

EXPEDITION TO THE RUWENZORI MOUNTAINS

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In January of last year our party of seven men and two women trekked from the sweltering plains of the Toro district of Uganda to the biting cold of the Elena Glacier of Mount Stanley, in the heart of the greatest area of high mountains in Africa. The party included climbers from Uganda, Kenya, England and Canada, and thirty-three porters were engaged to carry food and equipment for twelve days. One member of the expedition was John Alexander, a member of the M.A.M., who is now Warden of Mount Kenya National Park, and another was Miss Sally Goode, whose home is in Handsworth Wood, and who is Bursar of Gayaza High School near Kampala. For my part the climb of about 10,000 feet provided a contrast even more impressive than finding oneself in Central Africa within a day or so of leaving Birmingham in January.

Our route took us through valleys filled with dense tropical forest and jungle, through a belt of podocarpus trees and bamboo, gradually merging into a zone of enormous twisted tree heathers which were draped in strange hanging mosses and ferns. Higher up we encountered the giant groundsel and lobelia for which the mountains in Central Africa are famous.

This is indeed a strange world with its misty humid atmosphere, reminiscent of a fantastic "Walt Disney" set, where elves and goblins would seem more appropriate than the leopards, hyraxes and mountain hogs which do, in fact, inhabit these regions.

The climate is, to put it mildly, peculiar. There are no seasons as we know them in this country, and growth and decay, seedtime and harvest, sunshine and constant rain are present at the same time. The powerful equatorial sun seems to be carrying on a never ending battle to disperse the dense clouds which are continually forming, and seldom quite succeeds in doing so. It is reputed that rain falls on over 300 days in the year, and fine and bad weather can alternate many times in the course of a day.

No wonder the vegetation is lush and gigantic in this cool, "high altitude" atmosphere with an abundance of moisture and diffused sunshine. No wonder mountain tracks become very quickly overgrown. To mention only a few examples of the flora to be seen in this veritable botanist's paradise, there are wild bananas, tree ferns, orchids, red hot pokers, everlasting flowers, giant bracken, blackberries, and hosts of wild flowers including many of those well known in the Alps and in the English countryside.

Through this sort of country we made our way, passing the dark and rather eerie Lake Bujuku, to the Bujuku mountain hut. From here, four of us climbed to the bivouac on the edge of the Elena glacier. At this height (about 14,500 feet), the snow level is reached, and the scene is one of perpetual winter. Icy winds whistle across the glacier depositing their moisture in the form of flaky hoar frost on the rocks, and stormy blizzards sweep across the mountain tops. If you happen to be on a glacier when the overhead sun does burst through the clouds, the glare is terrific, and, without snow goggles and liberal applications of glacier cream, you would be in a bad way. When the mist blows up again, the temperature will suddenly drop to well below freezing point, giving rise to the formation of wonderful icicles along the cornices and ice-falls.

The Elena Glacier rises steeply, and then flattens on to the great Stanley Plateau—a large area of snow and ice from which the twin summits of Margherita and Alexandra rise. These two peaks (16,794 feet and 16,726 feet respectively) looked tremendous in the early morning sunshine. They are plastered with magnificent masses of ice and snow, suggestive of vast wedding cakes. Five of the party managed to climb Alexandra, but three attempts to “bag” Margherita failed owing to the difficulty in finding a route in the changeable weather conditions. The climb of Alexandra involved, among other things, turning some ice-falls, and cutting steps up a 60 degree ice slope before the summit ridge was reached. From here we were hopeful of being able to see down into the Belgian Congo, but when the mist cleared temporarily, all we could see was a boiling sea of cumulus stretching way out to the horizon.

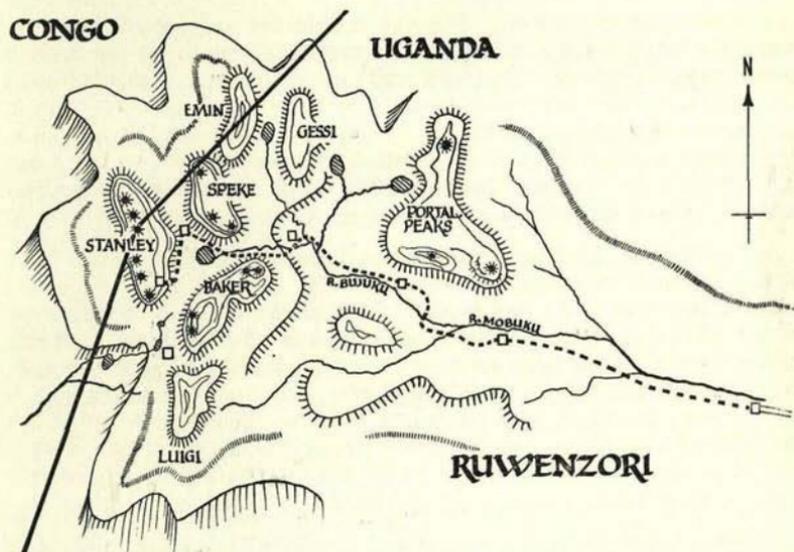
Mount Speke and Mount Baker are also very fine mountains, but do not present quite the same climbing difficulties. From the Bujuku Hut five members climbed the Vittorio Emmanuele summit (16,079 feet) of Speke. We had intended to move over the Scott Elliot Pass to Kitandara in order to have a day's climbing on Mount Baker (15,987 feet), but we were forced to abandon this owing to illness in the party, and to start moving down a day earlier.

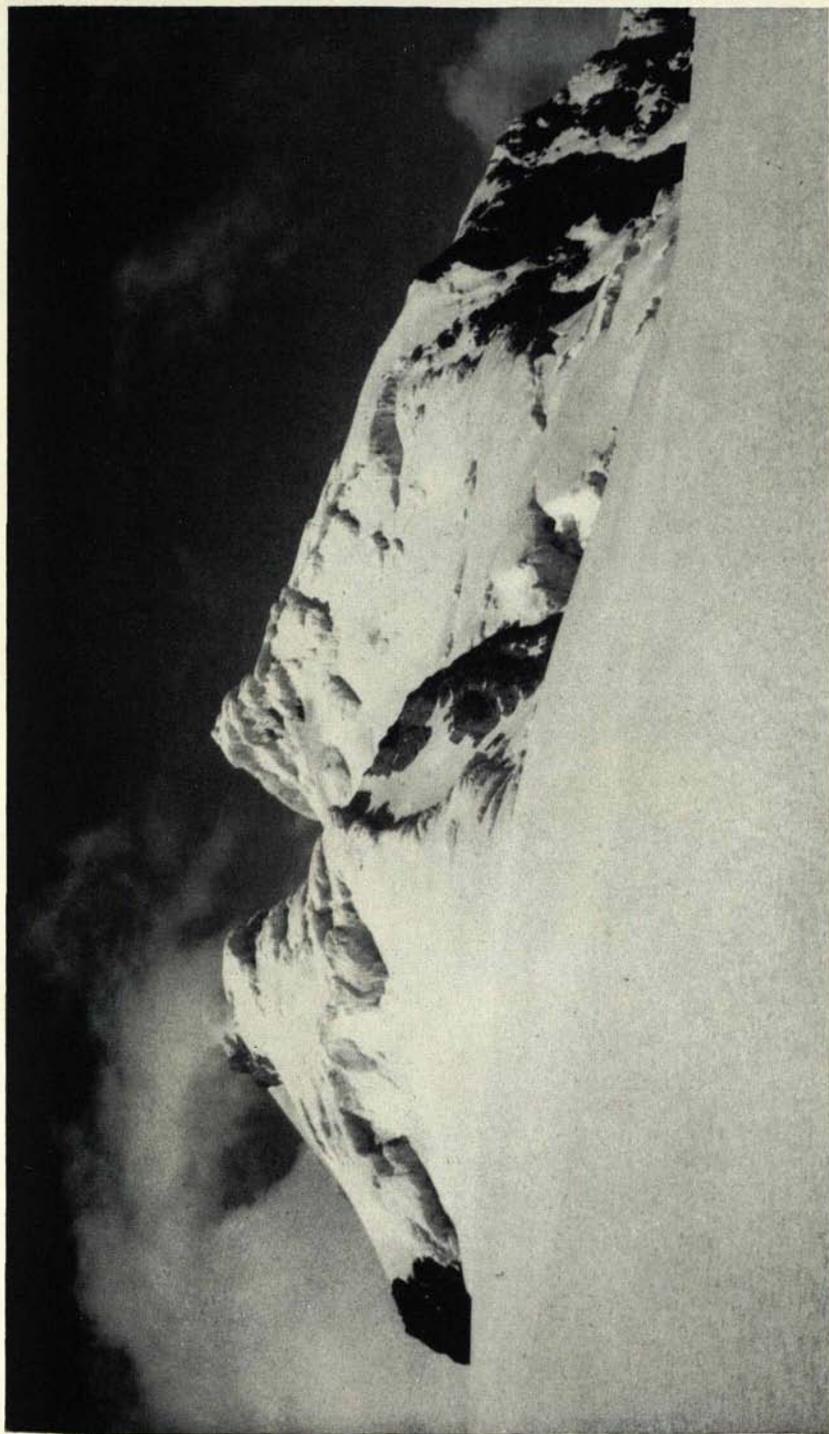
As a result of tiredness and sickness, we straggled somewhat on one of the marches on the way down, and some of us were overtaken by darkness in the forest with about an hour's march to the Nynambitaba Hut, but we managed to complete the journey with the aid of lanterns and torches without mishap. On our last day's trek, much of the route had been smashed down by elephants, and later we saw several on the other side of the Mobuku valley.

There is still plenty of pioneering work to be done in the Ruwenzori, notwithstanding the fact that the number of expeditions to this part of the world is increasing. The main difficulty in climbing some of the lesser known peaks lies in the laborious business of cutting tracks through the dense undergrowth.

In the second century, Ptolemy and the Arab geographers wrote that the source of the River Nile was a range of snow mountains, and this was believed to be mere legend until the great explorer H. M. Stanley saw the snow-covered peaks in 1875. The air of mystery which has surrounded the range is reflected in the old name of "Mountains of the Moon," and is probably due to the fact that it is so rarely possible to see any more than the foothills from the surrounding plains. The high mountains cannot normally be seen through the heavy heat haze and cumulus.

This twelve-day expedition now seems like a strange dream, and I often wonder if I shall ever have another opportunity of visiting this fabulous part of the world. Anyway, the fascination remains.





Alexandra (16,7726 ft.) and Margherita (16,794 ft.) from the Stanley Plateau

E. A. Goode

Mount Baker, 15,987 feet

