucura* Ridgw.), all of which were found to be breeding on some of the small rocky islands.

Finding that his first visit to the islands had been too late for the breeding season of most of the species, he paid a second visit to the Cape Verde Islands in 1897 for the special purpose of obtaining eggs, and his further notes on the group were published in 'The Ibis' for 1898, pp. 277-285.

His next expedition took him to the Zambesi region, when he formed one of the nine members of Major Gibbons's 'Cape to Cairo' Expedition, which set out from Chindi on the 18th of July, 1898. In company with his taxidermist Ramm he explored the lower part of the Zambesi and its tributary, the Kafuè River, and formed a large collection of nearly 1000 bird-skins representing 212 species, several of which proved to be new. The results of this important undertaking were fully described by Alexander in 'The Ibis,' 1899, pp. 549-583, 1900, pp. 70-109, 424-458.

No sooner had he completed his work on the Zambesi Collection than he left England for service with the Gold Coast Constabulary, and took part in the relief of Kumassi in 1900, for which he obtained the medal and clasp. On

this expedition he was accompanied by José Lopez his Portuguese collector, who had returned with him as a boy from the Cape Verde Islands, and who remained his faithful adherent during all his subsequent wanderings in Africa. As the relief-column advanced on Kumassi, José slowly followed behind and formed excellent collections of birds at each station on the lines of communication. After a three hours' fight the Ashantis were driven into the forest and the column entered the beleaguered fort.

An amusing incident shewing how Alexander's passion for ornithology dominated all other interests was related to the writer by one of the other officers who accompanied the column. Shortly after the occupation of Kumassi, Boyd being nowhere to be found, General Sir James Willcocks instituted a search for him and eventually he and José were discovered in their tent outside the fort, though the surrounding forest was still swarming with hostile Ashantis. On being asked to explain his reason for running such risks, he said that if he remained in the fort he was sure to be called on for duty, whereas in his present camp he was less likely to be disturbed and had excellent opportunities for increasing his bird-collection! On leaving Kumassi he was sent with a column of Haussas to Gambaga, the headquarters of the northern territories, and there he met with many interesting forms of bird-life, including several rare Desert Larks, such as *Heliocorys modesta* and *Mirafra erythropygia*.

On leaving Gambaga in May 1901 he trekked to Salaga and thence on to the River Volta, finally reaching the coast at Accra. An account of the fine collection of birds formed during this Expedition, numbering nearly 1100 specimens, will be found in 'The Ibis,' 1902, pp. 278-333 and 355-377. Several species proved to be new to science, including a Honey-Guide (*Indicator willcocksii*) which was named in honour of General Sir James Willcocks, while many of the other specimens obtained enabled the author to add considerably to our knowledge of the geographical distribution of the birds in this little-known area.

On his return to England Alexander was offered and

accepted a commission in the Rifle Brigade in which he had already served as a Militiaman, but his heart was not really in soldiering, except in so far as it enabled him to visit unknown lands in search of birds. In 1902, when he had completed the description of his Gold Coast collections, we find him organising an expedition to visit the little-known island of Fernando Po. This was one of his most successful undertakings, for he ascended the Pico Santa Isabel, which attains an altitude of 10,800 feet, and discovered a large number of new species, including the remarkable long-tailed Tree-Warbler (*Urolais mariæ*) representing a new genus and species. With his Portuguese collector José Lopez, who had developed the most remarkable talent both for shooting and preserving small birds, he arrived at Fernando Po on 27th October, 1902, and remained on the island till the middle of December, when his leave being nearly up he was obliged to return to England. Describing the ornithological results of this Expedition he writes:—"The work of the whole expedition resulted in a series of nearly 500 specimens representing 3 new genera and 103 species, of which 35 have proved to be new to science. I owe this remarkable success to having traversed the high ground, my predecessors having confined their attentions to the lowlands. The wealth of bird-life on the island is indeed wonderful, and proportionally larger than in the forest-region of the adjoining West Coast." A full account with coloured figures of some of his more remarkable discoveries on this occasion will be found in 'The Ibis,' 1903, pp. 330-403.

Boyd Alexander's next scheme was of a much more ambitious character than any of his previous undertakings, and is now famous all over the world as the Alexander-Gosling Expedition, which crossed Africa from the Niger to the Nile and explored the countries bordering Lake Chad. The whole journey occupied three years, from 1904 to 1907, and resulted in the tragic deaths of both his companions, his brother Capt. Claud Alexander (Scots Guards) and Capt. G. B. Gosling (Rifle Brigade). Undaunted by these terrible misfortunes

and accompanied only by his faithful Portuguese collector, José Lopez, Alexander pushed on across Africa by way of the Shari and Welle Rivers, and surmounting all dangers and difficulties eventually arrived safely at Khartum. The details of this great journey are still fresh in the memory of most of us, the story having been graphically told by Alexander in two large volumes bearing the title 'From the Niger to the Nile.'

On the 13th of May, 1907, he gave an account of this Expedition before the Royal Geographical Society at Burlington Gardens, where he received a most enthusiastic reception, and his graphic account of his journey with its triumphs and misfortunes, told in the simplest language, will not easily be forgotten by those who were present. [*Cf. Geographical Journal*, xxx. pp. 119-152 (1907).]

For his geographical discoveries Alexander received the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society of Antwerp in 1907, and the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society of London in 1908 ; he was also elected an Honorary Member of the Royal Geographical Society of Scotland in 1907.

The ornithological results of this great journey have not yet been published, for though Alexander had partly written two papers on the Birds, he had finished neither of them when he started on this last journey. The new species, however, some 29 in number, were described in the *Bulletin* of the British Ornithologists' Club, volumes xix., xxi., and xxiii.

One of the memorable incidents of this Expedition was the capture of an adult Okapi, which after being hunted for many days was shot by José in the Welle Forest. This interesting specimen was mounted by Messrs. Rowland Ward & Co. and presented by Alexander to the Natural History Museum, where it may now be seen in the Eastern Corridor, over the Great Hall.

Boyd Alexander's name will ever be associated with the history of Lake Chad, and it was near that Lake that he ultimately met his fate and where his body lies buried. On his return from the Alexander-Gosling Expedition he found

that his twin brother Robert was constructing a lake on his father's estate near Cranbrook. To commemorate the event, it was determined to make it in shape as nearly as possible a miniature facsimile of Lake Chad. The Lake at Swifts Place is now a very exact representation of the original, as determined by Boyd's Survey, and characteristic features have been added such as the boat-house and duck huts upon the banks and the island, which resemble the reed-built huts of the Buduma tribe inhabiting Lake Chad.

Of his last journey we can say but little. He visited the Islands of San Thomé, Principe, and Annabon, in the Gulf of Guinea, on each of which he made a complete collection of birds, and, after touching at Fernando Po, crossed to Cameroon. There he ascended the Peak and made extensive collections, one of his most important discoveries being a remarkable species of Francolin (*Francolinus camerunensis*) in which the plumage of the two sexes is entirely different. From his last letter to the writer, dated near Victoria 30th of April, 1909, the following passage is extracted:—"I have worked pretty hard on the peak of Cameroon and I do not think I have ever had more difficult collecting. The forest is so thick that I lose nearly half of what I kill. I had an appalling time of it on the mountain during the first night of the earthquake. My camp was at an altitude of 8,000 feet. At each boom from the mountain above us the ground danced like a live thing and torrents of stone poured down the hill not half a mile from where we were camped, forest-trees came crashing down and snapped in two like match-sticks, and the cries of terrified monkeys flying before the torrent added, if that was possible, to the dreadful scene. I abandoned my camp at three in the morning and only just in time, for an hour later the place was destroyed."

After leaving Cameroon he made his way once more to Lake Chad and finally, as has already been told, started on his last journey through Wadai.

He now lies beside his brother Claud, his body having been recovered and brought back to Maifoni, a British Post near Lake Chad.

List of Papers etc. by the late Boyd Alexander.

1896.

ZOOLOGIST.

On a new British Petrel, p. 167.

Ornithological Notes from Romney Marsh and its neighbourhood,
pp. 246-253.

Notes on Birds in Kent, pp. 344-349.

Ornithological Notes from Rye, pp. 408-416.

1898.

ZOOLOGIST.

Little Gull in Kent, p. 216.

THE IBIS.

An Ornithological Expedition to the Cape Verde Islands, pp. 74-118.

Further Notes on the Ornithology of the Cape Verde Islands,
pp. 277-285.

BULLETIN B. O. CLUB.

On Birds from the Cape Verde Islands, vii., p. xxvii.

1899.

THE IBIS.

An Ornithological Expedition to the Zambesi River, pp. 549-583.

BULLETIN B. O. CLUB.

On his Expedition to the Zambesi, viii., p. xlviii.

Exhibition of examples of *Cinnyris shelleyi*, viii., p. lv.

Description of *Chlorodyta neglecta*, x., p. xvii.

1900.

THE IBIS.

An Ornithological Expedition to the Zambesi River, pp. 70, 109,
424-458.

1901.

BULLETIN B. O. CLUB.

On new or rare species of Birds from the Gold Coast Hinterland, xii.,
p. 10.

Description of a new species of Nightjar, *Caprimulgus sharpei*, xii.,
p. 29.

1902.

THE IBIS.

On the Birds of the Gold Coast Colony and its Hinterland,
pp. 278-333, 355-377.

1903.

THE IBIS.

On the Birds of Fernando Po, pp. 330-403.

BULLETIN B. O. CLUB.

Descriptions of thirty-three new species and two new genera of Birds from Fernando Po, xiii., p. 33.

A Genus and four new species of Birds from Fernando Po, xiii., p. 48.

Description of *Heterhyphantes melanogaster* ♂, xiii., p. 49.

Glareola melanoptera in Sussex, xiv., p. 17.

A new species of Flycatcher from Fernando Po, xiv., p. 17.

1907.

From the Niger to the Nile. By Lieut. BOYD ALEXANDER. 2 vols. 8vo, London, 1907.

BULLETIN B. O. CLUB.

A short account of his three years' journey across Africa, xix., p. 46.

Exhibition and description of six new species of Birds, xix., p. 46.

Description of a new species of *Calamocichla*, xix., p. 63.

Exhibition of three new species of Birds, xix., p. 88.

Descriptions of two new species of African Birds, xix., p. 104.

From the Niger, by Lake Chad, to the Nile. By BOYD ALEXANDER, Lieut. Rifle Brigade. Geogr. Journ. xxx., p. 119 (August 1907).

1908.

'Birds of Kent' in the "Victoria History of the County of Kent," vol. i., pp. 267-301. (1908.)

BULLETIN B. O. CLUB.

Description of a new species of Lark-heeled Cuckoo (*Centropus neumanni*) from the River Welle, xxi., p. 78.

Exhibition of eight new species of African Birds, xxi., p. 83.

Remarks on certain species of *Indicator*, xxi., p. 91.

Exhibition of a new species of Flycatcher (*Batis chadensis*) from Lake Chad, xxi., p. 105.

Exhibition and description of new species of African Birds, xxiii., p. 15.

Exhibition of rare Birds obtained by him on his Expedition across Africa, xxiii., p. 16.

Descriptions of two new species of Birds from Lake Chad, xxiii., p. 33.

Description of a new species of Red-winged Starling (*Amydrus neumanni*) from Northern Nigeria, xxiii., p. 42.

1909.

BULLETIN B. O. CLUB.

Description of a new species of Grey Parrot (*Psittacus princeps*) from Princes Island, West Africa, xxiii., p. 74.

Descriptions of three new species of Birds, *Francolinus camerunensis*, *Anthus camerunensis*, *Cryptolopha camerunensis*, from the Peak of Cameroon, xxv., pp. 12, 13.