

Lukundoo

By Edward Lucas White

“It stands to reason,” said Twombly, “that a man must accept the evidence of his own eyes, and when eyes and ears agree, there can be no doubt. He has to believe what he has both seen and heard.”

“Not always,” put in Singleton, softly.

Every man turned toward Singleton. Twombly was standing on the hearth-rug, his back to the grate, his legs spread out, with his habitual air of dominating the room. Singleton, as usual, was as much as possible effaced in a corner. But when Singleton spoke he said something. We faced him in that flattering spontaneity of expectant silence which invites utterance.

“I was thinking,” he said, after an interval, “of something I both saw and heard in Africa.”

Now, if there was one thing we had found impossible it had been to elicit from Singleton anything definite about his African experiences. As with the Alpinist in the story, who could tell only that he went up and came down, the sum of Singleton’s revelations had been that he went there and came away. His words now riveted our attention at once. Twombly faded from the hearth-rug, but not one of us could ever recall having seen him go. The room readjusted itself, focused on Singleton, and there was some hasty and furtive lighting of fresh cigars. Singleton lit one also, but it went out immediately, and he never relit it.

I

We were in the Great Forest, exploring for pigmies. Van Rieten had a theory that the dwarfs found by Stanley and others were a mere cross-breed between ordinary negroes and the real pigmies. He hoped to discover a race of men three feet tall at most, or shorter. We had found no trace of any such beings.

Natives were few; game scarce; food, except game, there was none; and the deepest, dankest, drippiest forest all about. We were the only novelty in the country, no native we met had even seen a white man before, most had never heard of white men. All of a sudden, late one afternoon, there came into our camp an Englishman, and pretty well used up he was, too. We had heard no rumor of him; he had not only heard of us but had made an amazing five-day march to reach us. His guide and two bearers were nearly as done up as he. Even though he was in tatters and had five days’ beard on, you could see he was naturally dapper and neat and the sort of man to shave daily. He was small, but wiry. His face was the sort of British face from which emotion has been so carefully banished that a foreigner is apt to think the wearer of the face incapable of any sort of feeling; the kind of face which, if it has any expression at all, expresses principally the resolution to go through the world decorously, without intruding upon or annoying anyone.

His name was Etcham. He introduced himself modestly, and ate with us so deliberately that we should never have suspected, if our bearers had not had it from his bearers, that he had had but three meals in the five days, and those small. After we had lit up he told us why he had come.

“My chief is ve’y seedy,” he said between puffs. “He is bound to go out if he keeps this way. I thought perhaps. . . .”

He spoke quietly in a soft, even tone, but I could see little beads of sweat oozing out on his upper lip under his stubby mustache, and there was a tingle of repressed emotion in his tone, a

veiled eagerness in his eye, a palpitating inward solicitude in his demeanor that moved me at once. Van Rieten had no sentiment in him; if he was moved he did not show it. But he listened. I was surprised at that. He was just the man to refuse at once. But he listened to Etcham's halting, diffident hints. He even asked questions.

"Who is your chief?"

"Stone," Etcham lisped.

That electrified both of us.

"Ralph Stone?" we ejaculated together.

Etcham nodded.

For some minutes Van Rieten and I were silent. Van Rieten had never seen him, but I had been a classmate of Stone's, and Van Rieten and I had discussed him over many a camp-fire. We had heard of him two years before, south of Luebo in the Balunda country, which had been ringing with his theatrical strife against a Balunda witch-doctor, ending in the sorcerer's complete discomfiture and the abasement of his tribe before Stone. They had even broken the fetish-man's whistle and given Stone the pieces. It had been like the triumph of Elijah over the prophets of Baal, only more real to the Balunda.

We had thought of Stone as far off, if still in Africa at all, and here he turned up ahead of us and probably forestalling our quest.

II

Etcham's naming of Stone brought back to us all his tantalizing story, his fascinating parents, their tragic death; the brilliance of his college days; the dazzle of his millions; the promise of his young manhood; his wide notoriety, so nearly real fame; his romantic elopement with the meteoric authoress whose sudden cascade of fiction had made her so great a name so young, whose beauty and charm were so much heralded; the frightful scandal of the breach-of-promise suit that followed; his bride's devotion through it all; their sudden quarrel after it was all over; their divorce; the too much advertised announcement of his approaching marriage to the plaintiff in the breach-of-promise suit; his precipitate remarriage to his divorced bride; their second quarrel and second divorce; his departure from his native land; his advent in the dark continent. The sense of all this rushed over me and I believe Van Rieten felt it, too, as he sat silent.

Then he asked:

"Where is Werner?"

"Dead," said Etcham. "He died before I joined Stone."

"You were not with Stone above Luebo?"

"No," said Etcham, "I joined him at Stanley Falls."

"Who is with him?" Van Rieten asked.

"Only his Zanzibar servants and the bearers," Etcham replied.

"What sort of bearers?" Van Rieten demanded. "Mang-Battu men," Etcham responded simply. Now that impressed both Van Rieten and myself greatly. It bore out Stone's reputation as a notable leader of men. For up to that time no one had been able to use Mang-Battu as bearers outside of their own country, or to hold them for long or difficult expeditions.

"Were you long among the Mang-Battu?" was Van Rieten's next question.

"Some weeks," said Etcham. "Stone was interested in them and made up a fair-sized vocabulary of their words and phrases. He had a theory that they are an offshoot of the Balunda and he found much confirmation in their customs."

“What do you live on?” Van Rieten inquired.

“Game, mostly,” Etcham lisped.

“How long has Stone been laid up?” Van Rieten next asked.

“More than a month,” Etcham answered.

“And you have been hunting for the camp!” Van Rieten exclaimed.

Etcham’s face, burnt and flayed as it was, showed a flush.

“I missed some easy shots,” he admitted ruefully.

“I’ve not felt ve’y fit myself.”

“What’s the matter with your chief?” Van Rieten inquired.

“Something like carbuncles,” Etcham replied.

“He ought to get over a carbuncle or two,” Van Rieten declared.

“They are not carbuncles,” Etcham explained. “Nor one or two. He has had dozens, sometimes five at once. If they had been carbuncles he would have been dead long ago. But in some ways they are not so bad, though in others they are worse.”

“How do you mean?” Van Rieten queried.

“Well,” Etcham hesitated, “they do not seem to inflame so deep nor so wide as carbuncles, nor to be so painful, nor to cause so much fever. But then they seem to be part of a disease that affects his mind. He let me help him dress the first, but the others he has hidden most carefully, from me and from the men. He keeps his tent when they puff up, and will not let me change the dressings or be with him at all.”

“Have you plenty of dressings?” Van Rieten asked.

“We have some,” said Etcham doubtfully. “But he won’t use them; he washes out the dressings and uses them over and over.”

“How is he treating the swellings?” Van Rieten inquired.

“He slices them off clear down to flesh level, with his razor.”

“What?” Van Rieten shouted.

Etcham made no answer but looked him steadily in the eyes.

“I beg pardon,” Van Rieten hastened to say. “You startled me. They can’t be carbuncles. He’d have been dead long ago.”

“I thought I had said they are not carbuncles,” Etcham lisped.

“But the man must be crazy!” Van Rieten exclaimed.

“Just so,” said Etcham. “He is beyond my advice or control.”

“How many has he treated that way?” Van Rieten demanded.

“Two, to my knowledge,” Etcham said.

“Two?” Van Rieten queried.

Etcham flushed again.

“I saw him,” he confessed, “through a crack in the hut. I felt impelled to keep a watch on him, as if he was not responsible.”

“I should think not,” Van Rieten agreed. “And you saw him do that twice?”

“I conjecture,” said Etcham, “that he did the like with all the rest.”

“How many has he had?” Van Rieten asked.

“Dozens,” Etcham lisped.

“Does he eat?” Van Rieten inquired.

“Like a wolf,” said Etcham. “More than any two bearers.”

“Can he walk?” Van Rieten asked.

“He crawls a bit, groaning,” said Etcham simply.

“Little fever, you say,” Van Rieten ruminated.

“Enough and too much,” Etcham declared.

“Has he been delirious?” Van Rieten asked.

“Only twice,” Etcham replied; “once when the first swelling broke, and once later. He would not let anyone come near him then. But we could hear him talking, talking steadily, and it scared the natives.”

“Was he talking their patter in delirium?” Van Rieten demanded.

“No,” said Etcham, “but he was talking some similar lingo. Hamed Burghash said he was talking Balunda. I know too little Balunda. I do not learn languages readily. Stone learned more Mang-Battu in a week than I could have learned in a year. But I seemed to hear words like Mang-Battu words. Anyhow the Mang-Battu bearers were scared.”

“Scared?” Van Rieten repeated, questioningly.

“So were the Zanzibar men, even Hamed Burghash, and so was I,” said Etcham, “only for a different reason. He talked in two voices.”

“In two voices,” Van Rieten reflected.

“Yes,” said Etcham, more excitedly than he had yet spoken. “In two voices, like a conversation. One was his own, one a small, thin, bleaty voice like nothing I ever heard. I seemed to make out, among the sounds the deep voice made, something like Mang-Battu words I knew, as *nedru*, *metebaba*, and *nedo*, their terms for ‘head,’ ‘shoulder,’ ‘thigh,’ and perhaps *kudra* and *nekere* (‘speak’ and ‘whistle’); and among the noises of the shrill voice *matomipa*, *angunzi*, and *kamomami* (‘kill,’ ‘death,’ and ‘hate’). Hamed Burghash said he also heard those words. He knew Mang-Battu far better than I.”

“What did the bearers say?” Van Rieten asked.

“They said, ‘*Lukundoo, Lukundoo!*’” Etcham replied. “I did not know that word; Hamed Burghash said it was Mang-Battu for ‘leopard.’”

“It’s Mang-Battu for ‘witchcraft,’” said Van Rieten.

“I don’t wonder they thought so,” said Etcham. “It was enough to make one believe in sorcery to listen to those two voices.”

“One voice answering the other?” Van Rieten asked perfunctorily.

Etcham’s face went gray under his tan.

“Sometimes both at once,” he answered huskily.

“Both at once!” Van Rieten ejaculated.

“It sounded that way to the men, too,” said Etcham. “And that was not all.”

He stopped and looked helplessly at us for a moment.

“Could a man talk and whistle at the same time?” he asked.

“How do you mean?” Van Rieten queried.

“We could hear Stone talking away, his big, deep-chested baritone rumbling along, and through it all we could hear a high, shrill whistle, the oddest, wheezy sound. You know, no matter how shrilly a grown man may whistle, the note has a different quality from the whistle of a boy or a woman or little girl. They sound more treble, somehow. Well, if you can imagine the smallest girl who could whistle keeping it up tunelessly right along, that whistle was like that, only even more piercing, and it sounded right through Stone’s bass tones.”

“And you didn’t go to him?” Van Rieten cried.

“He is not given to threats,” Etcham disclaimed. “But he had threatened, not volubly, nor like a sick man, but quietly and firmly, that if any man of us (he lumped me in with the men), came near him while he was in his trouble, that man should die. And it was not so much his words as

his manner. It was like a monarch commanding respected privacy for a death-bed. One simply could not transgress.”

“I see,” said Van Rieten shortly.

“He’s ve’y seedy,” Etcham repeated helplessly. “I thought perhaps. . . .”

His absorbing affection for Stone, his real love for him, shone out through his envelope of conventional training. Worship of Stone was plainly his master passion.

Like many competent men, Van Rieten had a streak of hard selfishness in him. It came to the surface then. He said we carried our lives in our hands from day to day just as genuinely as Stone; that he did not forget the ties of blood and calling between any two explorers, but that there was no sense in imperiling one party for a very problematical benefit to a man probably beyond any help; that it was enough of a task to hunt for one party; that if two were united, providing food would be more than doubly difficult; that the risk of starvation was too great. Deflecting our march seven full days’ journey (he complimented Etcham on his marching powers) might ruin our expedition entirely.

III

Van Rieten had logic on his side and he had a way with him. Etcham sat there apologetic and deferential, like a fourth-form schoolboy before a head master. Van Rieten wound up.

“I am after pigmies, at the risk of my life. After pigmies I go.”

“Perhaps, then, these will interest you,” said Etcham, very quietly.

He took two objects out of the sidepocket of his blouse, and handed them to Van Rieten. They were round, bigger than big plums, and smaller than small peaches, about the right size to enclose in an average band. They were black, and at first I did not see what they were.

“Pigmies!” Van Rieten exclaimed. “Pigmies, indeed! Why, they wouldn’t be two feet high! Do you mean to claim that these are adult heads?”

“I claim nothing,” Etcham answered evenly. “You can see for yourself.”

Van Rieten passed one of the heads to me. The sun was just setting and I examined it closely. A dried head it was, perfectly preserved, and the flesh as hard as Argentine jerked beef. A bit of a vertebra stuck out where the muscles of the vanished neck had shriveled into folds. The puny chin was sharp on a projecting jaw, the minute teeth white and even between the retracted lips, the tiny nose was flat, the little forehead retreating, there were inconsiderable clumps of stunted wool on the Lilliputian cranium. There was nothing babyish, childish or youthful about the head, rather it was mature to senility.

“Where did these come from?” Van Rieten inquired.

“I do not know,” Etcham replied precisely. “I found them among Stone’s effects while rummaging for medicines or drugs or anything that could help me to help him. I do not know where he got them. But I’ll swear he did not have them when we entered this district.”

“Are you sure?” Van Rieten queried, his eyes big and fixed on Etcham’s.

“Ve’y sure,” lisped Etcham.

“But how could he have come by them without your knowledge?” Van Rieten demurred.

“Sometimes we were apart ten days at a time hunting,” said Etcham. “Stone is not a talking man. He gave me no account of his doings and Hamed Burghash keeps a still tongue and a tight hold on the men.”

“You have examined these heads?” Van Rieten asked.

“Minutely,” said Etcham.

Van Rieten took out his notebook. He was a methodical chap. He tore out a leaf, folded it and divided it equally into three pieces. He gave one to me and one to Etcham.

“Just for a test of my impressions,” he said, “I want each of us to write separately just what he is most reminded of by these heads. Then I want to compare the writings.”

I handed Etcham a pencil and he wrote. Then he handed the pencil back to me and I wrote.

“Read the three,” said Van Rieten, handing me his piece.

Van Rieten had written:

“An old Balunda witch-doctor.”

Etcham had written:

“An old Mang-Battu fetish-man.”

I had written:

“An old Katongo magician.”

“There!” Van Rieten exclaimed. “Look at that! There is nothing Wagabi or Batwa or Wambuttu or Wabotu about these heads. Nor anything pigmy either.”

“I thought as much,” said Etcham.

“And you say he did not have them before?”

“To a certainty he did not,” Etcham asserted.

“It is worth following up,” said Van Rieten. “I’ll go with you. And first of all, I’ll do my best to save Stone.”

He put out his hand and Etcham clasped it silently. He was grateful all over.

IV

Nothing but Etcham’s fever of solicitude could have taken him in five days over the track. It took him eight days to retrace with full knowledge of it and our party to help. We could not have done it in seven, and Etcham urged us on, in a repressed fury of anxiety, no mere fever of duty to his chief, but a real ardor of devotion, a glow of personal adoration for Stone which blazed under his dry conventional exterior and showed in spite of him.

We found Stone well cared for. Etcham had seen to a good, high thorn *zareeba* round the camp, the huts were well built and thatched and Stone’s was as good as their resources would permit. Hamed Burghash was not named after two Seyyids for nothing. He had in him the making of a sultan. He had kept the Mang-Battu together, not a man had slipped off, and he had kept them in order. Also he was a deft nurse and a faithful servant.

The two other Zanzabaris had done some creditable hunting. Though all were hungry, the camp was far from starvation.

Stone was on a canvas cot and there was a sort of collapsible camp-stool-table, like a Turkish tabouret, by the cot. It had a water-bottle and some vials on it and Stone’s watch, also his razor in its case.

Stone was clean and not emaciated, but he was far gone; not unconscious, but in a daze; past commanding or resisting anyone. He did not seem to see us enter or to know we were there. I should have recognized him anywhere. His boyish dash and grace had vanished utterly, of course. But his head was even more leonine; his hair was still abundant, yellow and wavy; the close, crisped blond beard he had grown during his illness did not alter him. He was big and big-chested yet. His eyes were dull and he mumbled and babbled mere meaningless syllables, not words.

Etcham helped Van Rieten to uncover him and look him over. He was in good muscle for a man so long bedridden. There were no scars on him except about his knees, shoulders and chest. On each knee and above it he had a full score of roundish cicatrices, and a dozen or more on each shoulder, all in front. Two or three were open wounds and four or five barely healed. He had no fresh swellings except two, one on each side, on his pectoral muscles, the one on the left being higher up and farther out than the other. They did not look like boils or carbuncles, but as if something blunt and hard were being pushed up through the fairly healthy flesh and skin, not much inflamed.

“I should not lance those,” said Van Rieten, and Etcham assented.

They made Stone as comfortable as they could, and just before sunset we looked in at him again. He was lying on his back, and his chest showed big and massive yet, but he lay as if in a stupor. We left Etcham with him and went into the next hut, which Etcham had resigned to us. The jungle noises were no different there than anywhere else for months past, and I was soon fast asleep.

V

Sometime in the pitch dark I found myself awake listening. I could hear two voices, one Stone’s, other sibilant and wheezy. I knew Stone’s voice after all the years that had passed since I heard it last. The other was like nothing I remembered. It had less volume than the wail of a new-born baby, yet there was an insistent carrying power to it, like the shrilling of an insect. As I listened I heard Van Rieten breathing near me in the dark, then he heard me and realized that I was listening, too. Like Etcham I knew little Balunda, but I could make out a word or two. The voices alternated with intervals of silence between.

Then suddenly both sounded at once and fast, Stone’s baritone basso, full as if he were in perfect health, and that incredibly stridulous falsetto, both jabbering at once like the voices of two people quarreling and trying to talk each other down.

“I can’t stand this,” said Van Rieten. “Let’s have a look at him.”

He had one of those cylindrical electric night-candles. He fumbled about for it, touched the button and beckoned me to come with him. Outside of the hut he motioned me to stand still, and instinctively turned off the light, as if seeing made listening difficult.

Except for a faint glow from the embers of the bearer’s fire we were in complete darkness, little star-light struggled through the trees, the river made but a faint murmur. We could hear the two voices together and then suddenly the creaking voice changed into a razor-edged, slicing whistle, indescribably cutting, continuing right through Stone’s grumbling torrent of croaking words.

“Good God!” exclaimed Van Rieten.

Abruptly he turned on the light.

We found Etcham utterly asleep, exhausted by his long anxiety and the exertions of his phenomenal march and relaxed completely now that the load was in a sense shifted from his shoulders to Van Rieten’s. Even the light on his face did not wake him.

The whistle had ceased and the two voices now sounded together. Both came from Stone’s cot, where the concentrated white ray showed him lying just as we had left him, except that he had tossed his arms above his head and had torn the coverings and bandages from his chest.

The swelling on his right breast had broken. Van Rieten aimed the center line of the light at it and we saw it plainly. From his flesh, grown out of it, there protruded a head, such a head as the

dried specimens Etcham had shown us, as if it were a miniature of the head of a Balunda fetishman. It was black, shining black as the blackest African skin; it rolled the whites of its wicked, wee eyes and showed its microscopic teeth between lips repulsively negroid in their red fullness, even in so diminutive a face. It had crisp, fuzzy wool on its minikin skull, it turned malignantly from side to side and chattered incessantly in that inconceivable falsetto. Stone babbled brokenly against its patter.

Van Rieten turned from Stone and waked Etcham, with some difficulty. When he was awake and saw it all, Etcham stared and said not one word.

“You saw him slice off two swellings?” Van Rieten asked.

Etcham nodded, chokingly.

“Did he bleed much?” Van Rieten demanded.

“Ve’y little,” Etcham replied.

“You hold his arms,” said Ven Rieten to Etcham.

He took up Stone’s razor and handed me the light. Stone showed no sign of seeing the light or of knowing we were there. But the little head mewled and screeched at us.

Van Rieten’s hand was steady, and the sweep of the razor even and true. Stone bled amazingly little and Van Rieten dressed the wound as if it had been a bruise or scrape.

Stone had stopped talking the instant the excrescent head was severed. Van Rieten did all that could be done for Stone and then fairly grabbed the light from me. Snatching up a gun he scanned the ground by the cot and brought the butt down once and twice, viciously.

We went back to our hut, but I doubt if I slept.

VI

Next day, near noon, in broad daylight, we heard the two voices from Stone’s hut. We found Etcham dropped asleep by his charge. The swelling on the left had broken, and just such another head was there miauling and spluttering. Etcham woke up and the three of us stood there and glared. Stone interjected hoarse vocables into the tinkling gurgle of the portent’s utterance.

Van Rieten stepped forward, took up Stone’s razor and knelt down by the cot. The atomy of a head squealed a wheezy snarl at him.

Then suddenly Stone spoke English.

“Who are you with my razor?”

Van Rieten started back and stood up.

Stone’s eyes were clear now and bright, they roved about the hut.

“The end,” he said; “I recognize the end. I seem to see Etcham, as if in life. But Singleton! Ah, Singleton! Ghosts of my boyhood come to watch me pass! And you, strange specter with the black beard, and my razor! Aroint ye all!”

“I’m no ghost, Stone,” I managed to say. “I’m alive. So are Etcham and Van Rieten. We are here to help you.”

“Van Rieten!” he exclaimed. “My work passes on to a better man. Luck go with you, Van Rieten.”

Van Rieten went nearer to him.

“Just hold still a moment, old man,” he said soothingly. “It will be only one twinge.”

“I’ve held still for many such twinges,” Stone answered quite distinctly. “Let me be. Let me die my own way. The hydra was nothing to this. You can cut off ten, a hundred, a thousand

heads, but the curse you can not cut off, or take off. What's soaked into the bone won't come out of the flesh, any more than what's bred there. Don't hack me any more. Promise!"

His voice had all the old commanding tone of his boyhood and it swayed Van Rieten as it always had swayed everybody.

"I promise," said Van Rieten.

Almost as he said the word Stone's eyes filmed again.

Then we three sat about Stone and watched that hideous, gibbering prodigy grow up out of Stone's flesh, till two horrid, spindling little black arms disengaged themselves. The infinitesimal nails were perfect to the barely perceptible moon at the quick, the pink spot on the palm was horridly natural. These arms gesticulated and the right plucked toward Stone's blond beard.

"I can't stand this," Van Rieten exclaimed and took up the razor again.

Instantly Stone's eyes opened, hard and glittering.

"Van Rieten break his word?" he enunciated slowly. "Never!"

"But we must help you," Van Rieten gasped.

"I am past all help and all hurting," said Stone. "This is my hour. This curse is not put on me; it grew out of me, like this horror here. Even now I go."

His eyes closed and we stood helpless, the adherent figure spouting shrill sentences.

In a moment Stone spoke again.

"You speak all tongues?" he asked thickly.

And the emergent minikin replied in sudden English:

"Yea, verily, all that you speak," putting out its microscopic tongue, writhing its lips and wagging its head from side to side. We could see the thready ribs on its exiguous flanks heave as if the thing breathed.

"Has she forgiven me?" Stone asked in a muffled strangle.

"Not while the moss hangs from the cypresses," the head squeaked. "Not while the stars shine on Lake Pontchartrain will she forgive."

And then Stone, all with one motion, wrenched himself over on his side. The next instant he was dead.

When Singleton's voice ceased the room was hushed for a space. We could hear each other breathing. Twombly, the tactless, broke the silence.

"I presume," he said, "you cut off the little minikin and brought it home in alcohol."

Singleton turned on him a stern countenance.

"We buried Stone," he said, "unmutilated as he died."

"But," said the unconscionable Twombly, "the whole thing is incredible."

Singleton stiffened.

"I did not expect you to believe it," he said; "I began by saying that although I heard and saw it, when I look back on it I cannot credit it myself."