

Norman Lock

A HISTORY OF THE IMAGINATION

I was sailing to Cincinnati with the King of Belgium in his private steamship. (It is not an easy thing to sail to Cincinnati from Africa! you say, cynical as always. Though a river town, Cincinnati is far from the world's great oceans! Except in dreams, I say—in dreams Cincinnati is an easy sail from Africa, especially in such a ship as belongs to the King of All the Belgians with its wonderful featherbeds, its frequent cocktail hours announced by the ship's silver bell, its golden ropes and handsome sailors who speak, I suppose, Walloon.) I was accompanying the King to the funeral to be held later that day for the last passenger pigeon, which had died the day before in the Cincinnati Zoo. (You cannot travel from the Congo to Cincinnati in only a day! you shout, fit to be tied. Tut-tut! I say, not at all troubled by such questions of travel. For me, travel had become a thought.)

"We have a special fondness for pigeons," the King said as we stood at the rail and watched the whales rush through the ocean like locomotives. "Pigeon racing is the national sport of Belgium, you know."

I did not know.

"My people are in mourning for this bird."

He showed me a photograph of the people of Belgium—not all of them, of course, but as many as can be crowded into a downtown street. They were dressed in black from head to toe. Black crepe drooped from lampposts and in shop windows and even from the sky, although that might have been a smudge or a photographer's trick.

"It is sad," the King said, hanging his head.

"Yes."

In truth I did not care that the last passenger pigeon was dead. In Africa I had eagerly helped to finish off several other species of fauna. But I was anxious to see Cincinnati once more and was—let me confess it—homesick for America. With the exception of that brief time spent working in the Wright Brothers' bicycle shop in Dayton (but that, too, I am now convinced, was a dream), I had not been home in eight years.

(Strange that in both cases I should have gone to Ohio! Is Ohio significant in a way that never before occurred to me—that has, perhaps, never occurred to anyone?)

“It is sad,” the King sighed.

The whales dove to the bottom of the ocean, to the ocean-bed. Who knows if they rest or must keep moving like the shark.

We went below and ate Belgian waffles with strawberries and confectioner’s sugar and talked about our safari days in the Belgian Congo, and for a little while we were happy to be taking this ocean voyage.

Was the naval attaché on board, whom I’d met briefly years before in the jungles of the Belgian Congo? Certainly! There on the high seas he was in his element. He was both captain and navigator of the King’s steamship. He also handed out the mops when the salt-stained decks needed swabbing and inspected them afterwards. He kept the ship’s keys in his pocket, including the shiny one to the rum closet; and when the decks were swabbed to his satisfaction, he would open the closet and, as the men took off their hats and cheered, take out the bottle for swigging. Three times would the ship’s swigging-bottle make its circuit of the assembled sailors. At the completion of the third and final circuit, the mate would cork the bottle and hand it shyly to the naval attaché, who would lock it up again in the rum closet under his sole command. (Not even the King had the key to it.)

“That is called ‘ship’s discipline,’” said the naval attaché to me after I had witnessed such a swabbing and swigging. “Ours is a lovely crew,” he said patriotically.

A dream crew, I thought to myself.

“Yes,” he said for the naval attaché had learned to read minds at the Institute for Psychical Research.

We traveled at the speed of thought. How could we not with so urgent an appointment to keep?

The engines? you ask.

Enormous turbines constructed of some precious metal taken from the King’s mines in Africa.

Their design? you ask.

A secret.

How did the ship's hull stand the strain? you ask.

It is only imperfectly understood. But the hull was painted blue.

Did the wind fly in your face while you stood on deck? you ask.

There was no wind.

Was the noise terrible? you ask.

There was no noise. Or only a slight hum.

The King and I were taking a postprandial stroll around the deck.

The naval attaché was sighting the sun with his sextant.

The sailors were swabbing the deck or coiling the golden ropes or uncoiling them. (Their actions were often mysterious to me.)

It began to rain ("because of nature's sorrow," said the King). The naval attaché hurried indoors, afraid to get his sextant wet.

I seemed to see two Kikuyu men. They clasped each other in a tight embrace as they walked through the waves under a battered old umbrella.

"Do you see that?" I asked the King, pointing at an area of gray ocean.

He shook his head.

"You may call me Leo," he said. "Because of all we have been through together."

The naval attaché knocked at my cabin door.

"Come in," I called.

He did and stood in the doorway with his boat-shaped hat in his hands.

"We have reached Cincinnati," he said.

My face partially lathered, I looked through the porthole at the city of my youth and was disappointed that it did not shine as it had always done in my memory.

"It is the fault of the rain," he said, having looked into my mind and seen the disappointment there.

"You are very sympathetic for a naval attaché," I told him.

He bowed and left me to finish my shaving.

Cincinnati! How wonderful your streets and houses! Even in the rain. And the women on your streets and in your houses—how lovely! Why did I ever leave you for Africa? What did I hope to find in Africa that could not be found here?

And the women of Mombasa? you ask.

True, the women of Mombasa are beautiful.

And the women of Nairobi? you ask.

Also beautiful. But the women of Cincinnati were there on my doorstep. I had only to open the door and invite them inside.

“What do you think of our women, Leo?” I asked the King.

He gave me a dark look that matched the sky. If the human head were capable of launching thunderbolts like the old gods, he would have launched them at me.

He rebuked me thus: “May I remind you of the solemnity of this occasion?”

We walked to the zoo—I, a few paces behind the King, out of respect but also shame.

In the rain.

September 1, 1914. My impressions of the funeral for the last passenger pigeon: a gray and cloud-blown day. People dressed in black. The flag at half-staff. Sousa slowly marching through the zoo’s black, iron gate, in a black uniform. He stands in the rain and blows a dirge on his sousaphone. On a telegraph wire overhead, three pigeons (of a species, for the time being, extant) tuck their heads under their wings and mourn. The King stands, his eyes wet. The men take off their hats. The women bow their heads. The King orates. He orates well. Soon all eyes are wet (and not with rain, you cynic!). He finishes. All is quiet except the elephants. The elephants trumpet their sorrow.

Nothing shines.

You say: It did not happen like that at all. There was no funeral—Sousa did not play. The King of Belgium certainly did not come. He had more important things to worry about: the Germans. The Germans with their pointy helmets were in Belgium (“gallant little Belgium!”).

I say to you: There is another history. There is another history that exists side by side with the one you know. In it all that I have told you

is true. (You have never heard of it? You have never read about it in any book? You are reading it here. You are reading it now. In these pages I am recording a history of the imagination.)

You say: But such a history is a figment, a lie!

I say to you: All histories lie. All histories tell a truth.

You say: Then why not make the bird *live*, in its millions?

I say to you (without bravado but with a growing unease): I wanted to write about a funeral. I wanted to write how the King of Belgium and Sousa came to Cincinnati and stood in the rain.

You say: Monster!

I say to you: What is one bird, even the last bird of its kind, next to the millions of our kind who would shortly begin to die. I did not want to write *that* history.

You say: Your history does them a disservice—all those people who died in the real history, the true history!

I say to you: I could do nothing for them. Nothing.

You shout at me: A crackpot theory! You can't prove any of it! Nothing you say is verifiable!

My answer to you is this: Nothing can be proved. Nothing.

You shake your head and tell me I have been too long in Africa. Maybe nothing can be proved in Africa, you say, but in Cincinnati, for instance, things are not so mysterious. We have science in Cincinnati.

The funeral was over. The last passenger pigeon was buried in a shoebox under a pear tree. (*The bird was stuffed!* you scream.) Leo and I left Cincinnati.

"I will never return to Cincinnati," I told him.

"Nor I," he said.

"I have been too long in Africa." (In this, alone, you are right.)

"And what about all the pretty women?" asked Leo.

I shrugged a helpless little shrug.

"There are other things in life besides love," I said (or perhaps it was Leo who said it—I cannot remember).

We walked out of Cincinnati into a great forest, and in an instant the sun was shut from sight by the thick screen of wet foliage. Here and there were patches of brush, which might contain anything in the shape of a lion, cheetah, hyena, or wild dog.

In the middle of the forest, the naval attaché was waiting to pipe us aboard.