

The Backbone of Africa, Alfred Sharpe, London, 1921

The western declivities of the northern half of Kivu fall steeply to the water; and as we went north, we had fine views of the great volcanoes of Karisimbi, Mikeno and Chaninagongo. Our little voyage of fifty miles ended at Bobandana, a Belgian station, situated on a hill overlooking a splendid harbour near the north-west corner of the Lake.

At Bobandana we witnessed the eruption of a volcano or volcanic vent situated some six or seven miles to the north of the station. It was preceded by an earth tremor, or strictly localised earthquake shock, which we were told was severe. Then followed subterranean rumbles; after which fire began to issue from cracks in the level ground, the fissures became enlarged, and lava, stones and ashes were ejected. This eruption had been going on for a fortnight before we arrived; and a cone, six hundred feet high, had been formed: named by the Belgian officials, after a neighbouring village, Katarusi.

At the north-west corner of the Lake, there is a break in the shore-line; and by an entrance not half a mile wide there is communication with the Kabino Inlet – itself, almost a separate lake, some twelve mile long and two or three miles wide, The first flow of lava from the eruption poured into this inlet, filled up a small bay, and, owing to the amount of solid material deposited, caused a strong current of almost boiling water to run through the passage into the main Kivu Lake. At a later period of the eruption, another river of lava flowed from the volcano direct into Kivu, cutting off a triangular tract of country containing several villages from all communication save through the boiling water of the Lake. The whole country lying within a segment from south-west to north-west was more or less devastated and destroyed.

We made an interesting trip to the stricken shore, approaching the volcano as near as was considered safe. We first crossed, in dug-out canoes, the entrance to Kabino Inlet, keeping well out in Kivu Lake lest the water prove too hot. Indeed, soon after starting, it became so heated that it was covered with clouds of steam. Midway, we encountered a strong current issuing from the Inlet; and this current being checked by a head-wind, a nasty choppy sea made our passage somewhat unsafe: the water being all but boiling, an upset would have had disastrous results. The splashes of the water, as the waves lapped in, were unpleasantly hot; and there was a strong smell of sulphur that suggested a passage of the Styx. All things considered, we had a bad ten minutes, and were much relieved on reaching the opposite shore.

We landed, three miles from the burning volcano, and climbed a hill (an extinct volcano), on the top of which was a village. With the wind at our back, we had a fine view of the eruption. Immediately in front of us was a steaming lava field, which had entirely obliterated and filled up a small bay in the Kabino Inlet. The roar of the volcano was ceaseless; every few minutes there were loud explosions, accompanied by ejections to a great height of hot stones and ashes and followed by flows of lava. The crater was about six hundred yards in diameter; and the size of the cone steadily increased, through the violence of the eruption. It was a magnificent spectacle; the piling pillar of steam and smoke, the deluge of fire, and the flow of burning lava over the lip of the crater downwards to the seething waters – a relentless flood that engulfed everything in its passage of nearly two miles.

There were still some inhabitants left in the village, where we stood, watching the destruction of their crops; and some, who had lingered late, were even then clearing out their goods and driving their live-stock away to villages farther off. We were told that, on the previous day, several men, in attempting to cross the Lake, had been overcome by the fumes and had perished in their canoe, which eventually was

carried out into the broken water and sunk; and on the very day of our visit three men in a canoe were lost in the same manner.

On our return journey we were careful to avoid, as far as we could, the danger spots. Occasionally, a whirlwind of steam, rising upwards for three or four hundred feet, would whip up a small waterspout from the churning waters; and, at the point where the lava stream entered the Lake, great volumes of steam rose high into the air and mingled with the smoke from the crater, forming clouds out of which came frequent lightning and squalls of wind and rain. It was a veritable inferno, this stricken corner of Lake Kivu.

I set out from Bobandana, on the following day, in order to buy stores at Goma, the Belgian frontier station on the north-east shore. In large canoes the trip in normal circumstances would not have taken more than three or four hours; but, under the conditions then existing, it was a somewhat risky venture. I took care to cross well outside the small island of Chesanga; but, nevertheless, we were caught in a heavy swell, and, several seas breaking over my canoe, were in imminent danger of foundering. In the end we had to ride with the swell and drift towards Chesanga Island, where I landed. Afterwards, I managed to reach the north shore and get to Goma,

From Goma the eruption seemed to have increased in violence. The column of fire was then many thousand feet high. This made me feel anxious about the return journey to Bobandana, as the water was getting hotter every hour. Moreover, paddling up the Coast, I had noticed that Nyamtagira – the westernmost of the great Kivu volcanoes – had also begun to throw up volumes of black smoke. So that, when we got opposite to Chesanga Island, we paddled across to it; and I climbed to its summit in order to survey the crossing to Bobandana. It was clear that we had a swift stream of almost boiling water to pass; the wind and sea were good, but much more steam was rising than on our outward journey. Added to which, close to the island, we noticed two big upheavals of muddy water, indicating, apparently, a seismic disturbance in the bed of the Lake. I came to the conclusion, therefore, that we had no time to lose; and so we made an immediate start.

The crossing was safely accomplished; but it was nervous work. The water must have been near boiling-point (I could not bear to put my hand in it), and the rising steam was so dense that it was difficult to see where we were going. In the great heat I was drenched in perspiration; and when we landed I decided, on cool reflection, that the experience would remain unique.

We left Bobandana with sixty carriers, and had to make a wide detour round the south end of Kabino Inlet in order to reach its western shore. On the way, we visited a new mission station of the White Fathers. Here, twelve miles from the erupting volcano, the water of the Lake was hot – too hot, indeed for a bath – and the crops were scorched and withered. At Saki, a cluster of villages at the north-west corner of the Inlet, the crops had been destroyed entirely by the ashes, and the banana plantations were laid low. Over all there was a fine deposit of scoriae, or black cinder sand, which increased in depth as we went further north. Large numbers of native houses had collapsed under the shower of ashes.

Climbing a hill, one thousand feet above the Lake, we pitched our camp in a hamlet perched on the crest of the peak. And here we passed the night of Christmas Eve, 1912. All night long the volcano, five miles away, vomited and thundered, throwing up fountains of fire. The red glow from the volcano turned night into day. Hurricanes of wind and heavy rain bombarded us. Lightning played around, and there were

crashes of thunder without end. At two in the morning there was an earthquake; and the tents nearly collapsed under their weight of cinders. When day dawned we were glad to break away from this scene of titanic convulsion.

[Author's footnote: The sound of these eruptions was heard at Beni (one hundred and forty miles north), at Bukoba (one hundred and ninety miles east), and, like rapid gunfire, at Pili-Pili (two hundred miles north-north-west). Walikale (one hundred and fifty miles west) was covered with ash, the prevalent wind being easterly. Many hundreds of natives were killed, mostly owing to their refusal to leave their villages and seek shelter elsewhere.]

We descended to the level of the Lake and got onto the plains, to the north-west and eventually to the north of the volcanoes, where we camped at a hamlet about eight miles distant. All the country we had traversed was black, and covered with ashes; trees had been withered, birds and small mammals killed or maimed: and – no wonder! – since some of the white pumice stones that fell were two inches in diameter.

From this scene of recent riot round Lake Kivu we passed, on our journey further northwards, to the lava fields of past devastation, in the country known in ancient times as the Mountains of the Moon.