

WEEK-END ON MOUNT ELGON.

ANNA OSMASTON

At 6 p.m. on Saturday of Whit weekend Rosemary Lowe, Henry and I left Bumagabula, where the road ends at 6,000 feet, with four African porters. As we left the village, climbing steeply up through banana plantations, men, women and pot-bellied naked children ran out of the mud huts to stare at us and exchange the lengthy native greeting which politeness demands, thus:

African : Jambo. (Greetings)
Self : Jambo.
African : Habari? (What News?)
Self : Mzuri. (Good News)
African : Ah-h-h-h.
Self : Eh-h-h-h.
African : M-m-m-m.

. . . . the final series of grunts continuing until distance renders further conversation impossible.

By 7-30 p.m., in darkness lightened by a moon almost at the full, we were climbing a steep rock-wall to which trees clung at impossible angles. Beyond was forest, and above this we entered the bamboo zone, the feathery fronds looking unearthly beautiful in the moonlight. These well-defined vegetational zones are a feature of tropical mountains. Night's lodging was a mud-hut in a clearing, protected against leopards and other night prowlers by a bamboo fence. Here the four porters insisted on returning to Bumagabula for the night—much to our dismay, for we placed little faith in their promises of return. But in the morning, while we were still groping for the breakfast porridge-oats, they were back again, and we were soon marching upward.

At about 9,000 feet the bamboos abruptly gave place to Tree Heathers. These are much like their dwarf counterparts but reach a height of 40 feet or more, giving one a sense of affinity with the beetles that thread their way through the forests of British heather. At 11,000 feet we reached the moorland zone. From a hill-crest we looked upon a landscape reminiscent of parts of Scotland — gently-rising moorland dotted with rocky outcrops. Beyond and above was the rock-wall of the crater rim, looking a long off. After lunching to raise our morale, we set off up the long, slow ascent — slow not because it was steep but because



JACKSON'S PEAK (13,650 feet)
(Mount Elgon)

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CAMP AMONG THE SENECIOS
(Below Jackson's Peak).

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our lungs were already beginning to take note of the height. At about 12,000 feet we reached a dilapidated grass hut, and the porters indicated that this was the ideal and only place for our night's halt. But it was only 2-30 p.m., and we were determined to spend the night near the crater or even in it, so we sat down to a wordy wrangle — a tiresome affair when neither party properly understands the other — at the end of which a tactful administration of aspirin to the leading rebel resulted in agreement to go on, on condition that the porters returned to this hut for the night.

The ground became more and more spongy as we ascended. The only vegetation was the weird Senecio, or Giant Groundsel. This grows to 15 feet in height, resembling some arboreal fantasy of Arthur Rackham's with its gnarled appearance, bunches of great cabbage-like leaves, and the thick covering of dead leaves lower down. Our goal was Jackson's Peak, a sharp rise on the ridge above us with a sheer drop of over 1,000 feet on two sides. As we approached it at a height 13,500 feet the wind grew cold and we were glad of pullovers and anoraks. A sheltered spot for our two tiny tents was found in a grove of Senecios at the foot of the overhanging S.W. face, and a tent-site was levelled by hacking off great bunches of dead Senecio leaves, which at the same time gave us dry and comfortable mattresses. Our water-supply was close at hand — almost too close, for it consisted of the drips from the cliff above us, under the most promising of which we set out all our receptacles. Then, leaving the porters to squat happily in the smoke of the newly-made fire, we wandered off to inspect our surroundings. We had neither time nor breath to climb Jackson's Peak that night, but we ascertained that the peak was not on the crater rim as we had supposed but separated from it by a narrow valley and a ridge. Further exploration would have to await the morrow, and we returned, in a light cold rain, to cook our supper.

The porters now decided not to return to the hut, and as they had only an exiguous covering of skins to protect them against the increasing cold we were obliged to hand over our cape groundsheets and some of our carefully-rationed food — they had improbably brought no supplies with them. For our part we put on all the clothes we had and squeezed into one tent 6 feet by 3 feet, where height and cramped quarters made us wakeful enough to appreciate to the full the symphony of night sounds, which included the blood-curdling howls of jackals.

The next day was a full one. We had to climb Jackson's Peak, reach the crater rim, descend 7,000 feet to the car and drive over 100 miles back to Jinja. The first part of this programme

we accomplished while breakfast was cooking. The thousand feet of easy scrambling took us some time and we arrived breathless on the top, to see a fine view over the near rock outcrops, down across moorland to the forest zones, obscured here and there by rolling masses of cloud; the crater was still invisible on the other side.

After breakfast we descended to cross the intervening valley and climbed the ridge beyond. At last we were on the crater rim, able to survey the magnificent amphitheatre-like panorama of Elgon. The rim on which we sat curved round in a vast circle of broken rock-ridge with several well-defined peaks, some of them flat-topped. The highest, Wagagei, is well over 14,000 feet. The further side of the crater is in Kenya, and a deep cleft in the rim, the Suam gorge, promises an intriguing route down into that colony which we hope one day to explore. Subsequently, on short leave in Kenya, we did explore the lower reaches of the Suam river, through thick forest — so thick that I nearly walked into three elephants; but owing to lack of time (and, I must confess, superabundance of elephants) we did not get very far. To return to the crater; this is about 2,000 feet lower than the surrounding rim and some 6 miles across. I cannot say I had actually expected to see a smoking abyss in the centre, but the gently-sloping grassy slopes of the deep basin, dotted with *Senecios* and one or two small lakes, surprised me—it was more like a pasture for peacefully-grazing cows than an extinct volcano.

It was after midday when we started the descent, at first missing our route and floundering amid huge tussocks to a little lake whose still waters mirrored the gaunt *Senecios* at its margin. Beyond the lake we struck our path, and keeping a good pace arrived after dark at Bumagabula, where the porters, whom we had sent on ahead, were waiting by the car to be paid. Having settled up to everyone's satisfaction, we began the long night drive back to Jinja.

"He who goes to the hills to his mother."

—Hindu saying.