

## *Behind God's Back*, Negley Farson, New York, 1941

(His knowledge of Carl Akeley's death is faulty: Akeley died of dysentery and was cared for by his wife and other expedition members. Presumably the author is in Nyamlagira, though it's a bit confusing as that is not a location of mist-forests; Akeley is buried on Mount Mikenno.)

### Chapter XXVI

I think that old Tembo, the elephant, is the most lovable, damnably dangerous thing that walks on legs. To see Tembo, jolting along the edge of some lush African swamp (when he doesn't know that you are there) is an experience charged with wonder. There he is, the old patient pachyderm, with his wrinkled hide, looking just as bored with life as when you saw him plodding along London, New York, or Hamburg's streets – holding his kinsman's tail. But don't make that mistake in the Belgian Congo – not if the wind is blowing from you to him – you'll see him flap forward those barn-door ears, squeal shrilly, like an impatient pig; and then, *mon ami*, if you have any sense left at all – you will run.

For twenty-one years, ever since I crashed an aeroplane in Egypt, I had been going round the world under the impression that I could no longer run. I never attempted to catch passing trams; at a bus stop I never waited, unless I could be near the head of the queue; I used taxis when I knew I could not afford them. But in the Belgian Congo, when an elephant squealed at me, ripped up brush and tossed it into the air, and then charged, I covered the 100 yards between me and Lake Edward in Olympic time. After that, whenever I saw an elephant, I instantly knew his meaning, his concept: elephant = danger!

When we crossed over from Uganda in to the Belgian Congo – over 8,000 foot passes, with the hundreds of green volcano cones on the valley floors – we found about a dozen elephant tusks standing nonchalantly against the wall of the Police and Customs' verandah. They were small, and they all looked as if they had been taken from dead elephants, who had lain a long time in the jungle; for they were stained, and their tips had been gnawed in deep criss-cross gullies by rats. Strangely enough, from their small size, you knew at once that all these tusks came from elephants that had died young – say, before forty, which is around their age of puberty.

We were looking for Colonel Hoier, a Dane, and Commandant Hubert, Belgian, who were the Chief and Assistant in charge of the great *Parcs Nationaux du Congo Belge*, the Albert Park, in particular, which is not a park (a term the Belgians took from the United States) but is a vast, unmolested stretch of Africa in which all living things (I am tempted to say, except human) are preserved. No firearms are allowed and

into which you may bring no flower or seed or introduce anything that is not of the indigenous flora. You may not even carry a weapon to defend yourself.

“Preservation of a biological nucleus in its primitive state, by the elimination of all human influence.”

That is the definition which King Leopold III gave of this internationally-controlled section of original Africa in his speech in London, November 1935. It was Carl Akeley, the American naturalist (who probably knew more about gorillas than any man living) who conceived the idea of these sanctuaries, after he had led an expedition to Lake Kivu, in 1925. He is buried in the park.

At Rutshuru, with our eyes still dazed from the hundreds of volcanoes we had come through (and that bamboo forest in the misty rain at 8,000 feet!) with the white heat of the sun slashed down through the green trees and scarlet flowers, we were told that Le Commandant Hubert had the ‘fever’ – malaria.

Colonel Hoier? Well, he was somewhere around Lake Kivu. With this precise information, for Africa, we turned the car around, drove back towards Uganda, and then took one of those amazingly good red roads that the Belgians have built throughout the Congo. The natives here look horribly like gorillas themselves, enough, you would think, to convince a Scotch person that Darwin must be right – these people seem to have taken hardly a step away from their original ancestors. And, working among these, building a new rest house, we found the grey-haired Danish Colonel.

He gave us his favourite rest house (“my retreat”, this strange and deep man called it) to sleep in that night. And as we reached it in darkness, guided only by an inarticulate native, we had no idea what it looked like – except that it was a board shack on the slope of a volcano. The volcano, (14,600 feet) was not active. But the lava was still boiling in it, or in one of those earth-pots immediately about use. Looking upward that night, along the huge cone, we saw the convolutions of the clouds above us lighted at intervals in colours of flaming rose. Then they resumed a blood-red glow.

Akeley, if I’m not mistaken, died of malaria and lay in the lichened, moist dripping forest just above us. He had been alone, too weak to get down, and they had buried him there on the volcano. What a perfect end – for a man like Akeley.

Hoier, that good man, had no more worldly or material needs than the average saint. One look at that rugged, unrepressed face, was enough to show you that here was a man who had found the meaning of happiness. His shack looked like it. It reeked with disdain of soft, personal comfort. Every home-made, slung-together object in it spoke of a man who was consumed with delight in the country around him – and in nothing else! Morning revealed, behind my bed; a roll of dead squirrel skins or ‘flying foxes’. The

tusks of a tiny elephant, a pile of dusty phonograph records, several scrolls of maps of *Parc Albert National* or plots of the volcanic region, a ball of twine, two dirty soup plates, and a tin of Kiwi boot polish.

The hut was made of native-hewn clap-boards. Its windows were made of glazed paper stretched over a cloth netting, and wouldn't open. In one corner lay a pile of enormous bulbs; and a cluster of dry immortelles hung from a native arrow. These grew on the cone above us at altitudes above 13,000. I found two mouse traps, and –looking out into a dew-drenched morning – I discovered we were in a perfect little paradise!

Colonel Hoier's garden sparkled in the sun. Roses, violets, and abandon of white lilies – and about half an acre of ripe strawberries. There were white climbing roses, fresh with dew, around the unpainted door (there was, in fact. not a daub of paint anywhere – which, of course, would have ruined this charm!); and, walking around the hut, I found peach trees in an orchard. Over this slowly passed the shadows of clouds hanging over the tips of each of the three volcanoes. The sun rose and the cloud shadows retreated upwards over the dense mist-forest above us,

I know of no scene which has ever given me such a pang from its sheer beauty. But perhaps it was only the association of the hut – that a modern man should have the wisdom to live like this. For Colonel Hoier was no long-haired recluse; he was a professional soldier who had fought with the Belgians against the Germans.

All this weird country lay in the 'Albertine Rift', that huge trench holding a series of great African lakes, along the eastern frontier of the Congo. It runs from the Zambezi to the Nile. The trench of this Central African Rift, along whose flank lie the glaciers of Ruwenzori, is usually about thirty miles wide, with an escarpment on either side about three thousand feet high; and, along this particular region we were in, the eastern barrier was a chain of volcanoes. One of these had been continuously active, with violent explosions in 1938, which cut off the settlement of Sake, and a flow of lave twenty-five miles long was still sluggishly overflowing its crater to hiss and steam and coagulate with sullen bulps into the Mediterranean-blue water of Lake Kivu.

I had gone down into the volcanoes of the Andes, and I suppose that inner New Guinea still holds some unknown plateaux that are like Conan Doyle's *Lost World* (as all those who have not seen them say); but I doubt if there could be any more fantastic region than this volcanic African alps – Mikeno 14,600 feet; Karisimbi 14,800 feet; Visoke 12,200 feet; Sabinyo 11,500 feet; Gahinga 11,400 feet; Muhavura 13,000

feet – and hundreds of other volcanic cones which seem too unimpressive among these giants to be worth naming.

Lake Kivu, which is the highest lake in Africa, was not known to the white man until 1894 – it is a feather of brightest kingfisher-blue, dropped into prehistoric vegetation. Like the plants before the Coal Age. And on Ruwenzori, whose glistening snows were not confirmed again, until fifty years after they were first sighted by an appalled white man – on this mountain, elephants, buffalo, lions and leopard roam up to 13,000 feet, and man, a pigmy, stands under lobelias that are twenty feet high.

There are pigmies in these mist-drenched forests (who live where few white men can penetrate); and they trap and kill the strange striped okapi, a horse-like animal which has the stud-horns of a giraffe. Its coat is the colour of a burnished horse-chestnut.

Among these cloud-capped volcanoes, tearing their way through this prehistoric mist-forest, live the last gorilla left of earth.

The good Colonel Hoier was so obsessed with the joy of carpentry (what fun building huts among volcanoes and gorillas!) that we did not have the heart to present a letter to him from the previous Governor of the Belgian Congo. Anyway, he had forgotten Europe. Give him a week, he said, clasping a bubble-gauge, and... he pointed the level towards Lake Edward.

No doubt, he said, *le brave* Commandant Hubert would be over the fever. I had been warned about Hubert ever since Tanganyika. “He will kill you!” said the Game Warden down there. “He throws chunks of mud at elephants!” And in Kenya, they said: “Don’t let him lead you to destruction – the man doesn’t know what fear is – he’s mad! One of our Wardens came back from there, from a stay with him, looking ten years older.”

“Is – is Commandant Hubert’s ‘fever’ very bad?” I asked Hoier.

“*Non!*” he grunted.

I felt like saying: “Too bad!”

The path down from the volcano, disclosed by morning, was through native maize fields; the ‘good red road’ soon turned into slabs of sharp lava – I could feel it cutting into our precious tyres. We dropped into a torrid jungle full of mahogany trees and hordes of baboons. We passed the hut of a chief behind its ceremonial palisade of plaited rushes. More baboon-like natives stepped off the road and stared at us. Some, with a little feathered crown around their heads, carried bows. These were usually cross-bred

pigmies. And occasionally an aristocratic individual strolled along, wrapped in a robe of imperial yellow, who was seven foot high. There were the Watusi, the African giants – into whose alpine land we were proceeding. But the greater part of this continuous procession (although there were a few female beasts of burden wearing nothing but leather flaps) were rather impudent African negroes in pure sleeveless jumpers and dirty shorts, with their women, wearing the inevitable yards of Belgian coloured cotton print.

(I gasped, about a year later, in London, when I watched a movie on this part of Africa – a very good film – which showed an expedition ‘penetrating’ into this Watusi country ahead of us, scaling breath-taking volcanic slopes – when they could just as easily have taken the road. I’ve come to the conclusion that Africa’s greatest export is gaudy buncombe,)

Lava in flow, proceeds along under a hardened crust. It will usually hold your weight. There will be hissing, sulphur-coated grottoes – broken blisters – with fiery breath and sounds of flames and dull explosions somewhere below you. You may sit before this open furnace door, if you like – as long as you don’t sit there too long and get asphyxiated. And you can even cross lava where it is still so hot that it will melt rubber-sole shoes. You may do all of these things, again and again, with the odds all in your favour. But you must not cross a field of active lava when it is raining!

As this is just the last thing that would occur to you, or an ‘ignorant’ native – Eve and I found a Watusi who had been cooked in this lava field. He was an el Greco figure, supernaturally extenuated, most of his flesh that artist’s favourite green – and one gaunt arm, looking as if it had been embalmed, was clasping a skull which was ivory white. All the meat had dropped off it.

The natives, who ran across this blistering bit of field, ran, I think, because of the horror of the sight – the spirit of this man – more than they did for fear of the same thing happening to them. I know that our two natives, when Eve and I were standing there, staring at him, ran off to an upper curl of the lava and looked down at us. A French commercial traveller zipped past, his ‘boy’ trotting behind with the Frenchman’s big sample case on his woolly head, and the Frenchman, seeing what we were looking at, gasped – “*Horrible!*” – and raced on.

Five hundred yards back, he said, beyond a granite island which rose above the lava, on which were some dead trees, we would strike a particularly dangerous bit.

“I would advise you,” he called back, “to hurry when you come to that. It looked thin to me.”

There were four natives, like this, cooked in the lava – all killed by rain. What happens is that the rain water seeps down through the crevices in the hard lava, strikes the molten flow, and shoots up again in

poison-gas steam. The lava-cropper loses his way in that, falls beside one of these poisonous grottoes, or is just killed by the steam itself.

This flow, coming down from the volcano twenty five miles away, is about a mile and a half wide as it nears the lake. In various areas long lines of smoky fumes arise from it, smoke, the shudders of subterranean bubbles bursting. Some of these fiery open grottoes are like the inside of broken pebbles which have crystals inside them. Their colouring is fascinating. The lava itself is like burnt black bread-dough. Split open, it reveals a soft reddish ready-to-powder earth below. It solidifies like coils of rope, in long jammed convolutions, like charred bundles of sheets that have been rinsed and not unwound again, like the waves of a tar sea that, heavy and slow-rolling, have suddenly stopped.

All along the lake-front geysers of steam shot up as fresh lava, molten treacle, contacted the turquoise blue water. This scene, set against vivid green mountains that rose in broken silhouette against a white-hot sky, jolts you. To a normal man it is the discovery of all discoveries; that this planet has not yet finished forming. A negro preacher might claim that here was Hell – “bursting right in my face!”

But the thing that impressed me most in that semi-inferno was the sight of a green triangle of brush, already beginning the growth that would one day cover this flow of the molten sphere.

Disconcerting, but not an altogether irrelevant sight, we saw two natives who hurried past us, carry on a pole over their shoulders, a trussed squalling pig. He was destined for the Greek who runs the isolated, filthy hotel in cut-off Sake. This greasy Greek, living in splendid isolation, was cashing in on this volcano; he charged for a meal that I would not give to my dachshund (indeed not!) five shillings. And when I made feeble protest he waved his hairy arms, and cried:

“But look! Look, Mister – look at all dat lava! Looka dis hotel! Look” – he pointed a murderer’s thumb towards the pig – “How much you tink it cost me to get him? Jesa Christ! I hottashell!”

But on the way back we found that new lava is far kinder than old. We got across a patch of country that at least I can guarantee will be safe forever from on-moving man. As we wanted to see what molten lava looked like in action, we took a canoe and paddled along where it was seeping into the lake. There was about a mile of muffled explosions and steam jets. They created, by various wind-suctions, their own surf. And it was boiling. About the molten lava itself, Eve and I saw two different things; she wrote it was like molten glass, almost crimson. I said, except that we knew it was not entirely liquid, that it looked like boiling blood. Mine was the most melodramatic description (as I have yet to see boiling blood); so the glass has it.

There was something peculiar, some smoulder of menace gained by staring that red lava straight in the face, that evoked a sensation that I cannot put a name to – but it was too much like staring The Beginning of Things in the eye,

Deceived by a shore of green rushes, and only lukewarm water, Eve and I left the canoeists and told them we would take a short cut across the lava field back to our car. One of them, a gentleman, instantly began to shout, “*Non! Non! Non!*” But the others, being just as smart business men as the Greek, shut him up, took our money, and paddled off. They left us.

After about an hour it looked as if we were to stay there for the night. What had happened was that we had gone ashore on the lava of 1912. It was covered by low growth of saplings now. This frequently concealed grottoes that were forty feet deep beneath our feet. There were ‘natural’ bridges across some of these broken blisters in the earth that were thick enough to look trustworthy. There were others that we were afraid to chance. And there was one we did chance – and fell through. All this tumbled lava was a pumice that had edges as sharp as knives. And there was the horror of lava blocks coated with strange moss that powdered as we touched it. In this mess we were liable to break an ankle at any step. There was a nice brimstone smell, wafted over from the smoking lava of 1938 – and in a fury at our foolishness we made our way over this silver-mossed moraine, looking like spectral coral, across more pie-crust domes that cracked under our feet, until we reached some deep ravines of broken bubbles, which stopped us entirely. Along these the new lava from the volcano was just solidifying – it simmered with heat-waves like the lid of a stove. And we went along this, until it cooled, and, in a grotesque sunset which turned these colourless heat irradiations into waving flame, we found four of the primitive ‘gorilla-faced’ natives, all clutching their circular bows, timidly admiring our car.

They dashed off as we came up. And that night, with a full moon over Lake Kivu, we ate a full Belgian supper, under the table-lights on the cement verandah of the Hotel des Volcans.

“*Un peu de fromage, Monsieur?*” said a black man whom the proprietor had ‘trained’.

“Odd to hear him talking French”, said Eve.

Odd, to hear him talking anything, I thought. I was thinking of an article I had read a few months back by a well-known Italian explorer – a bombastic man who is, unfortunately, not well-known enough. He had described his ‘discovery’ of the African giants, the Watusi, the overlords of this black population. He had pictured the sky-reaching volcanoes. War-dances, drum beats... But he never thought to mention this excellent little hostelry, L’Hotel des Volcans.

The contrast between his verbal bilge and the practical every day work of the Belgians in this district made me laugh. “I have an idea”, I said to Eve, “that you and I are going to find the Belgian Congo one of the best-run parts of Africa.”

“Not too well-run, I hope?” sighed Eve.

We looked at each other. The greater part of our married life had been spent in trying to get as far as we could from the alleged human race. But a forest fire had destroyed one paradise we had lived in for two aloof years in British Columbia; Thomas Cook and Son had discovered a wooden hotel we had found in the Slovenian alps – and were selling tourist tickets direct to it the next season.

“It’s owned by a Religious Order, you know! Very primitive, board floors and all that – but very clean and comfortable (just the stuff to catch them!)”

“And the Belgian will be running uses here, next,” said Eve

“But just think!” I exclaimed, “of the 3,300 square miles that are forever consecrated to gorillas – and Colonel Hoier!”

“I’m thinking”, said Eve, “of a good hot bath. We haven’t had one since Entebbe. You’re getting a bit whiffy!”