

EPISODES IN THE PUBLISHING OF TALBOT MUNDY'S *THE IVORY TRAIL*

By LOUIS E. LAMBERT

A GREAT MANY MEN now in their forties or fifties remember reading the books of Talbot Mundy; those who, in the 1920's and '30's, read *Adventure*, a magazine that was issued three times (not four) a month, might remember him with special fondness. Starting in 1911, Mundy began writing for this magazine, and his stories continued to appear there even beyond his death in 1940. Some of his stories also appeared in *Romance*, *Argosy All-Story*, *Everybody's*, *Blue Book*, and other magazines; but of his approximately 150 stories, more than 100 appeared in *Adventure*. After publication of *King—of the Khyber Rifles* in 1916, nearly all of his magazine stories were published in book form either in this country or England, and generally in both. After Scribner's published *Rung Ho*, his first book, in 1914, Bobbs-Merrill was his American publisher until 1931, when he shifted to The Century Company (later Appleton-Century), remaining with this firm until his death.

Born in London in 1879, Talbot Mundy was educated at Rugby and served almost ten years as a government official in Africa and India. After traveling in Australia, he came permanently to the United States in 1911, making his homes in Maine, Vermont, and New York, and later moving to California. (The bibliographical and biographical material is from the *Talbot Mundy Biblio*, ed. Bradford M. Day, Denver, New York, 1955, mimeograph.)

There is a thick file of Mundy material dating from 1916 to 1931 in the Bobbs-Merrill archives. Advertisements, reviews of the books, interviews of Mundy by reporters and book editors, illustrations, and layouts of title pages are included; but the most interesting papers are letters from Mundy to H. H. Howland. Most of these are typed, but there are some letters handwritten by Mundy when he was traveling.

Although Mundy wrote at least thirty-five books and Bobbs-Merrill published fourteen of them, this brief article will deal with only one. It comprises the middle two thirds of what Dr. J. Lloyd Eaton of Berkeley, California, writing in the Day bibliography of Mundy, has termed the Monty Saga. Monty is the Earl of Montdidier and Kirkudbrightshire, a retired cavalry colonel who had served in India, and the natural leader of the three adventurers: Fred Oakes, who had been to school with Monty; Yerkes, an American who had attended Bowdoin College; and the nameless narrator (presumably Mundy).

The first part of this saga was published in *Adventure* but never in book form. The first book, *The Ivory Trail* (1919), tells of a search for ivory buried by Tippoo Tib, the most famous of the Arab slave traders who led caravans from Zanzibar to central Africa in the 1870's and 1880's. The action takes place while Tippoo Tib is still alive (he died in 1905) but after the close of the Boer War in 1902. The archvillain is Professor Schillingschen, an ethnologist who is also a German agent; a more colorful "bad guy" is Georges Coutlass, "a citizen of three countries," who is Greek. Lady Isobel Saffren Walden, who has lost her reputation and accepted service as a German agent, complicates the plot. Strongly anti-German feeling appears throughout,

which is quite understandable in 1918. Mundy, however, had a personal reason for disliking Germans. A significant part of the book is autobiographical, the only Mundy book that is. In a letter to Howland dated November 7, 1918, Mundy wrote:

. . . I believe myself to be the only person in the world who could have written it. I believe I am the only man who saw conditions as they really were in German East [Africa] before this war, who thoroughly know and understand British East Africa as well, who have hunted lions and elephants, have held a civil job out there, have fought, sickened, been wounded, recovered and so on all up and down the monstrous land. . . .

I am the guy, for instance, who was wounded in the leg with the poisoned spear, whose grave the Germans dug, who was eye-witness of the floggings and hangings, who returned up Lake Victoria Nyanza on the dhow, who saw the cannibals on Elgon, etcetera, and so on.

Later in the letter Mundy suggested that the title might be improved. (In *Adventure* the title had been *On the Trail of Tippoos Tib.*) He also volunteered to "dope out a verse to go between" the chapters. This was not new with Mundy since in *Rung Ho*, his first book, a short verse heads each chapter. In *King—of the Khyber Rifles* the verses become longer, but in *The Ivory Trail* there are not only bits of verse, some more than forty lines in length, between chapters but also verses that Fred Oakes makes up and sings, accompanying himself upon a concertina. The following excerpt is typical:

Silver and black sleeps Zanzibar. The moonlit ripples croon
Soft songs of loves that perfect are, long tales of red-lipped
spoils of war,
And you—you smile, you moon!
For I think that beam on the placid sea

That splashes, and spreads, and dips, and gleams,
That dances and glides till it comes to me
Out of infinite sky, is the path of dreams,
And down that lane the memories run
Of all that's wild beneath the sun!

On the Trail of Tippoo Tib had been changed to *Up and Down the Earth Tales*, to which title Howland wrote that one of his best readers had given "a fine report." In a February (1919) letter Mundy reported that: "A young friend of mine (age 13) assures me that 'The Ivory Trail' would be a better title." After considering various alternatives, Mundy decided:

I am all in favor of *The Ivory Trail*. Thirteen letters. 13 is a *very lucky number*, all the more so because so few fools want it!

Bobbs-Merrill, however, warmed slowly to *The Ivory Trail* as a title. Howland reported:

We love the word "Ivory" and should like to see it used in the title but when you combine it with "Trail," doesn't it sound a bit like a boy's book? What do you think of *Yellow Ivory*? Or *The Ivory Folk*, or *The Wealth of Ivory*?

Howland then added:

. . . the fact that there are thirteen letters in *The Ivory Trail* will influence the judgment of both Mr. Curtiss [Bobbs-Merrill's New York representative] and Mr. Bobbs because thirteen seems to be the B.M. Company's lucky number.

By the end of March the title had become *Dead Man's Ivory*, which Mundy said ". . . gets my vote. 13 letters. Covers the whole ground. Suggests unimaginable things. . . ." Howland congratulated Mundy upon this title and moved to make it unanimous. Constable in London, however, preferred *The Ivory Trail*, and Mundy later

switched to agree with them. In a letter to William C. Bobbs late in April Mundy explained his logic:

The Ivory Trail has flair—a sort of poetic suggestion of a long trail leading somewhere. *Dead Man's Ivory* comes to a full stop, and might refer to false teeth!

In a return letter Bobbs gratefully accepted Mundy's reasons, saying:

The suggestion of false teeth kills *Dead Man's Ivory* for a book title and it is most fortunate that this idea occurred to you. "Ivory" is indeed a beautiful word and it has been in my mind from the start as the main word for the title.

The Ivory Trail is perfectly satisfactory. . . .

Thus the title which Mundy's young friend (age 13) had chosen by February 18 eventually became *the* title. It is worth wondering, however, if it would have been chosen if it had not had thirteen letters. (Howland's fear that the book might be taken for a boy's book seems unduly apprehensive. It *is* a boy's book and a very good one. The present writer read it when he was twelve, his first Mundy book, and it remains his favorite.)

Bobbs-Merrill gave *The Ivory Trail* vigorous promotion, and it was reviewed widely. It received the first page position in the "Books and Book World" section of the July 6, 1919, issue of the *New York Sun*. According to typed excerpts by Bobbs-Merrill there were favorable reports from various newspapers. The following are typical:

In the manner of Kipling, Mr. Mundy paints a vivid background for the game of international intrigue and crime in which British, German, native, and non-descript adventurers engage in pursuit of Tippoo Tib's storied ivory (*New York World*).

Here is a tale of adventure fit to rank with *She* and *King Solomon's Mines* (*Los Angeles Examiner*).

The Ivory Trail pulsates with adventure. The action that enthralls begins on the first page, and continues until the last line. And as Mr. Mundy tells his story, he reveals Africa, as through a panoramic camera, appalling at times in its fierceness and its savagery, in its tropic grandeur and its overwhelming mystery (*Philadelphia Record*).

The Ivory Trail is an entertaining and often thrilling adventure story, with plenty of incident, admirably portrayed characters, and a number of extremely narrow and entirely plausible escapes from sudden and violent death, told with spirit and skill (*The New York Times*).

But even favorable reviews and strong promotion by its publisher failed to turn *The Ivory Trail* into a substantial money-maker. The original edition in its first ten months netted Mundy just \$2,143. Still, there were royalties from the English edition; A. L. Burt issued a reprint edition; and McKinley Stone and McKenzie published it as one of their "Masterpieces of Oriental Mystery." (This was somewhat puzzling since, strictly speaking, it was neither oriental nor a mystery; in its own field, however, the present writer considers it a masterpiece.) In 1954 Universal Publishers brought out a paperback edition under the title, *Trek East*. Since Zanzibar is an island off the east coast of Africa and the trek is toward the interior of the continent, it seems regrettable that Universal lacked a young friend (age 13) to tell it that *The Ivory Trail* was not only more accurate but in every way a better title.

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