



# Our Ruwenzori Safari

By Ian Michael Wright

Photos by the Author

It all started one warm and sunny afternoon in Nairobi, as Kitty and I were relaxing comfortably with the Hempstones in their garden over a cup of tea. During a lull in the conversation Kitty Hempstone looked over to the gentle Ngong Hills in the hazy distance and, surely dreaming, said, "Wouldn't it be lovely to go to the Ruwenzori!"

Filled with enthusiasm in that easy-going atmosphere a safari to the Ruwenzori, the fabled Mountains of the Moon, didn't seem to present any serious problems at all. We all nodded assent. Later, we were to remember that pleasant conversation often and wonder how it could have seemed so simple; especially as we slogged knee-deep through stinking bogs and rotting vegetation, or as we cut our way through the dense and slimy tropical rain forest (with the help of local Bakonjo porters, it must be admitted). I, at least, should have known better, for this was to be my second trip, but by then the decision had been made and there was to be no turning back.

In this simple way our mountain safari was launched.

The Ruwenzori lie along the western border of Uganda just to the north of the equator. Formed by a tremendous block sixty miles long and thirty miles wide which was tilted and thrust up during the development of the great Rift Valley system, the highest peaks rise almost to 17,000 feet, a good 13,000 feet above the floor of the valley. Unlike the other great mountains of East Africa, they are not of volcanic origin although numerous craters, of

a later date, are found in the surrounding countryside.

In the center of the range there are six main mountain masses, each carrying permanent snows and glaciers. No fewer than nineteen summits exceed 15,000 feet. As they are virtually on the equator and capped with snow the weather, to say the least, is almost always unsettled. Warm, moist air from the great Congo forests is swept up over the icy summits, resulting in one of the highest rainfalls recorded anywhere on earth. Climbers joke that it rains at least 366 days a year. If one is lucky enough to escape the constant downpours, thick mists usually make up for it. There are few dry moments in these mountains, even during the supposedly dry seasons, at the end of February and from mid-June to mid-August.

It is just this amount of rain, however, which makes the Ruwenzori as interesting as they are. One of the main attractions, besides the peaks themselves, is the plethora of fantastic giant vegetation which abounds in regions above 10,000 feet and which includes the giant forms of lobelia, groundsel and heather, the latter often growing as high as forty-five feet. This vegetation is almost prehistoric in appearance, and I, for one, wouldn't have been at all surprised to meet a winged pterodactyl at rest among the giant groundsel in the mist.

At lower levels the rain forest is the most luxuriant of dank, dark places imaginable. The rich variety of trees, ferns, and vines only rarely allows the sun to penetrate into the cool world below in

myriads of small dancing patterns. Over a hundred different kinds of orchid abound, from large specimens to small exquisite flowers no larger than a dime. It is a botanist's paradise.

The dense vegetation, however, makes it difficult to see the wildlife. Birds there are aplenty, including the brilliant Ruwenzori Turaco, among the most beautiful of living creatures. Black forest leopards, chimpanzees, blue monkeys, red forest duikers, and hyrax are the most common animals, although only the latter are seen very often. It is said that poisonous snakes often lie in wait on branches over the trails, ready to drop on unsuspecting creatures passing underneath. A porter was once killed by one, but luckily we saw none of the great variety that exists. Elephant and buffalo are common in the lower valleys.

Historically, the Ruwenzori have played an important role by encouraging African exploration in the search for the source of the Nile. The first problem was to find them. In A.D. 150 Claudius

*Porters on the trail.*



Ptolemy wrote that the Nile's source lay in great lakes fed by streams from snow-capped mountains which he called the "Mountains of the Moon." His map was remarkably accurate, and it is now commonly accepted that his mountains are, in fact, the Ruwenzori. Others, among them Herodotus, Aristotle, and later the 12th Century geographer, Edrisi, knew of their existence. In more modern times, it was ostensibly the search for the Nile's source that brought most of the early European explorers (Burton, Baker, Speke, Grant, etc.) to East Africa.

In 1864 Sir Samuel Baker became the first European to set eyes upon the Ruwenzori, but naming them "The Blue Mountains" he failed to appreciate their full geographical importance. Sir Henry Stanley (of "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" fame) did, though, and it was he who first proclaimed their existence to the modern world. He claimed to have made the discovery himself in May 1888, but, in fact, two members of his expedition had seen them a month earlier. They reported this to Stanley, who dismissed their find on the improbable grounds that they were looking in the wrong direction. Stanley first caught sight of the Ruwenzori only when a boy directed his eyes to a mountain said to be covered with salt. Without realizing it both he and Romolo Gessi had seen the mountains on earlier expeditions.

It was Stanley who gave the mountains their name, "Ruwenzori." This was one of the many names he thought the people of Toro had told him. Actually, and most appropriately, the word means "the place whence the rain comes." It is improbable the inhabitants had a name for the massif or for the individual peaks, since those who live nearby only give names to rivers and places which they know and which are of value to them. It is for this reason that the peaks are named after famous European explorers.

Once discovered there began a steady stream of attempts to penetrate the range both from east and west. Between 1889 and 1906 such men as Scott Elliot, Mumm, Sir Harry Johnston, Freshfield and the famous Swiss guide Moritz Inderbinnen all tried

their luck. The snow line was reached and a few of Mt. Baker's minor peaks were climbed, but perpetual bad weather, difficult terrain and the innate complexity of the range were enough to turn back even the most determined of explorers.

In the summer of 1906 two strong parties headed for the Ruwenzori. The first, a British Museum Expedition, planned to study the flora and fauna of the region, but among its members was an avid mountaineer, A.F.R. Wollaston, who succeeded in climbing a few subsidiary peaks and who was on the verge of even greater accomplishments. Bedeviled by lack of funds, however, its members were forced to sit idly by, while the second expedition, headed by that great explorer and mountaineer, H.R.H. the Duke of the Abruzzi (Luigi Amadeo di Savoia), caught up with them and passed them by. The gentle Wollaston recorded his emotions in a letter to a close friend:

"We ought very soon to be starting round to the Semliki side of the range but we are stuck here by reason of exhausted funds and can move neither forwards nor backwards. Meantime the Duke of the Abruzzi draws near with a great following and will be at the top of the highest peak before I get within fifty miles of its foot. It is one of the most grievous ill chances that ever befell me and I am inclined to curse all royal dukes and wish they would stop at home."

Wollaston, however, was anything but bitter, and later he visited the Duke and gave him much valuable information about the mountains. He was greatly impressed with him, "lean and tough, about forty . . . and a climber by the look of him."

Wollaston was justly impressed. In the comparatively short span of six weeks the Duke's party climbed nineteen major summits, some of them several times, and carried out a program of scientific research, mapping, and exploration that would be a model of accomplishment even today. As a result of this great Italian expedition, the Ruwenzori no longer remained *terra incognita*.

If anything, their success was the direct result of

elaborate and thorough preparation. No expense was spared. There were twelve Europeans, including scientists, a surveyor, the great mountain photographer Vittorio Sella, two Alpine guides and two porters. It was altogether the largest and most formidable party yet to visit the range.

They arrived in Fort Portal early in June 1906, having walked all the way from Entebbe in three weeks. On June 8 they established a camp at the upper end of the Mubuku Valley at about 12,500 feet, and by 6:30 a.m. on the tenth the Duke and his two guides were on the terminal ridge of Mt. Baker. Unlike most previous expeditions which had gotten that far only to become helplessly lost in the mist, the weather was beautifully clear, and they could see the whole range spread beneath their feet. Within half an hour they were able to unravel the topographic mysteries of the range which had been so

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Kitty Wright following the trail through elephant grass.





*Mount Baker, 15,889 feet, is one of the principal peaks in the Ruwenzori. Photo by Arthur H. Firmin.*

*Smith distributes a blanket and sweater to each of the porters.*



*Saulo, our headman, and one of the porters.*



