

TOM DREYER

Willis and Guy were planning to spend only another day or two in Iringa before resuming their journey. They carried their provisions out of the *Mercator*, because from here they had to proceed by foot. Food, medicine, tents, even a collapsible cage for the okapi, everything was carried out and stored in a small store near the quay. When they had done, Guy regarded the old boat with something like nostalgia. It had now brought Willis and him as far as it could. From here on rapids made the Aruwimi unnavigable, and besides, their route lay further to the north, to the Ituri forest where okapis, evidently, were most plentiful.

That afternoon they took stock: corned meat, sardines, preserves, maize meal. They unpacked the first-aid trunk to check one last time that they were ready for any eventuality, also inspected their scientific equipment: a pair of binoculars from Troughton & Simms, a sextant from Quillers, traps and snares from Gillespie Brothers.

Willis negotiated with a local chief of the Basango, because they needed more bearers to supplement those that they had hired in Coquilhatville. All the baggage had to be carried by humans, because here in the tropics no pack animal was resistant for long to sleeping sickness. He met the man in a bamboo hut, close to a clearing where only rusted pipes bore testimony to some entrepreneur's dream of a sugar refinery. He bore in mind the advice that he had been given by the steamboat captain. "Say too little rather than too much. Keep your smile rare and your equipment spick 'n span – then they'll think twice before messing with you."

But this admonishment was unnecessary. Perhaps the tribal chief had had to swallow his pride too often; perhaps he had struck one compromise too many with the white intruders. For without much ado he had his men summonsed and explained to them that each man's wage would be his own. The Basango were hard pressed to scrape

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together the hut tax of the Belgians, and there was no lack of volunteers. Willis selected half a dozen of the strongest and most willing: men with barrel chests and thongs around their wrists. As with the six that were already camping under the trees behind the hotel, he advanced them a quarter of their wages. The rest would be given to them after the expedition. Or to their immediate family, should anything go awry.

Guy, too, kept busy. He collected butterflies by luring them with a blend of sugar syrup and aniseed oil, and then quickly striking home with his long-handled net. Some of his colleagues preferred collapsible nets, with handles that screwed together like new-fangled snooker cues, and he had even seen a chap brandishing a telescopic net. But his tastes were more conventional. If a birch rod had been good enough for Henry Doubleday or Beetle Bill Spence, then it was good enough for him. Besides, he knew that your gear was only part of the picture; it was intuition and perseverance that decided the game. And so he remained occupied, net in hand, collecting vials like shotgun cartridges in his belt. Some of Iringa's butterflies were strong fliers and one devil made him wade into the river up to his hips. He took little notice of how people were staring at him – incomprehension was, after all, the fate of the butterfly hunter.

In the evenings he classified his captures: swallowtails, nymphalids, hesperids, even a rare *Salamis parhassus* that had the temerity to settle on the rim of his brandy glass one afternoon.

Alice and the General went their own way. The General's days were an uninterrupted welter of cards and gin, while Alice passed the time sunbathing with the officers' wives or playing canasta in one of the fort's cool tower rooms. To Willis, who had his eye on her constantly, it seemed as if she was avoiding the Commandant's women, even the

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redhead, who one afternoon, to the great delight of the soldiers, waded gleaming into the river.

In this way two and then three days passed. On the fourth day the expedition suffered an unexpected setback, when the mail boat arrived from Coquilhatville, but without the guide contracted there by Willis and Guy. In his place there was a message – other commitments would occupy him for another day or two – but he would be sure to catch the next boat.

“What do we do now?” Guy asked that evening when they were turning over their options on the hotel veranda. They had met Obieka at the offices of a trading company, Anglo-Belge Intertropica, where the director had recommended him strongly. To lose him now would be a considerable blow. Apart from his role as guide, he would also have to act as their mediator with the bearers, and with the tribes they would meet on the road ahead.

“We wait,” Willis replied, slightly bewildered, because his thoughts had drifted to Alice. “What...else?” He looked at the piles of books on the table – travel journals by Johnston, Stanley, Uyttenboogaerd and De Brazza: men who had explored this world before him. He had invested so much in this project already, how could he allow anything to distract him now? But Alice had bewitched him with her eyes and her body, even though he had thought himself immune to that kind of sorcery.

The fact was, he had felt different ever since he had arrived in the Congo. In all the years of planning this expedition, he’d denied himself many experiences; but now he was here, and, as a blade of grass springs back after a boot has stepped on it, so everything that he had neglected over the years reasserted itself.

He stared at a strip of fly paper dangling from the ceiling. It was gyrating slowly. Later he got up to go to his room. Through the dining room window he could see the

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Commandant and the General at cards. Alice was looking on, her face sullen with boredom, but still so beautiful that he stood gazing from the darkness for a long time.

On his bed he was defenceless against the wash of noises from the forest: the chirruping of insects, the courting songs of frogs, now and again the grunting of hippopotami higher upriver. He curled himself into a tighter and tighter ball, because he was starting to doubt whether the sounds were really out there, and did not originate in his own head.

Only shortly before dawn did he manage to drift off, a restless slumber in which dreams stirred like flies on the fly paper. He was walking through a moonlit forest. In front of him, against the trunk of a lime tree, sat Alice. Her hair was draped over her shoulders and she was softly stroking the okapi sleeping with its head in her lap. The wind stirred in the leaves of the tree. The top button of her blouse was unbuttoned, so that moonlight pooled in the dimple under her throat. The okapi opened its black eyes, but Willis was absorbed in Alice.

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The next morning she appeared on her own on the breakfast veranda. Willis's eyes flicked to and fro between her and a lizard clinging to the edge of the table. It was ice blue above and red as fire beneath, just like him, alternating between feverish sweat and cold shivers. He smoothed the serviette on his thigh and started scrawling a note on it, because he was damned if things could carry on like that. Guy grabbed his wrist, but he was not going to be deterred. He walked past Alice and pressed the serviette into her hand.

He waited by the bamboo forest at the edge of the settlement. As the minutes ticked by, he began feeling more and more ridiculous. He must have misread the situation –

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probably understandably, given his circumstances. He had left the tame English countryside behind him, but also emotionally speaking he was on unfamiliar terrain. He clenched his fingers in a fist. How could he have thought that there was something brewing between him and Alice? For all he knew men did not interest her at all – why on earth would she be interested in him? He was on the point of slipping away, when he saw her moving behind the bamboos.

She was anxious and glanced back over her shoulder.

“You’ve come,” he said, suddenly unsure whether he was pleased or upset at this development.

“Yes,” she said, looking back once more. “You won’t tell? About the other evening...The General...”

Willis shook his head. “Of course not.” They stood in silence for a few seconds, then started walking downstream, as if that had been their plan all along. They looked at the water and at the Basango paddling past in pirogues. A sailor’s hand-line was a shiny scribble against the sky. “These waters teem with black bass,” Willis said when the silence grew oppressive. “Tigerfish as well. Those blighters will tire you out before you can get them on board.”

Alice looked at him expectantly; nevertheless she replied with languid grace, as if it had become second nature to her. “Nothing wants to be caught.”

Willis was bending back a bamboo before her; he stopped short, unsure whether her words applied to him and his mission, or perhaps to her own situation. “Yes,” he said, a bit awkwardly, “but there are other things as well. More important things. Passion, beauty, knowledge. The okapi has been known to science for ten years, but in fact we know very little about it. Outside Africa nobody has seen a living specimen. Only the museum in Strasbourg has a stuffed specimen, and even that is apparently a strange and misshapen creature.”

“What are you talking about, Willis?”

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“The taxidermist had only the hide and a few sketches to work with and so went ahead and used his own imagination.”

Alice smiled. “And you are going to rectify this situation?”

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The story of the okapi begins with one remarkable man, Willis explained to Alice, their reflections strolling along on the surface of the water: Sir Harry Johnston, the previous High Commissioner of Uganda, also Consul-General of Cameroon and the Niger delta. He was a great proponent of Cecil John Rhodes’s dream of a railway line from the Cape to Cairo, but apart from his political activities he had also achieved renown as an explorer and naturalist. Many animals had been named after him, including the rare tricorn chameleon, *Chameleo trioceros johnstoni*, not to mention the animal that had subsequently brought Willis and Guy to the Congo.

It was early in 1899 that Johnston first got wind of the okapi. He was watching a steamboat mooring at his headquarters on the Semliki river. The gangplank was lowered, after which a bizarre little company stepped ashore – a fat man in striped pants, followed by a wretched cluster of men and women who, judging by their stature, could only be pygmies. They eyed the jungle behind the row of colonial buildings as if contemplating flight. The fat man spoke to them harshly, after which they trundled on board again and arranged themselves in a bundle on deck.

Johnston decided to go and see what this was all about. The fat man introduced himself as Gunther Zeiss. He was aloof, even hostile, but became much more accommodating when Johnston invited him for a drink at the hotel. Brandy loosened his tongue. He divulged that he was a circus owner

from Hamburg, and that he was here in search of new blood for his freak show. He had come across the pygmies in the Akavubi district and had persuaded them with promises, beads and copper wire to accompany him to Europe.

Sweat glistened in the folds of his double chin while he expanded on his plans. He envisaged a kind of anthropological show that would play in all the capitals of Europe. It would boast a giant from Rumbi, also several Ubangis, according to him the women with the most pronounced lips in all of Africa. But the pygmies would be the star attraction. His idea was to split them into two groups. One would practise their traditional activities in a reproduction of a native village: hut building or drum playing or demonstrating their prowess with the bow and arrow. The second group would be dressed in European garb and for a small fee eat with knife and fork, or dance to the tune of Gunther's barrel organ.

This enterprise was too much for a man of Johnston's calibre. Apart from moral objections he was also concerned about possible political repercussions. A similar spectacle, in the London Hippodrome, had been the occasion of bitter controversy the year before. That show had been based on the theory of evolution; the pygmies had been held up as an important link in the chain of human development, slightly higher than the orangutan and the chimpanzee, but nevertheless lower than modern *Homo sapiens*, as embodied by the master of ceremonies with his top hat and his whip of hippopotamus hide. Although Europe's interaction with Africa had been premised upon a kind of scientific racism from the start, the public was no longer amenable to such a crude articulation. Church leaders had excoriated the exhibition as unacceptable in an age of enlightenment, an age that should be emphasising the similarities between races rather than the differences. The organisers had hit back with plaster casts of chimpanzee

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and pygmy teeth – a move which had hardly strengthened their case.

All these things were in Johnston's thoughts there on the banks of the Semliki. He had pondered the matter all night, and had found inspiration in the wee hours, for when he summoned the pygmies the following morning, it was to announce that he was calling them up to service in Her Majesty's army. This meant that they would, regrettably, not be able to accompany Gunther to Europe. Privately he sketched to them the nasty reality behind the man's sweet talk. In the land across the sea exploitation and ridicule, rather than a fortune, would be their portion.

The pygmies replied that they were members of the Wambutti tribe, and grateful to be delivered from such a fate. Ringmaster Gunther was less impressed. When he sailed away that afternoon, he could he heard cursing on the rear deck until the steamboat disappeared from view.

Johnston grinned as he walked back to the Wambutti on the parade ground. He told them that they were free to go, but they were rather bewildered by all that had happened, and asked if they could stay on at the fort for another day or two. It was in one of the banana-leaf huts they erected just outside the ramparts that Johnston first heard talk of the okapi.

He had to sit in the doorway, because the hut was not designed for men of his build. The air was smoky and the leader of the Wambutti rocked to and fro as he expounded on the mysterious animal that shared the forest with them and their ancestors. It was brown as a bongo. It was black and white as a zebra, and its blue tongue was long enough to reach its own ears.

Years of fieldwork had inclined Johnston to scepticism in the face of this kind of story. But his curiosity had been piqued, and after the Wambutti's departure, he often walked out to where their shelters had stood. He would

scuffle around in the ashes of their fireplaces, and with one eye on the depths of the forest, wonder if there might not be a grain of truth in their words. At length he found an excuse to travel to the Belgian fort at Mbeni – the Wambutti had told him that their fellow tribesmen sometimes caught okapis in their snares, and that this was where they exchanged them for beads or firewater.

Reaching Fort Mbeni, Johnston was surprised to hear that a group of pygmies had indeed brought along one of these animals just the day before. It had unfortunately already been cut up and processed – even the hide had been cut into strips to make bandoliers. When Johnston quizzed the soldiers about the animal's appearance his suspicion was confirmed that here he was dealing with something highly unusual. He bought one of the strips – chocolate-brown and banded with white – and sent it to London for analysis, along with a few scapulae that he had picked up at the slaughter station.

There the little bundle of skin and bones ended up on the dissecting table of Sir Horace Plunkett. Aided by a young Masters student, one Willis Reed, he carefully studied the bones and hide patterns, and concluded that they belonged to no known species of mammal.

In the meantime, Johnston had not been idle either. He travelled hither and yon following reports of okapis, until he acquired one that had been felled by a Wambutti's poisoned arrow. It was immediately apparent that this animal was even more exotic than he had hoped. It was not merely a new species of buck or zebra. No, everything – from the cloven hooves, to the shape of the neck, and the little blunt horns on the forehead – testified to the okapi's kinship with the giraffe. He sent the hide and skeleton to the Royal Museum, after which *Okapia johnstoni* was officially added to the list of the world's mammals. Johnston had notched up another discovery, the giraffe

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family had acquired another member, and the young Willis Reed had been fired with a passion that today was as fervent as ever.

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He and Alice had by now walked as far as a boathouse, He enthused by his narrative, she more reluctantly. Perhaps she had heard more about the okapi than she would have liked. Perhaps she would have preferred still to think of it as an enigma, a riddle beyond the compass of science, just as she would rather have seen Willis as a romantic stranger, an adventurer who could for a few hours brighten up the monotony of her existence. She dabbed her neck with a handkerchief, but smiled when he opened the door of the boathouse for her.

The little building was open to the water, and brimful of canoes, paddles, and tangled fishnets. A small sailboat, on which the Commandant and his women sometimes undertook pleasure cruises, was perched on blocks. Willis caressed the bow, hoisted himself aboard and reached out his hand to Alice.

Sunlight fell in strips through the bamboo wall. "You must understand," he said, leaning back against the cushions of the couch. "It's not a matter of the money I'll get for the okapi. It's difficult to describe, but there was a kind of electricity when I first touched that morsel of hide." He looked at the ribbed water of the river. "For as long as I can remember I've felt a kind of guilt, as if I'm supposed to do more with my life. The okapi is to me an escape, an opportunity to prove that there is something to me after all."

Alice stretched out her legs in front of her. "You're lucky," she said. "Some people never get such a chance. Some people don't even know that they're looking for it." She fiddled with a copper wishbone on the side of the boat. "The

General says we can't afford to dream. We're living at the end of an era and have to dig in before everything disappears."

"And you, what do you say?"

"I say it's our right to dream."

Willis was surprised to hear this sentiment, which he'd had to defend against so many bureaucrats and vacillating zoo functionaries, from the mouth of a woman. "Exactly!" he exclaimed. "Exactly!" He looked at Alice's hands, her lips, her hair black and lustrous. "And when you dream," he said, leaning a bit closer, "what do you dream about then?"

The directness of the question caught Alice unawares. "So many questions, Mr Reed," she laughed, looking down at her hands. "Are you trying to classify me as well, like that okapi of yours? Or perhaps, like your friend, you want to pin me down on a little card: *Alice de Quincy. Iringa. 1912?*"

A vague feeling of impropriety forced Willis to his feet. "Alice! How can you..." he started, but she pulled him down on the couch. "Never mind, old chap. Don't upset yourself. That is after all what I am: a curiosity along the way, a touch of colour on your journey..." Willis wanted to jump up again, but she held him down firmly on his seat. "You ask about my dreams," she continued, drowning out his protestations. "Lazy afternoons on croquet courts. The waxed moustaches of officers. That's what I used to dream about. Droplets of steam on a tea set."

The tips of her fingers hovered over the wishbone.

"But nowadays I dream other dreams. New roads and new places. The distant lights of Alicante, Cannes, Gallipoli, while candelabra sway above me, and a steam engine drones until I become as one with the sound. I open my mouth, the funnels smoke, and the sea parts in a V around the bow of the ship."

Later Willis wouldn't be able to remember whether these

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were her words or whether he had completed her sentences for her. He would not be able to remember when he had first caressed her neck. All that he knew was that the bamboo walls susurrated lightly in the wind and that she was not unwilling. They burrowed down between the cushions, the smell of wood and canvas in their nostrils, her breath warm on his neck. It felt as if a multitude of arms embraced him. A parakeet shrieked above the boathouse, but he was voyaging in a landscape of hills and valleys, and did not even hear it.

“A dream of movement,” Alice still whispered somewhere, but then it was stifled in a rustling of taffeta, the relenting of a button, and the boat starting to rock on its blocks. Willis’s body was replete with light, because even with his eyes closed Alice’s eyes radiated deep into his core.

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The horse snorted, shaking its black mane. The General put his boot into the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle. Willis, looking on from the door of the storeroom, saw Alice’s steed milling around in a tight semi-circle. Then she kicked him in the flank to persuade him to follow her husband’s horse. An overburdened mule slouched behind.

The General nodded as he passed Willis. “Til later, then,” he muttered, his eyes bloodshot under the tangle of his eyebrows. At Alice’s insistence he had invited Willis and Guy to call on their estate on their way past. He did not seem enthralled at the prospect, but had probably made his peace with the fact that life with a younger woman would not always be easy.

Alice shifted her grip on the reins, her attention on the shadow of her horse. The General spurred on his horse to a gentle gallop. Willis watched the two riders disappear among the trees, but Alice did not look back.