

The WONDERLAND *of*
THE EASTERN CONGO

The Region of the Snow-Crowned Volcanoes
the Pygmies the Giant Gorilla
and the Okapi

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Introduction

and the Sudan and northern equatorial zone, we are obliged to assume that in prehistoric, but not very distant times, much of the Sahara and Libyan deserts were covered by a wide expanse of shallow sea, or by fresh-water lakes many times larger in area than the Victoria Nyanza and Lake Chad. There is some local evidence to support this assumption.

Along the Eastern route, from Syria and Arabia, through Egypt and Abyssinia we may surmise justifiably that the anthropoid apes came to east equatorial Africa, and thence crossed the continent in the forms of the chimpanzi, to extend their range through its vast western forests. The gorilla, perhaps arriving later, only penetrated westward to the proximity of the Niger delta.

The okapi likewise passed from Egypt (its nearest relations are found fossil in Greece and Asia Minor) to the north-eastern Congo forests, but has not—as has the *Hylochaerus* genus of swine—been found west of the Mubangi affluent of the Congo.

The fossil remains of an equine like the zebra have been found in Algeria, but no wild ass or zebra has been located in the Sahara or Libyan deserts; or anywhere *west* of the main Nile, as far south as the Semliki River and the north end of Tanganyika. The range of the zebra, in two or more species, skirts the south end of Tanganyika and in general the southern limits of the Congo basin, and penetrates into Angola, south of the Kwanza River. The range of the rhinoceroses in the *southern* half of Africa is very much that of the zebras except, of course, that within the last hundred years the white rhinoceros has been virtually exterminated in Trans-Zambeziian Africa by the British-Boer white man. But *north* of the equator both forms of the rhinoceros may be found *west*

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furiously than ever since the Great War, the British, German, and the Boer settlers have been exterminating with reckless blood-lust a most magnificent mammalian fauna; South Africa, outside the forests of the Central region, offered a singular resemblance in its extravagant mammalian forms to the beasts of prehistoric Algeria, and of Abyssinia, Somaliland, and equatorial East Africa. Vestiges of this wealth were encountered by the author of this book and have been seen by many of those who from the days of Speke and Grant onwards have penetrated East Africa up to the borders of the Congo forests.

Not a few of the beasts and birds, living and extinct, which have been found in North Africa, Abyssinia, the eastern Sudan, Somaliland, and equatorial East Africa down to the sixth degree of S. latitude, are not only absent entirely from the central basin of the Congo but do not reappear till the Zambezi has been crossed and the South African sphere has been entered. A somewhat similar gap in distribution may be noted in the Americas where there may be great resemblances between the existing mammalian fauna of South America and that of pre-Glacial North America, with very little (to-day) in the way of living or fossil forms in Central America to connect them, the fauna not having cared to linger long in the attenuated connecting parts.

But in Central Africa there has been no lack of space for the maintenance of the southward-tending beasts and birds: we can only assume that the rather narrow connecting belt between north and south in East Africa has been caused by the existence of a vast recent lake over the inner Congo basin. Similarly, to account for the present distribution of beasts, birds, reptiles and fresh-water fish between North Africa

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of the main Nile ; and the black rhinoceros extends its range—seemingly—into Eastern Nigeria (though not to the west of the Niger) ; and according to the Roman records, was once very abundant south of the Sahara, round Lake Chad.

The vast forests of Central Congoland, *south* and *west* of the main stream, are to-day very different from the Northern Congo basin, the Cameroons, and the Tanganyika region in their mammalian fauna, different in what they lack rather than in what they possess. They are apparently without anthropoid apes, giraffe or okapi, water chevrotain, and most of the antelopes, the *Hylochærus* pig, rhinoceros, zebra or the *Manis* edentates (except the wide-spread *Manis temmincki*), and seemingly lack the aardvark.

The reason for this poverty in mammalian fauna seems to have been that within Pliocene and Pleistocene times, when the rest of Africa was being peopled with the mammals and birds of Europe and Asia, the Central Congo basin was a vast fresh-water lake of which Lakes Leopold II and Mantumba are tiny residuary fragments. This question has been treated at some length in my work on Grenfell's explorations, so it is not necessary to descant further on it here.

Similarly, and also within the human period, much of the Sahara and Libyan deserts was under water ; so that the routes by which tropical Africa received its modern mammals and its early types of man from the Mediterranean lands and from Western Asia were virtually restricted to the elevated strip of the Tassili-Tibesti highlands from Algeria to Darfur, and the mountainous country east of the Nile, from Egypt to Abyssinia and East Africa. Much of the Bahr-al-ghazal basin between Wadai and the vicinity of the Mountain Nile was a vast shallow lake.