SAVING THE LIFE OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

Posted on March 15, 2016 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 14 March 2016

Six of us were in a Land-Rover traveling through the jungles of Kenya and Tanzania, on our way to one of the tourist lodges which dot the jungle every 30 miles or so. The lodges had high and electrified protective walls to keep out the wild animals. The surrounding jungle teemed with all the African wildlife one can think of... lions, elephants, leopards, rhinos, hippos, monkeys, hyenas, vultures, flamingos...

An hour earlier we had watched a lion gorge on a black buffalo, its head deep in the torso of the animal. When the lion pulled out its massive head, perhaps because it had heard the whir of Land-Rover, its face and mane dripped blood. It ignored us and continued eating.

It was a Friday in late November of 1975. We had spent the night before at the famed Treetop Hotel where Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip had vacationed in 1952. The vacation had been interrupted when the future queen had received a telegram from Buckingham Palace telling her that her father (King George VI) had died, and that she should return to Britain ASAP. She was to succeed her father. Jim Corbett, legendary hunter and bodyguard of Princess Elizabeth during her visit, had written in the hotel's log book: "...a young girl climbed into a tree one day a Princess after having what she described as her most thrilling experience she climbed down next day as Queen. God bless her."

The 50-room "hotel", built on top of an expansive chestnut tree, offered at night, from its observation lounge, dramatic views of elephants, boars, hyenas at the water hole and the salt lick. The Treetop was on the migration path of several large animals such as elephants.

After a day of roaming the jungle, the vast Ngorongoro Crater and the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, I was satiated and tired. The shaking of the Land-Rover over the rock-strewn "road" didn't help the muscles or the bones. We were driving through the Masai Amboseli wilderness at dusk. The driver was hurrying because we had to make the lodge before nightfall. My colleagues, all of them Canadian travel agency managers, also seemed that they could use a comfortable bed. I was the sole journalist in the group.

It was my birthday, but all I wished for was a brief shut-eye as the Land-Rover continued its rattle and shake. My eye-lids in half shutter, I noticed a light some miles away. When I looked again the light had gone. Then it reappeared. I knew there were no settlements in the area: It was miles and miles of jungle. Because it appeared and vanished quickly, I wondered whether the light was a flashing Morse Code S-O-S.

I told the driver about the blinking light. He looked at the direction I pointed and said that he couldn't see anything... perhaps I was sleepy. I did not press.

Then I saw the light again. As soon as I told the driver, one of my colleagues jumped in and confirmed that he, too, had seen a blinking light in the direction I had indicated.

With obvious reluctance the driver got off the dirt road and gingerly drove towards the direction I had pointed. His reluctance was understandable: we could easily get lost or have an unpleasant encounter with the denizens of the wilderness.

After driving a few miles, we saw two elderly couples standing behind a mud-splattered Land-Rover. As our vehicle approached them, the ground got mushier. We could see the strangers' Land-Rover was stuck in deep mud. With night falling--which it does fast near the equator—the foursome would soon have all kinds of beasts for unpleasant company.

Judging by their accent, all four were British. They told us that they had tried to pull the vehicle out of the muddy riverbed but every time they had tried, the Land-Rover had sunk deeper into the slippery clay-rich terrain. In desperation they had used the Land-Rover's headlights to signal S-O-S.

Six of us got behind the marooned Land-Rover and after several attempts managed to extricate it to dry land. We also learned that the safari route of the British travelers would take them to another lodge many miles away. One of the couples began singing "O Canada" when we told them that were Canadian. They thanked us profusely as we exchanged "bon voyages". Just as we were about to get into our Land-Rover, one of the women said: "Before you go, I would like you to know that you have just saved the life of the Archbishop of Canterbury--the Most Reverend Donald Coggan."

We backtracked and shook the hand of the archbishop. Rev. Coggan, who had become Archbishop of Canterbury the previous year, was a theologian and revolutionary figure in the Church of England. The author of 20 books, he supported women's ordination among other innovations. As I kissed the green stone of his ring, I told him that I was Armenian. He smiled and replied that Catholicos Vazken was a good friend of his.

That night I telephoned the Canadian Press agency and gave them the scoop about the safari rescue of the archbishop and his companions. When we returned to Canada, I learned that we had had a coast-to-coast media coverage of the rescue. One of the Toronto newspapers had misspelled my name. It wasn't the first or the last time.