

The Coming of Doctor Congo (Acts 1 & 2)

by Lorenzo Baehne

1. The Doctor

Sudan, 1936

The trap was sprung!

The pair of would-be plunderers hung feet-over-head in a robust net of tightly woven rope, arms and legs entangled, alarm issuing like a Klaxon from their bewildered Belgian tongues. Neither foreigner suspected such a simple device had lain in wait and blundered unheedingly into it. It could not have worked better, doctor Ayo Amaré thought, had he guided the rogues into the snare himself.

A massive figure, his skin like polished ebony and arms of heavy brawn, stepped from his concealment behind a tumble of timber—illicitly felled trees the captured duo's workforce had hacked brutally from the earth. A perfect vantage point from which to witness his handiwork.

“You were warned, were you not?” called the giant African as he stalked across the ragged clearing to the inverted captives. “Yet here you are,”—a sweep of his sinewy arm indicated scores of jagged tree stumps—“apprehended doing the very thing you were cautioned against.” He cocked his mallet-like fists upon slim hips. “Were you in my place,” he wondered aloud, “what would you do with yourselves? Hack off your hands, perhaps?”

“No!” cried the scrawny one, his face mashed against the net by the weight of his fat neighbor. “We would show mercy.”

With a roar of laughter their captor threw back his woolen head, his small, round spectacles glinting under the sun. “No doubt the same brand of mercy you visited upon our people whilst burning their villages to the ground. Or the dead discarded in your wake, leaving wives bereft of husbands and mothers without sons.” The black colossus turned, then, to whistle toward the shadow-haunted bush. From all around a ruckus erupted from the jungle to reveal a half dozen eager comrades rustling through the undergrowth. Within moments the suspended interlopers were surrounded by a band of motley misfits, all with lambent outrage glowering upon furrowed brows.

The speaker unsheathed the wicked machete strapped to his hip and leveled it at the dangling Belgians. “Whence this desire to plunder our soil of its gifts to the African people? Mother earth is bountiful. Are not the riches of your own lands enough to sate this ravenous appetite?”

“We do only as we are told,” the fat man whined. “Do not harm us. We beg you!”

“We shall return to the city,” the other duck-lipped through the net's weave. “Never to trouble you again. We swear it!”

“I say we relieve them of their hands,” growled the fierce Maasai warrior poised next to Amaré. Lions' claws adorned his neck, and his hair, smoothed with red ocher, lay matted close to his skull. “Let us see their wives offer their marital gifts, then.”

A cheer of approval went up from behind the man—

A terrific crashing through the brush spun the group on its collective heels. Machetes were whisked from their scabbards, and wicked Maasai spears were held in seasoned readiness. But from the jungle burst but a single runner, winded, the efforts of his toil shining upon his brow. "Doctor," huffed the breathless man. "I've found you! Thanks be to the gods. You must come."

"Perhaps steadying yourself might first be in order," Amaré said, lowering his blade.

The runner gasped his thanks but continued: "A host of outlanders have penetrated the forest near Juba," he said. "They mean to despoil the Temple, to plunder its sacred treasure and abscond with it to distant shores that surely no son of Africa has ever beheld. It may already be too late."

Amaré turned to Lion Claws, Dakarai by name, "Cut them down," he said. "Let us display to them the mercy they would never return in kind." The warrior's disappointment was scrawled deeply upon his features. At the captives, Amaré directed his machete, "It seems the gods smile this day upon the foolish. Let this be a lesson to you both, for you will not escape with your hands a second time."

A rugged truck not fifty feet away, half concealed behind verdant foliage and tawny brambles caught Amaré's notice. The doctor stepped forward with an appraising eye, and with cocked brow, he said: "Is that not an American lorry? How did you come by it?"

The fat man gasped, "You cannot abandon us in the jungle like this. We will surely die!"

Dakarai stepped eagerly to the net, thrust out his Maasai spear, extended his opposite hand, and said: "Keys."

2. The Nazi

There arose an alternate legend upon his entry into the Promised Land, that Aaron, prophet and brother to the patriarch Moses, consigned his staff, a rod endowed with the great and razing power of God, upon an eventful journey into the untamed lands south of Israel. For it had long been the desire of iniquitous men to seize the rod and employ its terrible secrets to further their wicked designs. Thus did the almond rod of Aaron, so the legend goes, end its storied travels in the forested lands of southern Sudan, the heartland of the African people. At length a temple was erected around the staff and a city around the temple in honor of the prophet and his gift to a worthy tribe. Time, however, has its hoary way with even the most hardy of Man's achievements and the city, it came to pass, was consumed by the ravenous jungle. But it was not forgotten. Indeed the tale of the biblical wonder traveled far and wide, often upon the same breath as occulted Shambhala, shining El Dorado, and the whispered treasures of mysterious Zerzura.

Autumn greeted summer with its cooling embrace, one great generation gave way to the next, and thus marched three thousand years among the noble people of the Sudan. But the tale of the prophet and his staff of power remained ever upon the tongues of a storytelling race.

It is the business of the connoisseur of history to acquaint himself with legend and myth, fact and historical fiction. As such, Rolf Rudi Schroeder, archaeologist by education and National Socialist by temperament, came in time to accumulate every manner of cultural fable. His esteemed library, a sprawling collection boasting twenty thousand volumes, teemed with tales of Celtic lore, Indian legendry, and all that lay between. Codices depicting the crimson rites of the Mexican Aztecs lay cheek by jowl with the harrying yarns of Norse raiding campaigns. Little if anything was

not well represented in the library of Oberfuhrer R. R. Schroeder, which was celebrated throughout the Third Reich, as was the man himself.

Weeks of riding through belligerent territory upon endless unpaved roads, which, in Schroeder's estimation was the height of hyperbole, for the avenues were in truth glorified goat paths, made the Nazi officer long for the civilized comforts of his voluminous library in Berlin. On some days, not unlike the current juncture, Schroeder much resented Reichsfuhrer Himmler's dictate of an African expedition into the wilds of the dark continent. An arduous endeavor, the Reichsfuhrer elucidated, to penetrate to the near-mythical city of Jubariat, and bring to bear an ancient power long entrusted to the indigenous people of that distant land. An unstoppable force, he revealed, that the Fatherland may lay low the legions hostile to the thousand-year Reich.

Schroeder turned to Untersturmfuhrer Geschke, whose rangy frame occupied the vehicle's rear seat. A patina of perspiration glistened upon the younger man's brow and dark stains expanded beneath his arms, whilst upon his lap lay an open dossier.

"Distill Dr. Congo's biography to the essentials, Karl," Schroeder said. "I lack the patience for a dissertation in this swelter. Wotan alone knows how these Africans can bear it."

"Of course, sir," Geschke said. "His file, you understand, is anemic, Oberfuhrer. His place of birth, parentage, siblings. His family history is unfortunately excluded from our dossier. As such, his origins remain an enigma."

"Yes, yes. Get on with it."

"Ayo Amaré," Geschke began, "attended the Sorbonne from 1924 to 1931. His age and year of birth remain unknown, though

from several sources he appears in his mid-thirties. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, the celebrated physician and essayist, made Amaré's acquaintance on a prior visit to the Congo. It was the outbreak of a mysterious bleeding disease that drew Chabot into the jungle on this occasion. Chabot attended previous epidemics on the African continent and also in Arabia. Indeed, his insatiable curiosity for pestilential anomalies seems to have drawn him to many out-of-the-way locale during his storied career. On this occasion Amaré was in residence at the time of Chabot's visit, a fact the doctor points out in a subsequent article published in *Le Figaro* in which he mentions Amaré by name." Geschke glanced up from the file, "It would seem the African made quite an impression on him."

"I choke at the thought."

Geschke shuffled again through the document, then arched a skeptical brow. "It was none other than Chabot himself who sponsored Amaré at the university and financed his education," he said, echoing Schroeder's own suspicion of dubiousness. "A charity case?"

"There can be no doubt." But Geschke had fallen silent. Schroeder craned his neck again, saying: "And then?"

"And then nothing, Oberfuhrer. After 1931 the man vanishes. He is not seen or heard from again till 1933 in connection with the sabotage of a Dutch mining operation here in the Sudan."

"It seems our doctor graduated from medicine to vandalism."

"At the time suspicion fell heavily upon Amaré and six confederates, however their involvement was never decisively proved," Geschke said.

“Which is precisely why this man is of compelling interest, Karl. I have no intention of allowing this expedition to become a target for nationalist zealots,” Schroeder said without apparent irony.

Geschke pressed on: “Only three months later the same men, with Amaré as their suspected conductor, were accused of levelling an Italian tanning outfit in western Chad. An explosion. Sabotage again. Amaré’s name is liberally bandied by several regional newspapers. Though curiously not as the villain he unquestionably appears to be, but as a local hero. The region’s inhabitants long claimed the operation rendered the river downstream unusable and praised Amaré’s actions and those of his associates.”

“Speaking of whom, do we know the identities of his confederates?”

“Of his companions we have but the faintest sketch,” Geschke said, as he paged again through the dossier. “There appears to be six men in whose company Amaré is often found and connected to his anti-colonial endeavors. Each appears to have a specialized area of knowledge.” Geschke pulled from the file a grainy halftone and studied it for a moment before passing it to Schroeder. “The dossier includes this photograph of Dr. Amaré and his band of hooligans.”

Schroeder lifted his reading glasses from a breast pocket and settled them on a prominent nose.

“As you can see,” Geschke continued, “the group immediately stands out due to the two Maasai warriors in their midst. The pair are identified as Berko and Dakarai. Hunters and trackers. Both hail from the northern Tanganyika Territory. The short man next to them is called Zuberi, a mechanic who has evidently never met an internal combustion engine he could not master: automotive, airborne, or any vessel upon the sea.”

“And the rotund man?”

“He is Makena, a pilot who, during past antics, retrieved Amaré and company from seemingly inaccessible terrain. Despite appearances he appears quite the talented flyer. The last two,” Geschke pointed out, “are Adisa, another French-educated African. Structural engineering, I believe. And finally the scowling man on the far right is Folami whose specialty is armaments and demolitions. Folami is the suspected mastermind behind the Italian tannery explosion and whose—”

Interrupting the terse biography lesson, the driver stepped fast and heavy on the brakes, nearly launching Schroeder through the windshield. Geschke tumbled head first into the seat-back before him transforming the dossier into a storm of loose papers raining down upon the vehicle's occupants.

“What the devil do you mean by that?” Schroeder shouted, as he set his spectacles aright. The ambling flock of bleating goats inundating the road answered his question before the driver could open his mouth. Schroeder's impatient sigh escaped him before he could curb his frustration. The only comfort with which he could console himself was that their destination of Juba, whose namesake was the storied city of Jubariat, lay close at hand. And once the artifact lay in his possession, Schroeder thought, he could once and for all time place this Wotan-forsaken continent behind him and never think of it again.

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