

CHIRUPULA'S TALE

A BYE-WAY IN AFRICAN HISTORY

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CHAPTER V

Up the Muchinga escarpment—Kakwelé the Rhinoceros—Across the Lukashashi—Defection of Angoni porters—Lala lore—Trial by poison

"HEAVEN HAS NO RAGE LIKE LOVE TO HATRED TURNED,
Nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned."

Or is it "spurned"? Anyhow, we had neither scorned nor spurned: we had merely behaved ourselves with Queen Mwape, and acted with the decorum which we thought proper to our mission.

But when the time came to say good-bye, there was such a strangeness about the demeanour of the few villagers we saw that I fancied all was not quite well; in fact, there was obviously something amiss, though we had not the faintest idea how we had erred or offended. It was years later, as I have explained, that I learned how we had hurt Black Majesty's feelings.

The promised guide was a long time in appearing; but at length and at last he turned up, silent and sulky, and bidding a curt farewell to Mwape's "capital," we set out.

After a hot and tedious scramble through scrub and brake and thicket, we arrived at the foot of a formidable precipice which towered sheer above us—the main ridge of the south-western portion of the Muchinga Mountains.

Jones being a Welshman was also a mountaineer, so he took the lead, straight up the almost perpendicular

UP THE MUCHINGA ESCARPMENT

2,000-foot wall before us; and up we went, climbing, clambering, and sometimes crawling. But we soon found this mountaineering beyond a joke, and the porters were in difficulties: at imminent risk to themselves and our belongings, they were reduced to passing their loads up overhead as, and when, they could get any sort of footing.

However, at last the top was reached without serious misadventure—and truly magnificent was the prospect below us. A dozen miles away we saw the Luangwa like a silver ribbon shining in green folds; and to the east, whence we had come, the distant mountains lay like mauve and purple and black shadows upon the horizon. Yes . . . everything was beautiful, superbly beautiful, until we discovered that we had not a drop of water! Then things did not seem quite so good.

Although Jones and I and some of the more lightly laden carriers had reached the summit, the men with the more awkward loads were still mountaineering, so the nimblest and best climbers were despatched down the precipice to lend a hand.

But, of course, they would only help members of their own clan, or family, or surname—the last is, perhaps, the nearest equivalent according to our lights. In other words, these people would regard all Smiths in the world, all Browns, all Robinsons, as of the same descent: all Smiths are relations, all Browns are relations, but no Smith is any kind of relative to a Brown—certainly not!

Natives of the same "surname" have, among themselves, particular rights and privileges: they will do for their "brothers" what they would do for themselves. But the stranger, from another "surname," is, as the

Scriptures say, "Not with us," and therefore "against us"—and is treated accordingly.

So here we were on the high ridge of the Muchingas—the Luangwa River to the east, the Lukashashi River below us to the west, and the Zambesi (in the neighbourhood of Zumbo) some 150 miles almost due south. We had dropped down from the 4,000-foot plateau at Fort Jameson to the 2,000-foot altitude of the Luangwa valley, crossing on route the riveraine plain, and finally the river; now we had just scaled the wall beyond the river, this ridge of the Muchinga ("the-place-of-the-gorges"), and had to clamber down again into the valley of the Lukashashi, almost parallel with that of the Luangwa. Thereafter—to anticipate, for the sake of clearness—our path was to lead us up across the minor plateaux, to the west of the Lukashashi crossing, on to the Great Plateau of Northern Rhodesia which goes away west, almost without interruption, to the Atlantic borders of Angola or Portuguese West Africa.

Our descent into the Lukashashi—a lovely river, with crystal-clear water over the pebbles, and shady over-hanging trees—was uneventful, except that, much to Jones's and my excitement, we found the spoor of rhino, though we never saw the beasts responsible.

Kakwelé the rhinoceros is a queer, morose, solitary fellow, with strange habits: for instance, he charges quite inoffensive beings on sight; he goes to sleep after breakfast, tucking up his short little legs, kneeling down and sleeping like a sphinx; and (strangest of all) he always returns to scatter his droppings. He can go like an express train; he can also move like a ghost; and although the killing shots are in his ear, or mid-neck, or behind

his shoulder, these are not conspicuous marks; and as to other portions of his anatomy, it is better to reserve your ammunition and leave them alone!

Of course, it is easy to jeer at Kakwelé and his queer and rather unpleasant habits; but you must remember that there are extenuating circumstances.

You see, long ago Kakwelé, who lived in a very rough country, tore his hide, and he was very unhappy about it. So when by chance he met the porcupine, what more natural than that he should borrow a quill wherewith to make a sewing-needle and sew up his rent garment?

But Kakwelé's fingers are short and clumsy, so he put the needle into his mouth for a moment, to hold it while he was threading it; and then the needle slipped and he swallowed it!

It was a terrible predicament: he didn't know what to do about it; he wandered aimlessly to and fro all day, puzzling and thinking. Then at length he met the porcupine. The latter promptly demanded the return of his quill; he'd had some trouble that day with the leopard, and as a result was very short of his only means of defence. Could he have his quill back, please?

"But, alas! I have lost your quill," replied Kakwelé. "*Iri luwile!*" ("It is lost").

"Good heavens!" grunted the porcupine, "that's a nice thing to tell me! Why, it's the only one I've got!" "*Imo yenka,*" he chattered to Kakwelé, "*Imo yenka*" ("My only one; the only one I've got").

At last Kakwelé was able to get away from his outraged creditor, and, knowing that he was in the wrong and until he could repay the quill that he would remain in the wrong—for ever and for ever and for ever—he

was very much ashamed of himself and very much upset. But he thought—and thought; and then suddenly he realized that just as what goes up comes down, so that which goes in comes out, so . . .

Why, of course! . . . Accordingly, he rushed off to where he'd been that morning when the dreadful accident happened, and began feverishly searching . . . but no! No—nothing even resembling porcupine's lost quill! Kakwelé was so tired and so despondent that he fell asleep; and next day and for days and days—in the intervals of this despondent sleep—he sought; but it was no good. He was disgraced, and his children and his children's children would be disgraced, because of his infamy in borrowing and failing to repay.

The shamefulness of his position drove him from the haunts of respectable and honourable animals into the rocky fastnesses, into inaccessible thickets, into wild, inhospitable places. The sense of his dishonour and worthlessness preyed upon his mind; his search became his obsession. Only when he sleeps—exhausted by mental strain and the gnawing pangs of conscience—does he forget his eternal quest. And when he wakes up he remembers—and is very cross. So, unless you take all this into account, you must not judge Kakwelé the rhino. . . .

Beyond the Lukashashi we began to climb again, and ascended gradually till the Mulembo River was reached and crossed some twenty miles further on, when the ascent became much more abrupt and the going more difficult, with rocks and boulders often interrupting progress.

But soon we were up, and it was indeed a relief to be on comparatively cool highlands once more; for although the valleys through which we had tramped are far hotter in October or November, they had been quite warm enough, and we were glad to find ourselves at last upon the plateau.

In almost every *dambo* (meadow or clearing) through which we passed now we saw game-fences, with bent pole and loop snugly hidden over shallow holes, concealed by twigs, designed to trap small buck; but of game itself we saw nothing, for our askari and their wives, and the carriers too, never kept their tongues still for one instant, and our approach must have been heralded from miles away. Nor—in spite of the evidence of the traps—did we see people: the villages we passed were silent and deserted, and we guessed that, having heard our approach, the inhabitants had judged it best to keep out of sight. For they were, we had heard, adepts at the "Three R's" of Africa—as it was then—i.e. Robbery, Rape, and Rapine. Comparisons, from under the shadow of your nice policeman, may be unflattering to Africa. But what of the country of Tweed and Cheviot when, not so vastly long ago, your and my ancestors harassed and rieved to their heart's content, years after comparative quiet ruled both in Scotland and the rest of England? We have conveniently short memories at home—and are in the devil of a hurry in Africa!

Although we were not exactly reassured by the emptiness and silence of the villages and wondered what it all meant, we continued resolutely westward. Our way lay up the north-east of the Mufulwe Hills,

