

## SAFARI ON MOUNT ELGON

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We wound our way upwards through little patches of cultivation, greeting the inmates of each mud hut as we passed. After two miles we were relieved to reach the forest and plunge into its comparative coolness. We climbed for an hour until we reached an open rocky knoll whence we had a magnificent view down to the Karamoja plain and across it to two impressive rocky mountains, Napak and Kadam, the latter over ten thousand feet. The clarity was ominous and very soon we were ripping mackintoshes out of our rucksacs as the rain came down in torrents. The porters in their few rags were drenched in a minute, but still made a pretence of trying to keep dry under a huge sloping tree trunk. As we were very quickly shivering we pushed on, and for the next two hours stumbled and slithered our way up the muddy path which periodically became a stream.

We were too uncomfortably wet to stop for lunch but paused long enough to extract some bananas and sweets which we munched as we squelched upwards. An ominous cliff appeared ahead, rising above the trees. We asked the porters whether Benet was at the top of it. The reply was far from encouraging, and we visualized a series of ridges to be surmounted beyond it.

At least the rain began to ease off as the incline increased, and it was a relief to step off the mud and embark on the rocks. The line of cliffs here fortunately gave way to 200 feet of slabs. Above, the forest enclosed us again, but now and again the path led us through pleasant rocky glades, and at last we suddenly rounded a corner and came upon the first mud hut of Benet. We naturally thought we had arrived, but Benet apparently covers an area from nine to eleven thousand feet.

The tribe who live in this area are an offshoot of the Sebei down below, but they are quite distinct in their customs and way of living and keep themselves apart, going down occasionally with their donkeys to barter their potatoes for maize. They grow little but potatoes and keep large herds of cows, and also sheep and donkeys. Their houses are unique in Uganda, being long, flat-roofed mud huts which the family shares with livestock and innumerable fleas. The fleas are so bad that even the locals are worried by them, and they implored us to get them some "medicine" to keep them at bay.

Their huts are scattered over a wide area, little homesteads of two or three together, sited in great hilly glades in the forest, which is here thinning out and giving way to the open moorlands of the upper part of the mountain.

The sun came out and we ambled on pleasantly, greeting the odd herdsman, until the porters at last pointed out our hut on a hill across

a great clearing. We flopped thankfully down on the carpet of turf and flowers. It was a delight after the coarse long grass which covers so much of Uganda and makes walking burdensome. Ticks however made themselves felt almost at once, so we spurred ourselves on to the hut—a mud affair with the usual flooring of cow dung. To our enormous relief there was a curious Heath Robinson stove in the corner. The old chief appeared and provided a man to help us; we soon discovered that the stove did indeed work. By this time it was nearly 5 p.m. and definitely chilly at 9,500 feet. The porter bearing my baggage had mercifully arrived, but Ann's had not, and Henry was bringing up the rear. I put on my set of spare clothing, and generously gave Ann my spare sweater and the dog blanket to wear as a skirt. We then sat blissfully over the smoky fire brewing tea while a succession of fascinated locals peered at us through the window. Many of them had colds and coughs but were nevertheless half naked. Our poor dog, minus his blanket, was shivering miserably in spite of the fire.

Early next morning Henry set off up the mountain with his forest guard and also a game guard who had attached himself to us the previous morning, to inspect forest and game respectively. Having said they would return for lunch, they left Ann and me to a morning's enjoyment of our pleasant surroundings. The view was stupendous. Forest rolled down to the plains of Karamoja shimmering in heat 6,000 feet below. Kadam rose majestically across the plain with wisps of cloud round the jagged summits. Upwards we could see the moorland sweeping up to the crater rim at 14,000 feet. Having been up there before, we were able to repel the impulse to toil up there again. We returned to the hut to prepare lunch for Henry and then hung around expectantly until 8 p.m. when he finally returned to eat it. For several hours I had entertained haunting visions of the game guard having shot Henry in mistake for a charging buffalo. When they did return out of the darkness their numbers seemed to have swollen. First came a pack of very scraggy dogs, then the game guard with three dejected men, wrists tied with lianas, then a weary forest guard and Henry.

Eventually over the soup Henry divulged the story. Having inspected their forest and game, it started raining, and while they sheltered in a hut listening to local gossip, they were told there was a gang of poachers living in a cave above. A boy was eager to act as guide, so up they went for half an hour and found the cave containing the remnants of a fire, snares, spears, bows and arrows, skins, cooking pots, and several haunches of duiker. They hid themselves above the cave, and after twenty minutes a dog trotted out from the undergrowth followed by a little man in a large army greatcoat. The watchers descended on him in leaps and bounds, but he turned in a

flash, and was lost in the forest. Booty was seized, including a duiker skin satchel, and they set off down the mountain. Unfortunately for my peace of mind there was yet another diversion. Another informer appeared, pointing out a ruined hut in a deep valley below, which he assured them was the abode of poachers. These poachers are interlopers from a lowland tribe, and are not popular with the locals. The party descended; Henry crept up to the door of the byre at one end and the guards stationed themselves by the main door. Sounds were heard inside, and the guards ordered the inmates to come out. After the game guard had threatened to use his gun, two of them came out peaceably and were tied up. The third however hurled himself out and got hold of the gun, struggling with the guard for its possession. Henry promptly joined the fray, hitting the poacher on the head with an improvised club as often as he could get a swing in. Finally the poacher was subdued and the procession of captors and captives wound its way down to camp.

After supper, which was lengthy as Henry had had nothing but sweets and two biscuits since breakfast, he, armed with aspirin, went to visit his captives who with the two guards and various locals were in a nearby hut. The captives were handcuffed in a corner, docile and resigned, and the one with a bashed head accepted the aspirin with pleasure.

Ann and I has been reading in turns the one book we possessed—"Murder on Safari"—and when in the middle of the night I was suddenly awakened by a thud on the wall and heavy breathing, I was convinced that the burly poacher had come to take his revenge on Henry. However as the breathing continued steadily just through the wall within a foot of my head, and munching sounds became audible too, I decided a donkey must be reclining there, and slept again.

The next morning we started down, the poachers with their dejected dogs in tow. Due to a general misunderstanding, or more probably because the porters wanted to go that way, we went down the wrong route, arriving on the road seven miles away from our land rover at Kapchorwa. I may say that we had wanted to go down a different way, but not that one! The guards and poachers started off, and Henry after much difficulty and delay secured the only bicycle in the vicinity and went off to fetch the land rover for our benefit. Within half an hour a storm broke; the road became a quagmire and Henry was obliged to wheel and carry the bicycle in turns. He finally came in sight of the poacher party within a mile of Kapchorwa, the district H.Q., and was just in time to witness the grand culmination of our farcical safari. The guards, plodding along, wet through, in a low state of morale, were taken off their guard by the poachers who suddenly flung off their handcuffs, two disappearing into the bush on one side and one on the other, followed by the dogs.

The game guard plunged after them, falling over his gun in the process, which went off. The attempt at recapture was abandoned. No doubt the guard was thoroughly disheartened by the loss of his captives within a mile of H.Q. but my sympathies lay with the wretched poachers and their dejected dogs.

It was 7 p.m. by the time Henry returned to us in the land rover. We had been there for three hours, most of the time shivering under eaves of a mud hut while the rain poured off the thatch forming a curtain a few inches from our faces. Even "Murder on Safari" palled, and efforts at bright conversation failed, until finally as darkness came on we were discussing how we should organise ourselves for the night.

The drive back to our house in Mbale, although only 50 miles, took three hours as the road was very muddy, and once we had to stop to repair a hole in the road large enough to hide three people where the road gang had split and removed a half submerged boulder. Luckily the pieces of boulder were by the roadside so we simply carried them all back to the hole, a job we cursed the gang for not doing. We reached civilization at 10 p.m. and thus ended a safari which will afford us much amusement in retrospect.