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opening extract from

# Akimbo and the Snakes

written by

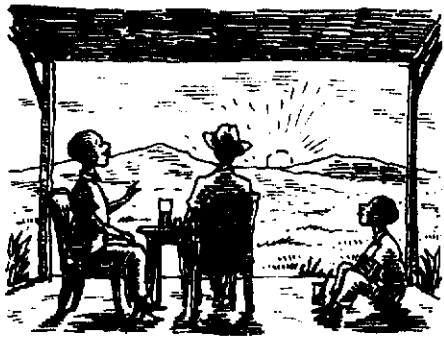
**Alexander McCall Smith**

published by

**Bloomsbury Publishers**

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# An exciting invitation

Akimbo was very proud of his Uncle Peter, although he hardly ever saw him. Once or twice a year, though, Uncle Peter would make the journey out to the great game reserve where his brother, Akimbo's father, was Head Ranger. These visits would always start the same way. Uncle Peter and Akimbo's father would sit down on the verandah and talk about family matters until the sun burnt down behind the hills and the African night filled with stars.

The following morning, though, would be Akimbo's special time, and Uncle Peter would sit with his nephew and tell him stories about his job,



which seemed to Akimbo to be just about the most exciting job imaginable.

Uncle Peter ran a snake park! Akimbo had seen photographs of the snake park and had wanted to visit it for a long time. He always loved to hear Uncle Peter talk about snakes he had caught and about what happened to them. Sometimes snakes died, or escaped, or hatched eggs; and all these events struck Akimbo as being very interesting and exciting. He had asked more than once whether it would be possible for him to visit his uncle and see the snake park, but had always been told that he would have to wait until he was a bit older.

At last the day came when, at the end of one of Uncle Peter's visits, it was agreed that Akimbo could go to stay with him during his next school holidays.

'I'll meet you off the bus,' said Uncle Peter. 'And you can spend three or four weeks with us. Your parents have agreed. Would you like that?'

'I'd love it,' said Akimbo.

'You'll have to help out, though,' went on Uncle Peter.

Akimbo's face showed his pleasure at the thought. 'You mean, help out with the snakes?' he asked.

Uncle Peter nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'Think of it as a working holiday.'

Akimbo was delighted to do this and over the next month scarcely a day went past when he did not dream about the visit that lay ahead of him. Finally the day of his departure arrived, and his father took him to meet the bus that would take him off to Uncle Peter's town.

'Be careful,' urged Akimbo's father. 'And remember to write a letter to your mother.'

Akimbo promised that he would, and as the bus engine roared into life he put his hand out of the window and waved cheerfully to his father. His

father waved back, and then in a cloud of dust and with a raucous hooting of the horn the bus was off on its way.

The journey was very uncomfortable. Even with all the windows open, the bus was hot and stuffy. A woman sitting next to Akimbo gave him a roasted maize cob and let him drink from her bottle of water, but before long Akimbo began to feel hungry and thirsty again and longed for the journey to end.

They passed through villages and small towns, picking up and dropping off passengers here and there. People boarded with baskets of chickens, which squealed and clucked as they felt the unfamiliar motion of the bus. A man boarded with a dog tied to a piece of string, and Akimbo thought he had never before seen such a miserable-looking animal.

It was night-time before they arrived in the town. Akimbo had dozed off and was woken up by the lights. As the bus drew up at its stop, and the passengers all started to jostle their way out, Akimbo caught a glimpse of Uncle Peter standing

waiting for him. It was a welcome sight in a strange town, and soon he was loading his case into the back of his uncle's truck.

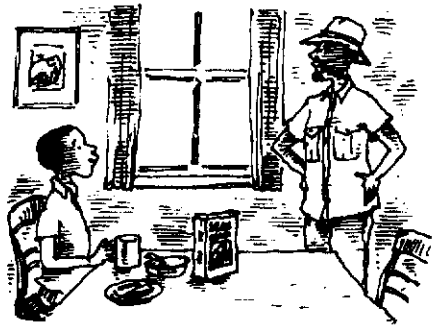
'You look hungry,' said Uncle Peter, as he steered the truck through traffic. 'I'll stop at a stall.'

Soon Akimbo was tucking into a delicious thick iced bun and drinking from a cold bottle of fizzy drink. He felt immediately better, and the discomfort of the journey seemed now to be a thing of the past.

'I think you should go to bed the moment we get to my house,' said Uncle Peter. 'You want to be fresh for tomorrow, don't you?'

Akimbo nodded. Tomorrow he would see the snake park. Perhaps Uncle Peter would let him handle a snake. Perhaps something exciting would happen. He would have to wait and see.





# Milking time

Akimbo awoke early the next morning, and by the time Uncle Peter emerged from his bedroom he was already sitting at the kitchen table, fully dressed.

Uncle Peter laughed to see his nephew ready so early. 'I can tell that you can't wait to get going,' he said.

Akimbo nodded. 'I've been looking forward to this day for a long time.'

Uncle Peter cut several pieces of bread and spread them thickly with margarine and jam. This, together with a hot mug of tea, was Akimbo's breakfast, which he ate eagerly.

'You must have seen quite a few snakes before,' Uncle Peter said. 'Living out at the game park you could hardly miss them.'

'Yes,' said Akimbo. 'But I've not had the chance to look at them closely. They're usually slithering away under a bush or into a hole.'

Uncle Peter nodded. 'That's why snake parks are so important,' he said. 'People can see snakes at close quarters. They can learn all about them.'

They finished breakfast and set off for the snake park in Uncle Peter's truck. It was just outside the town, and the journey took a little while, but at last they were there. Akimbo recognised it from the photographs and felt great pride when he saw his uncle's name spelt out on the sign outside the entrance.

Over the next two hours, Uncle Peter showed Akimbo every corner of the park. He showed him the enclosure, with its trees and branches set out to give the snakes a natural habitat. He showed him the special cages, dimly lit, and each containing one or two snakes. He showed him the small

laboratory, where there were snakes preserved in bottles, coiled and lifeless but still looking as if at any moment they could spring out of the bottles. Then there was a collection of snake eggs, all neatly labelled with information about the species and when and where the egg was found.



It was all every bit as interesting as Akimbo had expected, and the time passed very quickly. At mid-morning, Uncle Peter looked at his watch. 'Milking time already,' he said. 'I almost forgot.'

Akimbo was puzzled. Milking time? Did they keep a cow or a goat somewhere? Did they feed milk to the snakes? Surely not.

Uncle Peter saw his nephew's puzzlement and laughed heartily.

'No, not that sort of milking!' he said. 'We milk the snakes for their venom. Haven't you heard about it?'

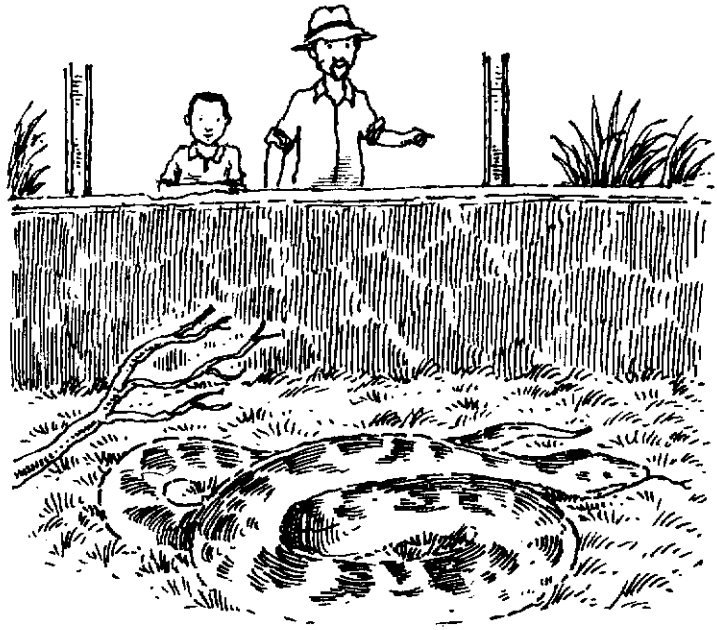
Akimbo shook his head. He had thought that he knew about snakes, but it was obvious that he had a lot to learn.

'Come,' said Uncle Peter. 'I'll go and fetch one of my assistants.'

They went to the edge of the enclosure, where there was a special gate which enabled the staff to go in. The assistant was already standing there, waiting for Uncle Peter, and as he arrived he handed him a list. Uncle Peter looked at it for a few moments and then nodded.

'We're going to milk two cobras today,' he said to Akimbo. 'One of them is a banded cobra, the other a king cobra. They're big snakes.'

Akimbo peered over the edge of the enclosure wall, with its natural habitat filled with snakes. Down below he could see a large snake, lying on a patch of grass, almost immobile apart from the flicking in and out of its forked tongue. Uncle Peter



followed his nephew's gaze.

'He uses that tongue of his to smell things,' he explained. 'He's not pulling tongues at anybody! But he's not the one we want to see.'

He spoke for a few moments to his assistant and then told Akimbo to join a small group of visitors standing beside the wall.

'We let visitors to the park watch this,' he said. 'It gives them a bit of excitement.'

As Akimbo went and stood beside the band of

visitors, Uncle Peter and his assistant let themselves into the enclosure. Akimbo held his breath as his uncle made his way towards the other side; the whole place seemed to be teeming with snakes. What if he trod on one, or one of them decided to attack him? Presumably his uncle knew exactly what he was doing, but Akimbo still could not help feeling worried.

Suddenly Uncle Peter and his assistant stopped. The assistant had been carrying a long pole with what looked like a clip of some sort at one end and a lever at the other. Uncle Peter took the pole from his assistant and very slowly advanced on a large snake which was sunning itself no more than a few paces away from him.

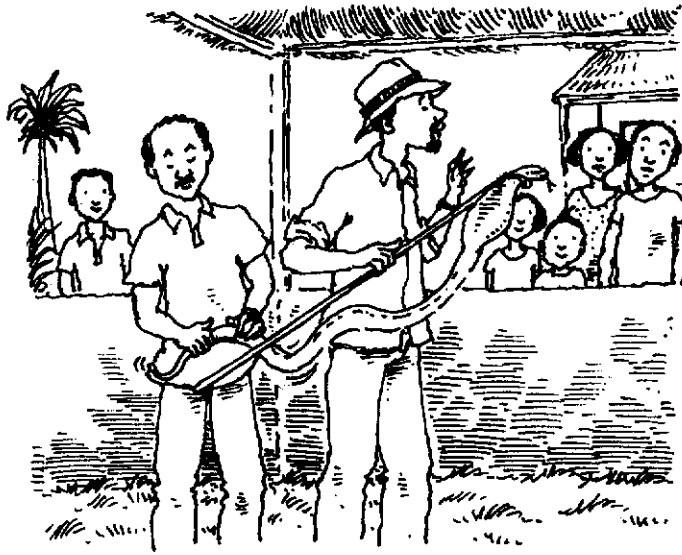


It seemed as if the snake was unaware of the presence of the men.

Akimbo watched as his uncle inched his way towards it. Was the snake asleep, or did it just not care? Perhaps it was tame, like the snakes which snake charmers carry in their baskets.

Suddenly the snake uncoiled itself and its head darted forward and up. Akimbo drew in his breath. There, swaying before his uncle, its cobra's hood fanned out, was one of the most dangerous snakes in Africa. Uncle Peter stood quite still. He did not seem in the least bit worried about the snake, and with a sudden movement of his arm he pushed forward the pole and pinned the snake's head to the ground. Then, pressing gently at the lever, he closed the jaws of the pole about the snake, just below its head.

The rest of the snake was not at all happy about what was happening. The body and tail lashed backward and forward as the angry snake attempted to wriggle free from the restraint. At a signal from Uncle Peter, the assistant stepped forward and grasped the tail of the snake firmly in his hand. Then the two men lifted up their captive



and carried him writhing towards the wall where the observers were standing.

Another assistant had appeared and he now took over Uncle Peter's place, while handing him a small glass jar. Uncle Peter stepped forward and spoke to the people staring over the low wall of the enclosure.

'This jar,' he explained, 'has a thin plastic membrane stretched over the top of it, rather like a plastic bag. I am now going to push the snake's fangs through this and force it to eject its venom – its poison – into the jar. That's what we call

milking a snake.'

'But why do you do it?' somebody asked. 'Isn't it bad for the snake?'

Uncle Peter smiled. 'They may not like it very much, but it does them no harm. And as to why we do it, we collect the venom for the laboratories that make the serum to treat snake bites. You need the venom if you want to make the medicine to cure snake bites. That's why we do it.'

He turned away and walked to the assistant holding the pole. Then, very carefully, Uncle Peter took hold of the snake just behind its head and held it firmly between his thumb and forefinger. The jaws of the snake-catching pole were released and the snake's head held over the jar.

Akimbo saw that the snake's mouth was now open, and two wicked-looking curled fangs were exposed. Uncle Peter now forced the head down and the fangs pierced the membrane on the top of the jar. With another finger, he pressed the top of the snake's head, and out came the venom – pure, clear drops of deadly poison, ejected through holes



at the end of those vicious fangs. The crowd held its breath as the milking took place. There was not much venom to harvest, no more than a teaspoonful perhaps, but Akimbo knew it was more than enough to kill a fully grown man.

The milking over, Uncle Peter held the snake away from him, and at his command, both he and his assistant let go of the reptile, tossing it safely away. The snake shot off, indignant and confused, and they, in the meantime, went off to find their next victim.

The milking of the second cobra was a quicker affair, as there was no explanation and the snake was a bit smaller. Then, with that snake released, Uncle Peter pocketed the two jars of venom and left the enclosure.

Akimbo joined his uncle's side as they made their way to the laboratory.

'We've got to get this into the fridge as soon as possible,' said Uncle Peter. 'It's no use if we let it spoil.'

In the laboratory, each jar was carefully labelled and then stored in a large fridge in the corner of the room. There were many other jars there, all similarly labelled, all awaiting collection by the people who make the snake bite serum. Now it was lunchtime and Akimbo and his uncle sat down to eat a sandwich in his uncle's small office. It was a comfortable room, cool and secluded, and filled with books and pictures of snakes.

'There's just about everything here that you could want to find out about snakes,' said Uncle

Peter proudly. 'But, all in all, experience with snakes is the best way to find out about them.'

He handed Akimbo a chart with pictures of many different snakes on it. 'You can have that,' he said. 'You never know when it might come in useful.'

Akimbo looked at the pictures. There were quite a few snakes on it that he very much hoped he would never have to meet!