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# AFRICAN ODYSSEY

*The Life of Verney Lovett-Cameron*

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*Illustrated with 59 Photographs*



*By courtesy of "South Africa"*

Commander Verney Lovett-Cameron  
(On return from Africa)



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A less resolute character might have felt justified in abandoning such a seemingly ill-starred expedition, the more particularly after what befell him in Unyanyembe. Often the outlook appeared extremely dark and hopeless.

The slowness of that painful advance from Bagamoyo into Unyanyembe must have proved exceptionally exasperating to a man of Cameron's immense energy and capacity for work. All eagerness to press forward speedily to his destination, he found himself up against a set of circumstances beyond his power to combat effectually. The sloth, disloyalty and rapacity of the average African was insurmountable, he soon concluded. Promises were made only to be broken. Even Bombay, the alleged paragon of virtue and trusted henchman of Speke, proved absolutely incompetent and quite dependable in any crisis arising. He was seldom other than a drink-sodden weakling when called upon to deal with cases of ill-discipline among either askari or porters; and in any unpleasantness with the followers in camp or on the road, Bombay invariably sided with them and let down Cameron. As a headman Bombay never once earned his salt and proved himself a futile, contemptible specimen of African manhood.

The four Europeans with the expedition learned to know the native of Africa during those heart-searing days as would not have been possible under other conditions. Possibly, they saw the native at his worst—lazy, dependable, dishonest, untruthful and eager not to neglect the slightest opportunity for taking advantage of his employers' ignorance of the country and its people.

Ill-luck persistently dogged Cameron's footsteps, even in the early stages and over a well-trodden trail. His porters habitually deserted from the camps *en route*, not always having the decency to leave behind them the loads entrusted to their care. Such losses of food supplies, stores and trade goods (the local currency) were of even more serious moment than the fact that a further number of carriers were deficient.

Every petty chieftain or village headman demanded wholly exorbitant *mhongo* (tribute) for the privilege of the expedition passing through his district. Food supplies were almost as difficult to purchase as were porters to replace deserters indeed hard to recruit. When they halted for a couple of days from force of circumstances, the native members of the expedition raised every kind of obstacle to a resumption of the march inland. Indeed, if they rested for more than a single night at any camp the fact proved fatal to quick progress. This was made painfully evident to the young leader, yet only too

often there was no other option but to comply. Murphy and Moffat, shepherding the rearguard portion of the expedition, experienced identical difficulties and annoyances on the road.

By April 26—a month after leaving Kikoka camp—Cameron was left in no doubt about the strenuous nature of his undertaking. He realized, ever more and more, it would test his powers of leadership and endurance to the fullest limits; but consoled himself, however, with the thought that Stanley (1871-2) and others had come and gone over this selfsame road. Why then should he fail?

On that date they reached a village called Simbo, close to the Kihondo hills in the Usagara country. There they prepared themselves to negotiate the difficult passage of the dreaded Makata Swamp—a large and level plain situated between the Usagara mountains and those near Simbaweni. Now they had been a month on the road, but had covered only a distance of approximately sixty miles. Cameron and Dillon groaned at the memory of this crawling pace. They had spared themselves no effort to speed up progress; but the spirit of Africa and her people defeated them.

The Makata Plain offered no great difficulties to caravans during the dry seasons of the year. During the rains, however, the entire area was converted into a vast expanse of swamp, with two or three really troublesome morasses on the western side. After two hours' march from Simbo village they had their first introduction to the swamp—and in its worst possible mood. Five solid hours were expended in travelling over five miles of this swamp-track, while heavy rain persisted throughout the march. A mile an hour, perhaps, was not bad going under such dreadful conditions. The tracks of elephant, giraffe, buffalo and rhinoceros formed innumerable pot-holes in the wet clay, some being knee-deep and filled with water. Many of the transport donkeys were trapped in these water-logged holes and had to be extricated by sheer force. Cameron and Dillon did not rest in their efforts to keep porters and donkeys on the move, but were so frequently bogged themselves that it was not always possible to reach the spot where others were in difficulties. The spirit was willing, but the flesh weak.

They fought their way onwards until three o'clock in the morning, and then halted on the site of an old camp. This proved a comparatively dry spot, with a certain amount of wood for fuel and materials for hut-making available. The rain fortunately ceased shortly after daybreak. Once more the expedition resumed its weary march over the level, swampy plain. They crossed the Makata river, a swiftly swirling stream about forty yards in width and ten feet deep,

Neither men nor women have any objection to being watched by the opposite sex whilst going through these antics ; but, as in many other tribes, they never mix or dance together.

" The huts in which they live are usually built of stout posts planted in the ground and the interstices filled in with clay. The roof is flat with a slight slope to the front, and the rafters are covered either with sheets of bark or with bushes and grass, over which is spread a thick coating of earth. Sweet potatoes cut into slices, pumpkins and gourds are often laid out on the roofs to dry for their winter provisions.

" In the interior of these huts there are generally two, and sometimes even three, divisions. The first contains small bed-places covered with hides ; and here also is the universal African fireplace consisting of the three cones of clay, which in a few instances are hollow and form an oven. The only cooking utensils are earthen pots, nearly everything being prepared for eating by boiling. In the next division are kept kids and lambs. The innermost one is used as a granary, where corn is stored in *lindo* or bark band-boxes with lids carefully luted on with clay. These *lindo* are often of enormous size, some being sufficiently large to contain a dozen sacks of corn. Smaller *lindo* are frequently used as trunks when travelling any distance. (*Lindo*, in Swahili, is " a watching-place " ; *linda* means " guard, watch or keep " ; and *lindi* is a " pit or deep place. " It is probable that Cameron did not get the correct name for these boxes, and that *lindi* would have been the word employed by the natives.)

" Light is admitted only through the doorway, which also provides the sole means for the escape of smoke. As a consequence the rafters and walls are always black and shiny, and the cobwebs with which they are festooned are loaded with soot. Amongst the rafters are stored walking-sticks, bows, spears, knobkerries, and arrows to become duly seasoned by smoke. As may be expected, these dwellings are infested with vermin, the worst being the enormous ticks, the bite of which is so annoying that the Arabs believe them to be venomous and often to cause fevers.

" . . . The clothing of the Wanyamwezi is usually of cloth obtained in trade, but the poorer people have to content themselves with native cloth made from the inner bark of a species of wild fig-tree. The outer covering of this tree is stripped off during the rainy season and the trunk swathed with banana leaves until the inner bark becomes sufficiently tender and soft for manufacture. It is then removed and steeped in water, after which it is laid on a plank and tapped gently

with mallets, usually made of rhinoceros horn grooved on the face. At each tap the piece of bark grows larger and larger, and when finished has something of the appearance of a felted corduroy. . . .

" The distinguishing tribal marks of the Wanyamwezi are a tattooed line down the centre of the forehead and on each temple, the two upper front teeth are chipped so as to show a chevron-shaped gap, and a small triangular piece of hippopotamus ivory or of shell, ground down white and polished, hung round the neck.

" Their ornaments consist principally of beads and brass or iron wire. Chiefs and headmen wear enormous cylindrical bracelets of ivory extending from wrist to elbow, which are also used as signals in warfare. The noise occasioned by striking them together is heard at a long distance, and is used by chiefs as a call for their men to rally around them.

" The men usually shave the crown of the head and wear their hair twisted into innumerable small strings, lengthened artificially by plaiting long fibres of bark-cloth with the hair. This is often carried to such extremes as to make it hang down to the small of the back, and when on the road this mixture of bark and hair is usually tied into a kind of club-tail. Others, who only want to appear smart on special occasions, have wigs of string and keep their own wool either shaved or clipped close to the head.

" The women follow no particular fashion in dressing their hair. Sometimes they allow it to remain in its native frizziness, often using it to stick a knife, pipe or other small article into. Others have their hair dressed in innumerable small plaits, lying close to the head and having something like the appearance of the ridges in a field. Occasionally they make it into large cushion-like masses, padded out with bark-fibres. The two latter methods of hair-dressing occupy two or three days to complete, but when the work of art is finished it remains undisturbed for six months or even longer."

Chief Mrima Ngombo was then engaged in making a royal progress through his domains, and made a special point of paying a visit to Cameron at Hisinene. He was dressed in a scarlet burnous trimmed with gold embroidery, which looked rather strange over his greasy waist-cloth—his only other garment.

Mrima Ngombo made his presence felt in Hisinene. He evinced the most intense displeasure with the headman of the village, reprimanding him angrily for not having paid the white man sufficient honour or hospitality and for not having supplied *pombe* to the followers of Cameron. As a matter of fact, the headman had been

ahead the previous day but now had turned back to place themselves under the white man's protection. They admitted being afraid to go forward alone. This did not augur well for Cameron's own progress to Ujiji, and he began to speculate about the dangers which might threaten to overwhelm his caravan. However, his fears proved groundless.

Rainstorms, flooded rivers, a badly poisoned leg due to an insect bite, false alarms and excursions, troubles with the porters, and being lost for three days—all these combined to delay Cameron's progress. Finally, however, they managed to struggle into the village of Man Komo, chief of part of Kawendi. They camped near the village. The latter was protected in front by a river, fully twenty-five feet wide and eight feet deep; and at the rear was a precipitous rocky hill, on the side of which the main portion of the village stood. Many of the inhabitants had appropriated holes and caves in the rocks for abodes. So difficult of access and so easily defended was this village that even Mirambo had been driven off by the villagers when he attempted to plunder them.

Representatives from Man Komo soon arrived in the camp to demand the payment of two hundred yards of cloth as *mhongo*. They declared their chief had heard that Cameron paid this amount in Ugara; and, when pressed to name the source of their information, they cheerfully said the men from Mrima Ngombe, whom Cameron had protected on the road there, had told them all about it. However, he refused to be bluffed; and his anger at the disgraceful lies and base ingratitude of the men of Mrima Ngombe was great. He knew that Man Komo had never before been paid tribute, so his attempt now to extract *mhongo* was merely barefaced audacity. Cameron bluntly refused to pay any tribute. Man Komo did not press his claim, but marked his displeasure at failing to extort tribute by refusing to sell any food to the caravan.

Cameron started off next morning at an early hour to march straight through to the capital of Uvinza, as he had been told there was no difficulty in obtaining food along the road ahead. Two local guides showed him the best track to follow. Cameron's leg was now so bad that he could not walk or even ride the donkey, so he had his chair slung to a pole and was thus carried forward by four porters. Following the road along a small flat lying between a stream and the foot of a hill—the northern end of which they rounded—they came to another hill with so steep an ascent that the porters were incapable of carrying him up it in the chair. They literally dragged him to the summit by his arms.

From the top of this high hill there was a most extensive view over the plains, woods and valleys spread out at their feet, all surrounded by mountains presenting every variety of size and outline. The most distant, the guides told him, overhung Lake Tanganyika. This was indeed welcome information.

They had climbed this hill at the only accessible point in the direction from which approached, and the sides in many places "went down so sheer that huge stones rolled over the edge crashed through the branches of projecting trees without touching earth until they landed far below in the valley." The descent would have been fairly simple but for the fact that a blinding rainstorm set in, drenching everyone and flooding the hillsides with running water. During the afternoon they stumbled across a small collection of huts with about twelve inhabitants. The expedition was glad to camp there. No food was obtainable. Despite three days' foraging in the neighbourhood, they were compelled to proceed in a semi-starved condition.

This inhospitable spot was left behind on January 31. They made their way along a narrow valley through which ran a winding stream with numerous fenced-in patches of cultivation on each side of it. The villages were perched among the rocks, and the inhabitants refused to have any intercourse with, or even supply food to, the nearly starving caravan. On emerging from this valley they passed through open forest along the slope of a hill.

Suddenly Cameron found himself unceremoniously dropped and abandoned by his carriers, all of whom bolted at top speed to seek cover. Immediately afterwards a general stampede took place. The *wapagaqi* threw down their loads—guns and spears as well—in their sudden panic. He happened to be unarmed. Cameron now found himself on his side on the ground and jammed into the chair by the pole to which it was slung. He was quite incapable of any movement. A moment later a solitary buffalo bull came charging at top speed with lowered head in the helpless man's direction. The buffalo passed within twenty yards of him, apparently without seeing or scenting him, and disappeared from view without anyone or anything being injured. This was the first and only encounter with one of the major beasts of Africa which Cameron records, but those few moments must have been most unpleasant for him. It is astounding that he should have made this journey across Africa and yet experienced so few adventures with the dangerous animals of that continent. Elephant, lion, rhino, hippopotamus, leopard, crocodile and buffalo left him severely alone, with this sole exception. Even then the bull buffalo was

probably more scared than bent on mischief, striving only to escape as quickly as possible from the presence of his deadly foes—human beings.

On the following day they arrived on the banks of the Sindi River, a large affluent of the Malagarazi. They camped there for the night. The wide stretch of country passed through was all under water, varying in depth from one to three feet, as a result of torrential rains.

They crossed the Sindi river on February 2 by means of a mass of *sindi* (floating vegetation, which served the purpose of natural floating bridges). At the point where the caravan crossed the river there was only a clear channel of about two feet in width on each side, the remaining hundred yards of the stream's width being covered with this vegetable growth. It extended for a distance of about three-quarters of a mile down the stream. Stepping on those islands Cameron declares "was accompanied with much the same sensation as walking on a quaking bog overgrown with rushes and grass. On boring with a pole through about three feet of closely matted vegetation mixed with soil the river was found. The hippopotami swam underneath this mass."

These masses of floating vegetation vary in thickness and stability from year to year. They owe their origin to the rushes growing in the bed of the river impeding the course of the floating debris, thus causing it to accumulate and form soil for vegetation. Plants quickly spring up and flourish. Interlacing their roots this soon results in a compact mass, which continues to increase in size for a period of about six years. Then the limit is reached, and the island begins to decay. In a matter of four years after decay has once set in the mass disappears entirely.

Caravans sometimes passed over the *sindi* when the stage of decay had already started, and a number of men were lost in the attempt. It was not without many prophecies of a similar disaster overtaking the expedition that they ventured to trust themselves on this floating vegetation. However, they got across safely and without a single untoward incident. Once on the far bank they lost no time in marching forward through a region generously sprinkled with cultivated fields and villages. They soon gained the village of Itambara, the headquarters of the chief of Uvinza.

Looking back towards the hills just crossed, Cameron was greatly impressed by their likeness to an archipelago. The islands were represented by numerous hills detached from each other by narrow gorges, with bluffs, cliffs and promontories. Many of them had such precipitous sides as to appear from the distance to be quite inaccessible ;

but the curling faint blue smoke betokened the presence of native villages under those rocky crags.

In Uvinza food of various kinds was found to be quite plentiful, and there were many plantations of Indian corn (maize), *matama*, sweet potatoes, beans growing like a bush, and even a poor type of tobacco plant. At Itambara a cordial welcome was extended to Cameron by the village headman. This hospitable native assigned some huts for the use of the expedition ; also sent a gift of fowls and a goat to Cameron ; and supplied a present of flour for his followers.

*Mhongo* had to be paid here for permission to cross the Malagarazi river. The fee demanded was staggering. Cameron was assured, however, that payment of this tribute would effectually clear him with the *Murwale* (chief of a single village, a title given universally throughout Uvinza to such a man) at Ugaga, where the ferry was actually situated. They said he would only have to reward the canoe-men operating the ferry over the river. A day was occupied in chaffering over the important question of the *mhongo*, and in drying their sodden clothing and stores after the soaking received during the tropical rain on the road ; and still another day was lost through the obstinacy of Bombay, who failed to collect the men in readiness for the advance.

Ugaga was reached on February 5. Their route led through the jungle and past many villages, then descended diagonally the face of a cliff which divided the uplands from the plain of the Malagarazi river. Far and wide stretched the green plain. In the distance to the northwards could be seen the blue hills of Uhha ; while close at the foot of the cliff was Ugaga, where the caravan went into camp.

The *Murwale* of Ugaga, much to Cameron's anger and disgust, promptly demanded a heavy tribute for the passage over the Malagarazi. The *mhongo* paid at Itambara would, so he had been promised faithfully, free them from all further demands in connection with the crossing of that river. Yet now the *Murwale* declared that they had paid only for permission to cross the river, and that he (as lord of the ferry) as well as the chief of the canoe-men and various other minor officials, would all expect their fees. Otherwise no canoes would be forthcoming for their passage over this wide river. Cameron was held in a cleft stick. The river had to be crossed, and this could only be accomplished by means of canoes ; and the latter would not be made available unless he submitted to these additional blackmailing charges.

The *Murwale* was a young man of about twenty-five years of age. He proved quite civil, "but would not transact any business on the day of our arrival." By this time, however, Cameron had acquired some understanding of the curious mentality of the African natives