

A Training School for Elephants

'Masterfully weaving adventure, intrigue and the darker truths of colonial ambition into a story as gripping as it is eye-opening.'

LEVISON WOOD

'A superb, thoughtful quest into the heart of Africa.'

CAL FLYN



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For Anne and Johnny

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*'All continents are dark continents, half the time.
But the darkness is not empty.'*

—TEJU COLE,
Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time

*'Better to know. I always think it's better to
know than not to know . . . You hear people say,
"Why do people always talk about colonialism? It's over".
But no, it's not. Because until we are more open about
understanding its consequences, it's not over.'*

—ABDULRAZAK GURNAH,
in conversation with Kunle Ajibade

'It was impossible to keep a real course, the path wound so.'

—VERNEY LOVETT CAMERON,
Journal, 13 February 1874

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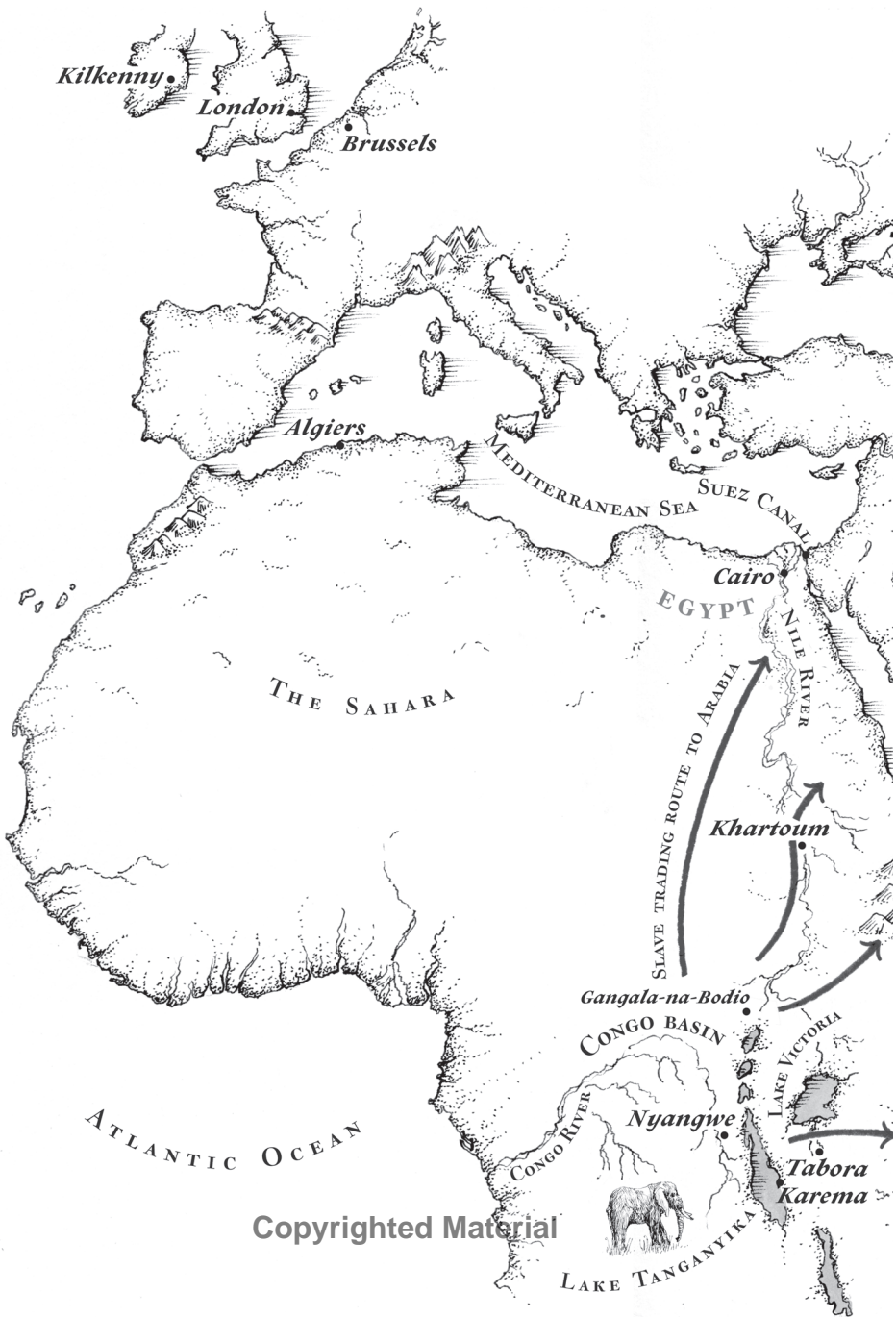
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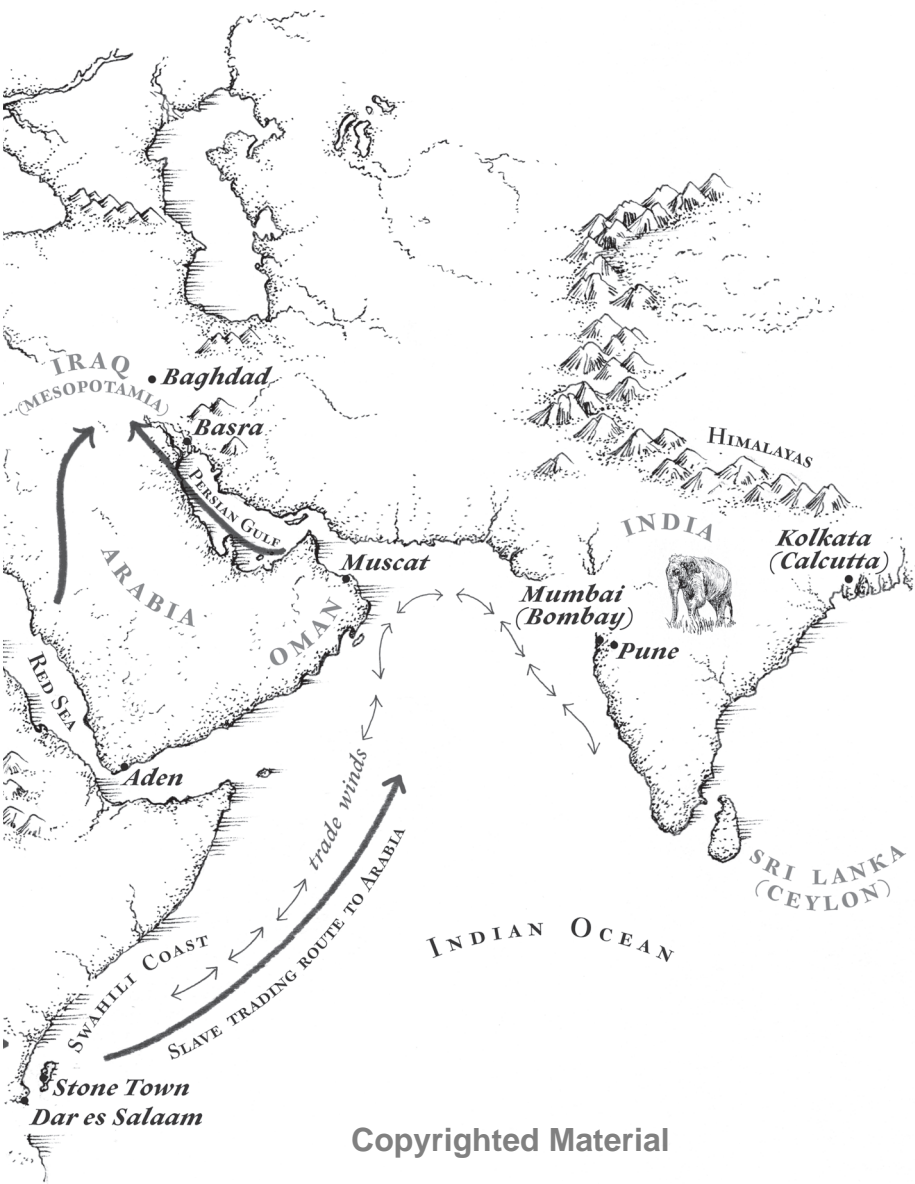
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Author's Note

THIS BOOK TRACES THE forgotten story of an 1879 European expedition in Africa – one of the first stabs at a colossal, brutalizing vision waiting to unspool in a scramble for its resources. Not long after, at the Conference of Berlin of 1884–5, Africa began to be crudely divvied up by Europe's colonizing powers, which changed the continent's political, economic, ecological and belief systems for ever. I followed in the expedition's footsteps to interrogate this pivot in the world order, my approach weaving together archive research and reportage with the arc of a journey. Those layers of past and present meant confronting numerous patterns of domination.

The map on pp. x–xi carries modern place names with nineteenth-century equivalents given in parentheses. In the pages that follow, you'll find a blend of both depending on the context. The map on p. 310 details the loose dominions of some of the main ethnic groups that occupied the region in 1879 when this expedition took place. These groupings still exist in and around the countries of Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC. Understanding that ethnic geography helps with the imaginative leaps needed to erase current national boundaries shaped largely by the colonizers.

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The main thrust of the expedition's journey begins in Zanzibar. The route then winds from the shores of East Africa to Lake Tanganyika, the border territory where modern Tanzania rubs up against the DRC. Tanzania was called German East Africa from 1886 to 1916. After the First World War, the region came under British control, and was known as Tanganyika Territory. In 1961, the country gained its independence, and following union with Zanzibar in 1964, became the United Republic of Tanzania. The turbulent nomenclature of the DRC (which is a different country from the much smaller Republic of Congo) is another story. The region was called the Congo Free State from 1885 to 1908 when it was in the private ownership of King Leopold II of Belgium, and the Belgian Congo from 1908 to 1960. With independence came a new run of names in rapid succession, including Zaire. For simplicity, I've generally used 'Tanzania' and 'Congo' throughout.

The colonizers, it would seem, didn't let their ink run dry in the African sun. When they weren't sweating off a malarial fever, they were filing trunkfuls of official reports, field journals, letters and newspaper articles to their consuls, editors and benefactors. This abundance was a direct reflection of literate power at the time, composed in English, French, German and Arabic. I've relied on those written sources from the 1870s and 1880s, which are detailed in the Select Bibliography and Notes. Meanwhile, the African oral tradition, and the role of intermediaries, guides and interpreters, was largely unacknowledged by nineteenth-century European documentarians. With a few exceptions, Africans were rarely named, and often not in full. I've tried to find a better contemporary balance with oral history, although I know there are problems with representation (women, for instance, aren't given the same

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voice as men). I haven't changed the name of any living person. My reasons are not just journalistic, but to counter the deletions of the past.

In modern Tanzania, the most common tongue is Swahili, alongside various local languages and English. In Swahili, two prefixes are used to denote people from a particular ethnic group – one for the singular, and one for the plural. A different prefix is used for languages. See the Ethnic Groups section on pp. 310–12 for further detail. For clarity, I've stuck with the names of ethnic groups in their basic form throughout.

I've not edited or changed the words used in historical primary sources, even though some language may be disturbing to modern readers. I have, however, done my best to avoid unnecessary repetition of offensive words. This is not to diminish the depth of colonial perversions but out of a writerly belief that we must let some words die without overlooking the ideas those words represent. My choices haven't always been straightforward given the challenge of agreeing upon consistent idioms to replace centuries of bigotry – a process which unfurls at a different pace in different parts of the world. Certain words are perceived differently in the UK than in English-speaking countries elsewhere, while translations of this book into other languages make those nuances more complicated again. If any offence is caused, I take full responsibility in line with my intention: to better understand what happened, how recently those events occurred, and how words (then and now) bear liability.

The same stands for my picture choices. Some images may be difficult to face, but it's also important to look human cruelty straight in the eye. Because if nothing else, the themes in this book have made me confront numerous issues around

othering that are so much a part of writing in English – a language entwined with (and struggling to extricate itself from) the roots of colonial thinking. ‘As for “ideology,” the British economist Joan Robinson remarked, ‘it’s like breath: You never smell your own.’ Stitching this story together has meant unpicking multiple assumptions and narrow points of view, starting with mine. To help guide me, I kept a warning pinned to my conscience – an essay by the late Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina, who offered outsiders his tongue-in-cheek advice on how to write about Africa. ‘Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable,’ he wrote. ‘Keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular . . . mention near the beginning how much you love Africa . . . Elephants are caring, and are good feminists or dignified patriarchs.’

For anyone who has watched the little yellow biplane bank off the Oloololo escarpment in the movie *Out of Africa*, or has seen water shimmer pink as startled flamingos take wing, the clichés Wainaina pilloried can be hard to avoid. But Wainaina was a satirist, not a censor. The truth is I *do* love Africa. I *do* think it’s beautiful. I *do* think elephants are caring. I think they’re some of the most extraordinarily moving creatures on Earth, while their diminished populations stand as shameful testimony to our collective human greed. By the late nineteenth century when this book’s story begins, elephant numbers were so eviscerated by the ivory trade, hunters supplying foreign demand had to travel beyond Lake Tanganyika into Congo to make any significant gains. Yet only twenty-five years earlier, this stretch of country had stood for ‘Regions unknown!’ to inquisitive Europeans, a kind of promised land. These are Joseph Conrad’s words, taken from an essay written in the last year of the novelist’s life. He was describing a map

in a childhood atlas from 1852, and a vow he'd made to his school friends that one day he would get there.

For Conrad, it was an ambition cut short. Following the European 'discovery' of Lake Tanganyika in the late 1850s, he pencilled in the outline of the lake where the blank space on his old map used to be. By 1890 when Conrad eventually travelled into the African interior himself, Congo was King Leopold's private colony. Conrad experienced the stark opposite of the idealized space he'd imagined as a child. 'It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness.' Instead of wide-eyed adventure, Conrad reinforced the opposite trope: universal criminality and impenetrable forest. His 1899 work, *Heart of Darkness*, conjured an enormous metaphor which ever since has associated Africa with horror. That reputation sticks to the entire continent, as Wainaina reminds us, and the influential Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe before him. Conrad was 'a thoroughgoing racist,' argued Achebe in the 1970s, a white author who didn't give any African a name.

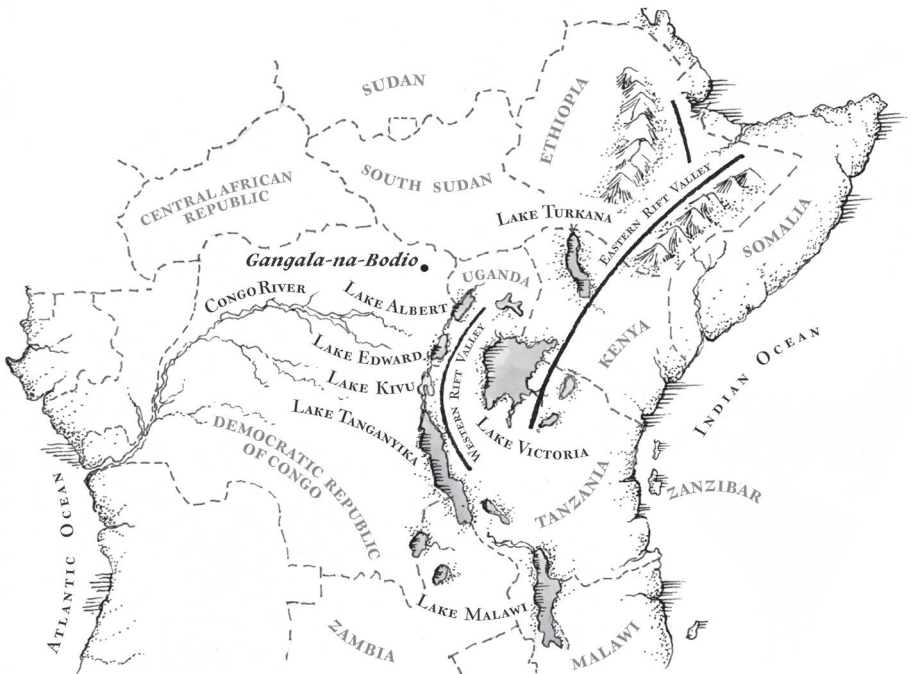
But the evocative lure of the continent that first tugged at Conrad's childhood dreams endures. So does the power of place when I'm standing on Lake Tanganyika's shores. That's the other part of this story: the tantalizing sense of infinite strangeness as I lie awake, fearful and attentive to the scattered sounds of night; the gentle waves, sucked and sieved by the thick quartz sand; the heron triggering alarm calls in the drape of tangled forest behind. That's when I wish that more of life could be perceived like this, taking me to a place – however brief, however close to the edge of uncertainty – to make me believe something beautiful might still exist outside our ugly human history.

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Prologue to an Adventure

'I wouldn't be at home if I were at home. Everywhere I find myself seems to be nothing but a resting place between places that become resting places themselves.'

—DYLAN THOMAS,
Letter to A. E. Trick, Summer 1935



I LIVE IN A DORSET valley which falls away from a high horse-shoe ridge down to the English Channel. The landscape is arresting in its stillness, crowned with a run of Iron Age hillforts where the poet William Wordsworth used to stride out to clear his head when he borrowed a house nearby. I walk these hillforts often, making my way home through the beechwood alleys and sunken lanes. From my parents' old farm, the route weaves down the valley's steepest sides where there's still evidence of medieval strip lynchets – a kind of fretting, or terracing, wrinkling the land.

Not so long ago, I found myself walking this valley obsessively, sometimes for up to six hours a day. I was stuck between pandemic lockdowns, between finishing one book and trying to settle on another. So when a friend offered me a way out of my fug – a man who suffers from the same problem as me: 'shiftless, rootless, hedge-diving restlessness,' as he wrote in an email exchange – I took him up on it. He said I could borrow his cottage in Donegal for a change of scene. He described it as the wildest place he knew, in spite of a career working in remote forests in equatorial Africa. His father had bought it in the sixties on a patch of tilted Irish ground with a connection to Dylan Thomas. In 1935, the poet had come to this same treeless cliff to shake off his worsening alcoholism. Thomas had rented a donkey shed nearby made just about habitable by an American painter a few years before.

My friend's cottage was a cut above, with a view of giant sea stacks shaped like Gothic spires poking out of the Atlantic

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swell. The fridge was a wooden box attached to the outside wall. The bath ran the colour of thin coffee, the water drawn from a peaty brook which kept threatening to spill its banks. Sheep splotted with dye grazed outside; sometimes, when the weather was fierce, they took shelter in the lee of the cottage porch. At night, I dried my clothes on the pipes of a turf stove and read by solar lamps and candles. My mornings were stirred awake by the sound of Ocean FM as the obituaries were being read: the iambic lilt of the elegy, the names of the newly dead, the condolences and announcements of upcoming wakes.

For Thomas, his Donegal trip felt like a holiday, until the picturesque began to fail him. 'I find I can't see a landscape; scenery is just scenery to me,' he wrote to a friend. Disturbed by Ireland's violent colonial history and mass emigrations, he turned increasingly melancholic. Sometimes he would shout into the nearby mountains, only to have his voice bounce back at him. 'The dead Irish answer from behind the hill. I've forced them into confessing that they are sad, grey, lost, forgotten, dead and damned forever.' It was in Donegal that Thomas also began writing one of the stranger stories of his career. 'Prologue to an Adventure' described a winter's night walking through a city with the devil by his side. Written between the two world wars, Thomas's surrealist allegory evoked a moment in time 'before the West died'.

Thomas was living in 'a funny dimension' on this Atlantic edgeland, and so was I. I scrambled down the cliffs to a nearby storm beach. I walked in heavy wind across the headland, balls of bog cotton quivering in the mizzling rain. I could see the creep on every side – ripples of green velvet slipping from the bedrock. I poked around a village abandoned in the mid nineteenth century when Ireland lost around a quarter of its

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population to the famine of the 1840s. As the wet days stretched out ahead of me, I dug into my friend's bookcases for something new to read. That was when I found a nineteenth-century map of Africa's Great Lakes tucked among the spines, which drew me into a line of thought that had nothing to do with where I was.

Maps have that effect on me. They take me out of myself as much as they suggest a way into somewhere or something else. Maps seem empty where there's desert, and then you zoom in closer and discover a lost ocean in the Sahara. Story is written into the place names – a Valley of the Whales, a Place of Floating Seashells. The same with water, in the way maps are largely wordless where there's a great sweep of blue. The A T L A N T I C has plenty of space to spread out in noisy capitals across an ornamental globe. The P A C I F I C has even more, while Lake Tanganyika in the middle of Africa is so long and narrow, you sometimes see the letters stacked vertically, like a streak of lightning. Go deeper into the charts used by mariners, and the detail intensifies in the mud and broken shale, in the sticky ooze of the ocean floor. Questions lurk in each notation. Magnetic anomalies. Isolated dangers. Reported, but not confirmed. ED (meaning 'existence doubtful'). †unexamd (meaning 'unexamined'). Maps are much more powerful, more multi-dimensional than they first appear.

*I like maps, because they lie.
Because they give no access to the vicious truth.
Because great-heartedly, good-naturedly
they spread before me a world
not of this world.*

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Prologue to an Adventure

The map I laid out on the table in Donegal covered a swathe of Africa's Great Lakes to reveal the complex, interconnected *dot dot dot* of inland waterways that pool in a line through the middle of the continent. As my finger followed the veins of water, I found myself being pulled north towards the watershed of Africa's two big rivers, the Congo and the Nile. More significantly, the map dragged me back into some strange history I'd encountered on a journalism assignment a few years before. In 2015, I'd journeyed up the line of Great Lakes, flying from Lake Tanganyika over the flank of the Rwenzori Mountains – for centuries, their remoteness was evoked in their other name, the Mountains of the Moon. The lakes shone like spills of glossy ink. Hippos looked like stepping stones spread across the water, pirogues like scattered matchsticks. I was slowly working my way north to a national park called Garamba in northeast DRC to cover a story on an ambitious conservation initiative to rehabilitate one of the continent's most important habitats for elephants. To help with safe passage for the final leg, I was met on the Uganda–DRC border by Mr Oddo, a local fixer clad in an immaculate suit printed with Heineken beer bottles. As I waited to get my passport stamped, the heat of the day thickened. The flies got dozier, the officials even slower. With my papers eventually cleared, I left the town by another small plane, this one operated by a missionary organization. When I'd used their services before, the pilot had put his hand to the Bible and read a prayer before we took off.

We banked right, flying up towards one of the biggest gold mines in Africa, then struck out northwest for Garamba, where the savannah began to bloom green beneath our wings. The landscape was scored with looping rivers, which wound so lazily I couldn't tell the direction in which they flowed. For

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a few days, I worked at the park headquarters, then, using the same small bush plane, flew to a place nearby called Gangalana-Bodio. It turned out to be the location of a semi-derelict training school for African elephants dating back to the early twentieth century when Congo was a Belgian colony. I was familiar with the notion of working elephants in Asia, but in Africa? I'd never heard of such a thing.

On our approach from the air, Gangalana-Bodio appeared as an island of palms in a rippling grass sea. When we landed, I picked my way towards the former training school through the bony roots of trees. As I walked into ruined buildings, between broken signs and clumps of bougainvillea, a young girl looked on warily. In a white broderie anglaise dress and matching bonnet neatly tied beneath her chin, she appeared like a ghost as she followed me into a clearing cut with blades of sunlight. This was where the elephant tethering stones stood, arranged in two rows with the military precision of a Brussels boulevard. Fan palm seedlings frilled the ground, sprouting up among the stones and hoops for fastening chains. I found it affecting – the idea that it wouldn't be long until nature took over completely, the seedlings bursting like giant shuttlecocks from the fertile earth to swamp this pocket of history for good.

A local man in mirrored sunglasses came up and explained how the clearing was once used for colonial parades. More recently, Gangalana-Bodio had functioned as a lair for Joseph Kony, a former Catholic altar boy turned Ugandan warlord. Kony and his child soldiers had moved on from the area before I visited, but the threat of kidnapping endured. The man said locals still couldn't risk travelling more than a few miles from where they lived, with other active militia groups

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spilling into the DRC from neighbouring Uganda and South Sudan. As for the captive elephants, they'd long since died or departed – an absence which seemed profound given the wild populations that used to thrive in these grasslands, when herds a thousand elephants strong would move through the landscape like 'a solid grey army on the march'. But after Congo gained its independence in 1960, new waves of political violence meant ivory poaching expanded. It swept in from every direction, including from the sky, with elephant carcasses showing evidence of having been shot in the back from helicopters. It was only from the vantage point of the missionary plane that I'd managed to glimpse any elephants in all the days I spent in the region – a skittish breeding herd fleeing through the grass with their young. Their behaviour showed the habits of the hunted; they trumpeted and flared their ears.



Elephants photographed from the missionary plane during my 2015 visit to Garamba.

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They looked vulnerable and scared, their tails stiff like fixed antennae.

When I got home to England from Donegal, I started looking into newspaper archives for stories about Gangala-na-Bodio under the Belgians. The more I searched, the greater my realization that there was something significant in the backstory to this haunting European avenue cut out of the jungle. I was curious to know more about the bond between these animals and their trainers, known as mahouts, and how patterns of subjugation were enforced. I wanted to understand how the idea of this training scheme had first come about. So I got back in touch with the Belgian conservationist who was managing the park when I'd visited. He'd collaborated on a book about the region with some details about the elephant school. He'd also tracked down an old photograph of Gangala-na-Bodio's parade ground, with the elephants in hobble chains lined up in two tidy rows.



The parade ground at Gangala-na-Bodio.

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I read about how Gangala-na-Bodio was once run to military calls and bugles, with a Belgian cavalry officer overseeing up to a hundred African mahouts. I found a colonial-era film that revealed the process by which Congo's young elephants were captured in the wild, a half-grown calf lassoed and lashed with ropes to a tree. Another report described the young elephants – 'little fellows standing about five feet' – and how they 'scream with rage when they are tied to the lines.' To tame the elephants, the mahouts used the 'chicotte' – a knotted whip made out of hippo hide, which colonial soldiers also used to torture forced labourers to increase Congo's rubber harvests.

It turned out there had been various attempts at the same idea in different regions of the country. In 1899, an Elephant Domestication Centre was opened at Api, about two hundred and fifty miles west of Gangala-na-Bodio. By 1904, it was presided over by a Belgian soldier called Jules Laplume – a man described as 'lean as a cudgel,' 'more of a trapper than an officer,' possessing 'angelic patience.' Laplume was assigned as many local Azande elephant hunters as he needed in order to start catching juvenile elephants on the Bomokandi River. His method was to ride into the savannah on a horse. When he found a good breeding herd, the men would start stressing the elephants by firing gunshots into the air to separate an elephant calf from its mother. The men would then run after the baby elephant and bind it with ropes to a tree. If the mother continued to protect the calf, she would be shot. This approach was later adjusted to make use of habituated elephants, which were employed as decoys on capture expeditions. Soon elephant catching was being described as 'one of the new industries on the Congo.' Another school was then founded in the mid 1920s at Gangala-na-Bodio. At first, the

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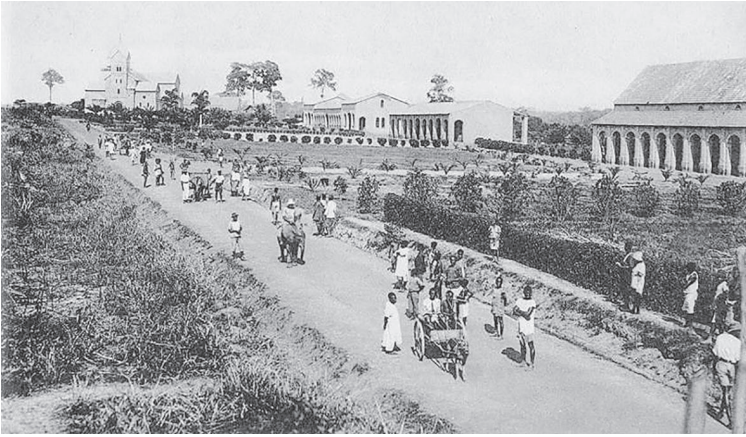
trained recruits were largely used for cultivating fields. Soon ‘elephantdozers’ were being used to construct the Route Royale – the Belgian portion of the Great Central African Highway – and the new colonial railways. Even local missions found a use for elephants. At Buta, three hundred miles west of Gangala-na-Bodio, an ad hoc operation was set up by missionaries, successful in large part due to the mission’s wildlife expert, Brother Joseph Hutsebaut. A kind of Doctor Dolittle character, he was among the first Europeans to successfully raise an okapi in captivity. I got in touch with Hutsebaut’s descendants, who explained how their ancestor had cared for elephants captured by locals. His work wasn’t commercial, but I found images of elephants from other sources hauling timber for missionaries.

By the late 1950s, Gangala-na-Bodio’s elephants were decorating Belgian Congo banknotes and stamps. They were also being marketed for tourism. A few years later when Congo’s

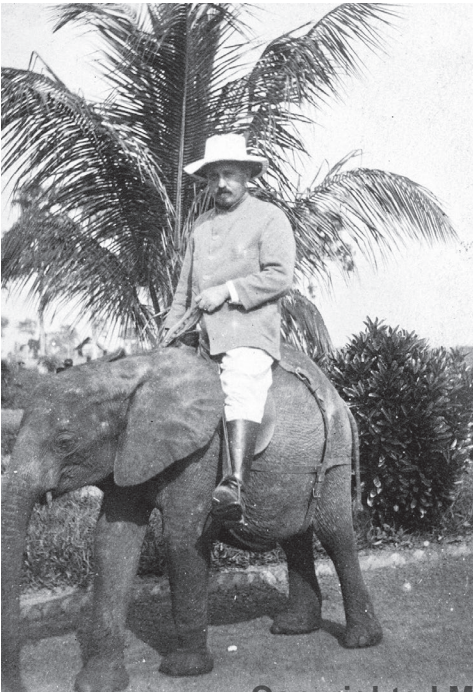


Elephants ploughing in Congo during the colonial period.

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The main boulevard in Buta in the 1930s with a young elephant being ridden like a horse.



Brother Joseph Hutsebaut with his first elephant, Ndjoku, whom he kept from 1918 to 1940. He hung this photograph on the wall in his bedroom.

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independence was declared, South African writer Nadine Gordimer travelled on a paddle steamer up the Congo River. She didn't much care for her fellow passengers – Europeans who 'looked as if they were carved out of lard' – but she was fond of the captive elephants she rode at Gangala-na-Bodio, which by this time were being used for wildlife safaris. She liked watching the elephants gather down by the river at tea-time for a daily bath, 'four great stubby feet waving in the air'. Then in January 1961, Patrice Lumumba, Congo's first legally elected prime minister, was assassinated in a plot later implicating the American and Belgian governments, his body dissolved in sulphuric acid. That summer, Congolese soldiers mutinied against their former overlords. Not long after Gordimer's visit, 'all news from this remote corner of the Congo ceased'; '[t]he few white people in the district fled to the Sudan, and I imagine that the Belgian commander of the station – the only white man there – must have been among them. Any information about what was happening to the elephants started to fall away. But for me, there was something about Gordimer's account which stuck. I couldn't shake off her descriptions of the songs she'd heard among the African mahouts, how the melodies evoked the soothing drone of Hindi lullabies originally used to tame elephants in Asia. The African trainers had learned the songs from the Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) mahouts Laplume had originally brought in to assist with the schooling. This historical connection prompted me to examine my lazy assumptions about what distinguished the African and Asian species – and the dogma I'd somehow absorbed that the African elephant was untameable.

I knew there were differences in the way they had been commodified – Asian elephants for captive work, African

elephants for their ivory – but was there a true disparity in the species’ potential for being tamed? Or was it just the history of human exploitation that told a myth about difference? The Carthaginian general Hannibal crossed the Alps with an army of African war elephants in 218 BCE, which showed that trained African elephants were in use more than a thousand years before the school at Gangala-na-Bodio came into existence. If the African elephant was in fact no more difficult to tame than the Asian, then was my assumption part of some deeply entrenched prejudice? In 1868, in a war the British fought in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), forty-odd elephants were shipped from India to Africa to carry British artillery guns over the mountain passes. Five elephants perished, their bodies riddled with galls and sores, throats half choked by the unrelenting tug of heavy loads. The reason the army had to rely on Asian imports, posited a British commentator, was because ‘the Africans have no notion what to do with an elephant at present but to kill and eat it.’

I began to understand why the Belgians had wanted to train elephants to extract Africa’s resources, but I was also becoming increasingly curious about an odder, earlier story hidden in that narrative, in the seeds of Congo’s elephant training schools planted decades before Gangala-na-Bodio was established. It was one of those slivers of history repeated across sources with a suspicious confusion of names and places, which made me think no one had looked into what had really happened when, in 1879, King Leopold II of Belgium settled on a seemingly bizarre idea: dispatching four Asian elephants and their mahouts from India, a region with a tradition in working elephants, to Africa, which did not. What exactly was Leopold trying to achieve on a continent

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with abundant elephants of its own? Why did he need to take the trouble of putting these animals on a ship bound for Africa? In 1879 the number of African elephants was estimated at between twenty to thirty times the figure it is now. The elephant stood as a popular synecdoche for the entire continent, and had done since at least the early eighteenth century:

*So Geographers in Afric-maps
With savage-pictures fill their gaps
And o'er uninhabitable downs
Place elephants for want of towns.*

Leopold's aim was to reach Lake Tanganyika – then a threshold of Congo's so-called 'Ivory Frontier' – and start an elephant training operation, using the Asian elephants to test a new form of transport in the race into Africa's interior. The expedition niggled away at me on numerous levels, including an interest I've always had in stories that disappear in the margins.* Leopold's elephants felt as if they had the potential to unravel the beginning of a colonial story with far-reaching effects. The 1879 expedition was part of the preamble to the 'Scramble for Africa,' which resulted in decades of violent European rule. And while the era of colonial governments may have passed, the looting is ongoing, just with different

* I like footnotes. They're the narrative underdogs that can't quite find their place in the dominant record. They're also where a richness of nuance often resides. At their best, they can provoke a diversion or encourage a slightly shifted gaze, to say something bigger than their diminished position might first imply. Footnotes can also break a story's flow. For this reason, all but two footnotes in this book have been relegated to endnotes – see pp. 317–79.

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nations making a neocolonial run on what's left of the resources. Interested in the messier swirl of how history resonates in the present, I started to think Leopold's expedition could open a window into how nineteenth-century European expansionism remains tightly bound with topics of enduring consequence: racism, resource extraction, wildlife extinction. The long tail of empire remains a dominating feature of current affairs – the push and pull of cause and effect, of then and now. In retracing the journey of Leopold's elephants, I could see a vehicle to perhaps explore some of those dynamics.

'A touching tale, if all were known,' remarked a missionary who had stumbled on the elephant story at the end of the nineteenth century. He described Leopold's parade as a 'strange prodigy' of men carrying an agenda they didn't fully understand or, in their duplicity, didn't choose to disclose. 'Stuck high on the elephant's back, you have four white men who symbolize the coming struggle for supremacy,' the missionary continued. I felt a beckoning in his line *if all were known*, as if there was more story to uncover. The missionary's account drew me into the absurdity of the entire endeavour, manifested in the image of Europeans on top of Asian elephants marching into the heart of Africa to inspire and demand obeisance. I was interested in how a symbol could come to mean so much – how the historical, imaginative and political dimensions of Leopold's elephant expedition converged with and contributed to the Europeans' 'invention of Africa.' And what of the four animals who carried this story on their backs? Were they loved or abused, willing or terrified? I wondered what they'd seen travelling through Africa – a wild-life Eden? – and what had since disappeared. I was curious to hear the local stories from the regions they traversed.

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I've always liked elephants, and the silent dignity they project. In their company, I feel all sorts of emotions, ranging from fear to awe and affection. When I first walked with them in the wild, it changed my perspective: the things *we think* make us powerful, as intellectual beings, are rendered irrelevant. But that humbling experience is easily forgotten. I belong to an industrialized, technologically organized society so divorced from nature that it's harder and harder to feel instinctive connections with animals. It's as if the scientific approach is all that matters, even if science may eventually tell us what our hunter-gatherer forebears knew before we created organizing hierarchies; that elephants are more than biological automata. I wanted to interrogate how and why we've come to treat animals in the ways we do – and how much cruelty we've got away with. 'A robin redbreast in a cage,' wrote William Blake in 'Auguries of Innocence,' 'Puts all heaven in a rage.'

As summer turned to winter, I began exploring various archives in London. Among the missionary reports and consular records, I found buried mentions of Leopold's elephant schemes. What was becoming clear was the extent of the 1879 expedition's ambitions, entangling Scottish shipping magnates, anti-slavery campaigners, German zookeepers and American businessmen. Among all the names, I noticed a man given the moniker 'Lord of Tuskers' – an Irishman called Frederick Falkner Carter whom Leopold had hired to lead the expedition. Yet Carter's name had been almost completely forgotten.

I pinned Carter's portrait to a rogues' gallery on the wall of my office – my aide-mémoire detailing who I needed to keep track of as I reunited people to story, and story to place. I've been making displays like this for years, ever since I started

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training to be a journalist in the 1990s. I would rip out leads in newspapers, and tape them on to my apartment wall where they would yellow in the sun. I'd layer them up and place the clippings side by side – sometimes purposefully, usually haphazardly. Positions would alter. Lines of enquiry would multiply and fizzle out. New connections would sparkle attractively, or confoundingly, to reveal a logic or unlikely dissonance. My husband, who thought they looked like evidence boards in murder investigations, called them my serial-killer walls.

I drew a red line tracing Carter's beginnings. He was born in Kilkenny, Ireland, in April 1841. Aged fourteen, he joined the British merchant navy. In 1863, he moved to Mesopotamia, which is now Iraq. He found work with the Euphrates and Tigris Steam Navigation Company, owned by some enterprising childhood neighbours of his mother's called the Lynch brothers. With the Suez Canal linking Europe to the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf was no geographical cul-de-sac, but an increasingly relevant node in the rapidly expanding global trade routes. Though my chronology of Carter's career was only one line among many, it reinforced a bigger nineteenth-century phenomenon: in the Age of Empire, it was possible to travel freely (if you were British, often with a 'contemptuous ease') because of an unprecedented flourishing in the broadening bonds of trade and communications. As the internet has been in my lifetime, so the steamship was in Carter's – a dramatic development in speed which fed Europe and America's booming capitalist economies. The Indian Ocean before steam, wrote one of the Lynch brothers, was 'ayam al-jahilieh' – a phrase normally used to describe the absence of light before the arrival of Islam.

On the same map, I marked the traditional ivory and East

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African slave trade and caravan routes of the 1870s on which all travellers depended – ‘Arab’-controlled* trails that ran in and out of the coastal ports. I put a red pin in the main ‘slave nests’ on the edge of the Sahara further north, and sketched the shadowy trade in human lives leading out towards the Persian Gulf, where the enslaved worked in harems or diving for pearls. The numbers were staggering to me – over thirteen centuries, more than 9.8 million Africans were shipped as enslaved people to Arabia, various Indian Ocean islands and the Indian subcontinent, and a further 4.1 million were shipped across the Red Sea, yet attention has been focused on the much better-known transatlantic trade to the Americas. I highlighted the Suez Canal in blue. When it opened in 1869, this leap in infrastructure reduced a six- or seven-month journey from Europe to India via the Cape of Good Hope to a matter of weeks. Submarine telegraph cables were enabling faster communications. In 1870, the first Indian Ocean telegraph was established, connecting Britain to Bombay and Calcutta (now Mumbai and Kolkata); another line, linking Europe to South Africa via the port of Aden, was inaugurated in July 1879, with messages reaching Brussels from Zanzibar in as little as three hours.

As I surveyed the research in front of me, I knew I’d need to go to Belgium to understand Leopold’s motivations for commissioning the elephant expedition. I wondered if I’d

* I use the word ‘Arab’ with caution throughout this book, as the trade was heavily tied up with Swahili communities because of centuries of mixed blood along the Indian Ocean littoral. Though other Africans were also complicit, ‘Arab’ became the default signifier for the eastern trade in enslaved people. This was also because of a European habit of demonizing the perpetrators (Muslim Arabs were the traditional enemy of Christian Europeans). The moralizing Europeans relied on this oversimplified narrative to help them gain a foothold in African affairs.

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ever get to the Tigris River in Iraq where Carter had first made his name. As I began to pin my office map with the rough route Leopold's elephants had walked, my husband said something which felt like a blessing. 'I guess you'll be gone for a while,' he remarked. He knew my restlessness better than I wanted to admit it to myself. This was my chance to become immersed in a journey again, in the cut and thrust of unfamiliar towns, among the hot tin roofs, the smells of dry earth, and the push and shove of boda-boda motorbikes.

Plans were falling into line. In readiness, I packed a copy of George Orwell's essay 'Shooting an Elephant.' It describes how a British officer was called out from his police post in Burma (now Myanmar) to dispatch a marauding, man-killing elephant, which he shot 'solely to avoid looking a fool' in front of a gathering mob of two thousand Burmese. Orwell's



Logging elephants in Katha in 2018, in the same Burmese forests where a young George Orwell worked for the imperial police. Each evening, I'd watch the elephants bathe as the mahouts sang to them.

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chilling account isn't just about a botched execution, the elephant 'dying, very slowly and in great agony'. It is a story about an Englishman's failure as a moral human being – an admission of complicity with an imperial system young men joined without questioning its depravities – and the glimmerings of self-awareness. This journey was something I wanted to take on not because it was going to be easy, but precisely because of an unease with my ignorance about the colonial story in Africa. I hoped I could follow Leopold's elephants to discover more about what had really happened: how European imperialism had unfolded on the African continent, and the effects on its people. This was always going to be about more than the historical fate of four pachyderms from India. With the 1879 expedition as my narrative thread, I could piece together a journey map to guide my enquiries into historical erasures. The path the elephants took would be my passport into a region's oral memory. My sources would expand across time and place, which appealed to the traveller in me. But before going any further, I'd need to understand Leopold's motivations. For that, I'd have to start with the nineteenth-century archives in Belgium.

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Shopping for an Elephant

'... no, I don't care about silence for its lack of everything but for what it says about everything.'

—IGNACIO RUIZ-PÉREZ,
'Blind Poet'



IT WAS A CRISP spring day when I arrived in Brussels to explore the colonial records. In the stark Flanders light, everything seemed to have its ordered place: the chocolatiers in the Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert, the bright chimes of church carillons sounding across the rooftops, the city's business people hurrying to appointments in tailored woollen coats buttoned up against the wind. I occasionally encountered graffiti the authorities hadn't had a chance to wash away – *Racist! Criminal! Smash the Patriarchy!* – but otherwise the city appeared as if it were just as King Leopold II had intended when he'd used the extreme wealth amassed from Congo to beautify his nation.

From 1885 to 1908, Leopold formally held Congo as his private possession, commanding a swathe of Africa eighty times the size of Belgium. He called himself the country's 'proprietor' before he was reluctantly forced to sell it to the Belgian state in 1908 – in large part because of revelations of extraordinary human rights abuses – but not before Leopold and his people had been significantly enriched. Between 1889 and 1908, the tusks of around ninety-four thousand African elephants from Congo were shipped into the Belgian port of Antwerp alone, to meet the demand for ivory objects, from piano keys to dildoes. Over the same period, exports of rubber from Congo exploded by a thousand per cent. In 1903, at the height of the rubber boom, Leopold imported the modern-day equivalent of over half a billion euros' worth of this stunningly profitable commodity. By the outbreak of the

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First World War, Belgium had become Europe's fifth largest economic power.

To find my bearings with all this history, I walked the tight grid of government offices, palaces and avenues of pollarded limes. I lingered at the door of 10 Rue de Namur, where Leopold's right-hand man for African affairs, Colonel Maximilien Strauch, ran the king's various Congo schemes. The park nearby was studded with familiar icons of Western culture, including emperors alongside classical gods. Among the statues, there was one of Narcissus, the hunter from Greek mythology who perished beside the pool where he stared at his own reflection. Standing by an emptied pond, this stone Narcissus didn't have any mirrored image to admire. He was also missing a hand, which made me think of Leopold's Force Publique, a terrorizing gendarmerie who routinely chopped off the hands of the Congolese if rubber quotas weren't met. Close to the statue, there were two marble feet – just the feet, as delicate as a child's, on another broken plinth. The park map said it was Hermes, the Greek god of roads, commerce and thieves.

I headed out towards the ring road to see where Belgium had hosted the 1958 World's Fair – a kind of giant trade show for industrial nations to display their achievements. This was the same year the microchip was invented, passenger jets started flying across the Atlantic, and a US nuclear submarine passed for the first time under the North Pole. Belgium, however, had different ideas about what constituted 'progress.' Part of their propaganda as the host nation included what was known as the 'Kongorama' to demonstrate Belgium's 'civilizing' impact on Congo. Designed by the Ministry of Colonies, this 'human zoo' included nearly six hundred Congolese men, women and children the Belgians had rounded up in the

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'deepest forests of Kasai and the mountains in Urundi'. Their role included re-enactments of Congolese village life. Among the 'exhibits' on show, which visitors could observe from behind bamboo fences, were some of the African mahouts from the Gangala-na-Bodio training school for elephants.

Six decades previously, Leopold had presented the Congolese in much the same manner. His earlier 1897 'human zoo' had created such a sensation, it attracted more than one in four Belgians as visitors. It was staged at the former royal hunting grounds of Tervuren, outside Brussels, which is also the location of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, a neo-classical palace Leopold originally commissioned to impress potential investors with his various Congo schemes. The museum still holds one of the world's largest collections of African artefacts.

As soon as I stepped into the atrium, I encountered placards outlining a contemporary agenda that, among other things, instructed visitors on the difference between law and morals. 'The collections that the AfricaMuseum [sic] preserves and curates are the legal property of the Belgian federal state, but the moral property of the countries of origin,' read one of the notices. It wasn't the museum's business to decide on ownership and restitution, read another sign, but the Federal State Security for Science Policy. I wandered through the rooms, past polished niches occupied by statues of eminent Belgians on pedestals, and busts of King Leopold. In life, his physical presence was overbearing – a commanding six feet tall, despite being born a puny baby, and with such a large nose his mother considered it a deformity. He was his parents' least favourite child, showing a proclivity for violence early on, as well as a ruthless intelligence. 'Leopold is subtle and sly,'

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