

Captain Birdseye's Expedition · *Alexander Theroux*

IT WAS ENGLAND, 1889.

J.C. Birdseye, K.C.B., C.S.I., D.S.M., the famous explorer, had long since removed with his wife to the village of Drowsimere after having sustained a fateful wound in the Sudan that put an end to their domestic bliss.

He did nothing but read the *Times*, which he considered a patriotic duty. She knat, furiously.

Margot grew bored. Wouldn't he at least join her in a game of dot-boxes? Drawing-room archery? Squails then? No answer. At first she wept, pitches of suchness that drove him to galvanic belt treatments for nervous exhaustion.

The marriage soon soured. His wife, always a bit too previous, eventually began to throw his incapacities up to him, often by making up small facetiae about his dear Queen ("another widow," she said) with whom, for her own Irish origins, she was fully out of sympathy.

It all came to a rather abrupt end when one evening as she was peering into a lenticular stereoscope and remarking on a well-endowed Kaffir he to change the subject quietly commended the Queen's Potato Embargo which made her snap at him.

"You feel," he asked, lowering the newspaper, "that the bill went further than public opinion warranted—or was justified in the case of a private member's measure?"

She snickered—

And, packing that night, flung out the door without so much as a by-your-leave and took a train in the direction of London.

Having sardonically made the constation that there wasn't then a noble thing left to do in life but write the memoirs that sought to prove it, he sat day after day at his dwarf Sutherland sipping pints of old-and-mild and inconfidently scribbling away.

Nothing noble left to do? But wait!

One day, it so happened, he unexpectedly received in the post a commission from Westminster notifying him that he of all others had been voted a bursary by Parliament to secure for Queen Victoria—the Widow of Windsor herself—a certain gift (the existence of which, however, was questionable for none had ever been seen, none ever found) to be offered subsequently by her in memorial of the deceased Prince Albert, he of the chain.

The Queen apparently wanted, more than anything else on earth, a black orchid.

It was a miracle! thought Captain Birdseye, a chance at last to redeem himself and by heroic act to win back his wife (who at the time, unbeknownst to him, was living in concubinage on Lisle St. with two Maltese ponces).

An expedition was immediately organized. He got maps, mugged up on his botany, and then proceeded to load his supplies: a mallet; several penny cyclopedias; arsenical soaps; Keating's Worm Tablets; an eel ferret; jerked meat; antibilious pills; treacle; Boots multivites; Rouser tabloids; Freeman's chlorodyne; three pairs of stout puttees; lunar caustics; tartarised sodas; 1 cwt. of pressed vegetables; a blunt-pointed bistoury; twine; protractors; a Huntley & Palmer's Dundee Cake; scowring drops; ginger rock; common salt; sewing needles; Epp's Cocoa; Bird's Custard Powder; quinine; eyewash; beads to pay porters; a snakeproof helmet; one Watt's hymnal; two mattocks; and a roll of mosquito netting, by which he hoped to set legions of them at defiance.

It was raining in South America.

Captain Birdseye, with a handful of beads, enlisted several dusky little bearers whose chief qualification was that they had no family ties. They started through jungle vegetation and reached the Cordillera Occidental of the Andes when things started to go badly wrong. The entire food supply went awash at 13 degrees latitude crossing the River of Doubt.

The porters proved vile. They spat incessantly, brazenly engaged in acts of buttock love, and filched a brooch, the *pars pro toto* of his grandmother.

And then his lead-boy, mindlessly micturating one night, peed on a lit Tilley lamp—and it exploded. They were now without light.

Months passed.

They climbed higher and higher and, spying into misty gorges, saw various cattleya waving in rocky crevices. Once, one wide-mouthed porter with a bowl haircut came drooling expectantly up to him with a flower of rose-coloured petals and a frilled-lip of crimson and yellow—no, no, no, it was only a stupid *Dendrobium*, lovely, but not black. (The reverse might have been said of Peru.)

Their only food now was bread kneaded with rainwater.

Once into the depths of the interior the Cholo half-breeds grew restless. "*Wiwi! Wiwi!*" one of them screamed, bouncing in a squat and pointing to a chain of distant smoke-holes. It was the Valley of the Inca Kings, a place where, while supposedly cursed, orchids yet profused. But when he trekked in—

—the bearers all bolted.

Captain Birdseye, now alone, got lost in an intervening swamp and was bitten blue by bushmasters, Sauba ants, and motuca flies in pursuit of what turned out to be merely common twayblades and begonias that could be had for a tuppence from any florist in Elmer's End. His wound began to ache in the dampness, but he wouldn't give up for his manhood was at stake.

A year went by. He was often shrammed to the bone from cold, his shoes split, and leaves now had to be used for eating, clothing, and absterging the podex.

For sanity's sake, he set himself the task of doing sums in his head. What for instance, he asked himself, was the square of 365,365,365,365,365,365?

133,491,850,208,566,925,016,658,299,941,583,224 it occurred to him. (He was one shy.)

Sitting in trees by night, he once peered over and in all seriousness proceeded to ask a jackdaw, "Are *you* the orchid?"

That was normal?

At Porto Maldonado, some time later, he shakily wrote in his journal with the tip of a wet lucifer, "I love the delicacies from Fortnum and Mason's the angel sent to me." It was the first real sign of his derangement. There was nothing to eat anywhere.

He then began to suck his thumb and do unpredictable things—

—wandering the sky-high slopes of the mountains, crazily skipping about, and singing hymns at the top of his lungs. It was suddenly at 23,000 feet above sea-level when he saw it.

There over his head just above an inch of ledge on the side of a precipitous gorge, affixed indifferently to a bare rock and fluttering in the wind, was a single velvety variation of *Coelogyne pandatura*, its calyx, corolla, and sheathing leaves of uniform colour. A gleam of pardonable avarice shone in his eyes.

The orchid was as black as your hat.

Captain Birdseye began giggling and slapping at his mouth. He swung out on a manual traverse and inched along by his fingertips, his feet dangling above the vast emptiness below. He paused a moment when it was at nose-level, reached for it with a shout of brief, but manly, triumph—then *ate* it!

It tasted, he thought, like vanilla, but it wasn't nourishing enough by half, poor thing, for him to keep his grip.

Queen Victoria, just before she died, knighted him in absentia, and as the only remaining family his wife, tendered an annual stipend in perpetuity, was

also allowed to add a crocodile and hippo to their coat of arms. A monument to the explorer, in Drowsimere, was later erected.

Margot, in weeds, obligingly cut the ribbon.