

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Out In The Midday Sun

Elspeth Huxley

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# About the Book

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Elspeth Huxley captivated readers throughout the world with her ‘memories of an African childhood’ in *The Flame Trees of Thika* and *The Mottled Lizard*. In this final volume of her trilogy she tells the story of her adult life in Africa, in which the vigorous and evoked personalities – from pioneer Lord Delamere and Baroness Blixen to Jomo Kenyatta – blend with her superb description of the social, cultural and political upheavals of the time.

OUT IN THE MIDDAY SUN

Elspeth Huxley was born in 1906 and spent most of her childhood in Kenya. She was educated at the European School in Nairobi and at Reading University, where she took a diploma in agriculture, and at Cornell University, USA. In 1929 she joined the Empire Marketing Board as a press officer. She married Gervas Huxley in 1931 and travelled widely with him in America, Africa and elsewhere. She was on the BBC General Advisory Council from 1952 to 1959, when she joined the Monckton Advisory Commission on Central Africa. She wrote novels, detective fiction, biography and travel titles, and her books include *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959), *The Mottled Lizard* (1962), *The Challenge of Africa* (1971), *Livingstone and His African Journeys* (1974), *Florence Nightingale* (1975), *Scott of the Antarctic* (1977), *Nellie: Letters from Africa* (1980), *Whipsnade: Captive Breeding for Survival* (1981), *The Prince Buys the Manor* (1982) and *Last Days in Eden* (1985, with Hugo van Lawick). She died in 1997.



ELSPETH HUXLEY

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OUT IN THE  
MIDDAY SUN

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My Kenya



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# Foreword

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If you live long enough you find, much to your surprise, that you have lived through a part of history; people and events that you recall as if they had lived and happened yesterday vanish into a seamless past and turn into legends. To anyone aged thirty, what happened fifty years ago seems as remote and peculiar as, say, the Crimean War or the War Between the States appeared to people of my generation. I think this is especially so in the case of British colonial history in Africa, which ended over twenty years ago. Elderly colonials have become period pieces in their own lifetimes; and now that they are obsolete and therefore harmless, a certain indulgence has crept into the general attitude towards them, softening the disdain in which they were previously held.

This book is not, most emphatically not, an attempt at a political history, or any other kind of proper history. Nor does it take a stance on the wrongs and rights of colonialism. For good or ill, colonialism happened, as it has throughout the centuries from the time of the Assyrians, and I expect before, to the time of the USSR. I have little doubt that it will continue to happen, since the strong and confident will always wish to spread their doctrines and customs, and often their rule, to the less strong and confident, thereby enhancing their own strength and (as they hope) security, regardless of ethics.

All I have attempted to do in these pages is to put on record memories of some of the people and places of eastern Africa, mainly of Kenya, in the period between the First and Second World Wars. I have not brought down a guillotine fore and aft, so that the time-scale now and then extends backwards into earlier years and forwards into later ones. I have been greatly helped by many friends, some of them children or other relatives of the earlier members of the white tribe of Kenya, some of them tough old survivors pushing ninety, or even past that tidemark, who have lent me letters and diaries, and gone to much trouble to recall their own memories of fifty years ago and more. A list of names at this point would, I think, be rather tedious, so I have acknowledged their help in notes to each chapter at the end of the book. I hope they will forgive this form of thanksgiving which cannot, however offered, be adequate; I am deeply grateful to them all.

After Kenya's independence in 1963 some of the place-names were changed, African ones replacing those bestowed by British geographers and agents. In the main I have continued to employ the old colonial names, because they were in use at the time which I have been writing, but I have indicated the modern ones.

The Rhodes House Library in Oxford, which has assembled, and continues to assemble, a splendid collection of colonial records, was, as always, most helpful, and my thanks are due to the Librarian, Mr Alan Bell, and his staff; also to Mrs Olive Gorton Cirencester, who with great patience and, I must assume, at times second sight, has managed to decipher both my handwriting and my two-fingered stabs at a typewriter well on its way to becoming an interesting and, I hope, in due course, a valuable antique.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Hat Overboard

An old diary is as good a starting point as any. I have never kept proper diaries, only little pocket ones recording the barest details somehow or other, that for 1933 survives. It was in January 1933 that I set out to return to Africa after an absence of eight years.

*January 19. Left Victoria on P and O Express at 1.50 p.m. Seen off by Frank MacD, Jim and Polly, Michael and Otilie, Aunt Vera Basil Marriot, Eaton, Wilkie. Very cold, snow on ground.*

'Seen off' – every voyage started with a party then. Station platforms and quaysides were crowded with well-wishers come to see you off with a Godspeed. Laughter, speculation, promises, awkwardness as time stretched out and one had said all there was to say. Once aboard there would be flowers, telegrams, an attentive steward disposing of suitcases, the smell peculiar to ships compounded of – what? Paint, ropes, sea-water, some kind of disinfectant? An exciting smell anyway, and an exciting bustle. Departure was a ceremony investing the traveller with a little brief authority, a fleeting importance.

'I'll write from Port Said.'

'Something light for the voyage. A new Ellery Queen.'

'Press photographers. Who d'you think's on board?'

'Some actress ...'

Puffing grandly, the engine moved, the platform became a mosaic of waving hands, faces blurred and vanished. Once out of the station, sleet rattled on the window-panes. We were bound first for Marseilles.

A year and one month since we married, and now we must part, Gervas for Ceylon and I for Kenya. The Depression was upon us, gaunt faces under shabby caps stared from street corners, the economic blood-stream of the Western world was clogged. One day Gervas said: 'Our horse has been shot under us.' The organisation that employed us both was to be abolished – axed, we called it, the Geddes axe.

We had no resources, but Gervas had a friend called John Still, an unusual man, a poet, who had spent his life, save for a brief interlude as prisoner-of-war in Turkey, in the jungles and mountains of Ceylon. He had written evocatively about them in a book called *The Jungle Tide*. The Depression had not spared Ceylon and, in particular, the tea plantations. Chests of unsaleable tea were piled up in warehouses and were even, we heard, being thrown into the sea.

A bold counter-stroke was planned. The world had too much tea. If people could be persuaded to drink more of it, even a few extra cups each per year, the surplus would melt away. A body was formed to carry out this plan (or try to anyway) and someone was needed to direct it, starting from scratch.

One cold November day I met Gervas at Paddington station en route for Oxford, where his father lived. It was dark and drizzly, soot-laden steam swirled around us, locomotives panted, whistles blew, lights were halo'd in smoke, it was like being at the bottom of a grimy sea. Over a cup of tea in the buffet he said: 'Shall I accept?' It would mean, for him, continuous travel for at least three years, and his modest salary would not provide tickets for me. Our perch must be abandoned – a little rented flat, sparsely furnished, in a turret, one room (three in all) on each floor. (On top was the sitting room whose ceiling had been painted midnight blue with silver stars.) The question was rhetorical. Three months later we were on our way.

Gervas had indeed been fortunate, and my luck was in too. Rather more than a year before, the pioneer of white settlement in Kenya, Lord Delamere (third Baron), had died. His life in Africa had spanned, or very nearly spanned, Kenya's colonial period up to date; he had entered into every controversy and been involved in almost every development. To write his life would be to write Kenya's history over the past thirty years, a fascinating but exacting task for which I had no qualifications beyond some experience in journalism and a little knowledge of the country. Nevertheless I wrote to Delamere's widow Gladys and she, to my surprise and delight, authorised me to write the biography.

There remained the obstacle of money. Clearly I had to get to Kenya where most of the material lay. Here I was fortunate again: a publisher expressed interest and offered an advance of two hundred pounds. To sign the contract, I was led through silk-paneled anterooms, half expecting to see clerks perched on high stools clasping quill pens and bent over ledgers; then up a wide staircase and into the presence of a tall, stooping figure who rose courteously from a commodious arm-chair, extended an arm and touched my hand – the merest touch, putting me in mind of a limp fish. This was Harold Macmillan.

So here we were, bound for Marseilles and the parting of our ways.

*January 20. Lunch on board ss Maloja. Went to Hotel Beauvais, dinner at the Frégate, very good meal. Gervas went on board 1*

Alone, I returned to the hotel. My ship, the ss *Malda*, was due next morning but failed to arrive. Marseilles in January was bleak, lonely and cold. I wrote letters. Next morning the *Malda* put in; amid a rattle of winches and shouts of seamen I climbed a gangway slippery with salt spray, and we steamed into a wintry Mediterranean sea.

*January 23. Sick. Cold. Passed Corsica. Dr Burkitt on board.*

Dr Burkitt I knew. He was one of Kenya's characters and a great doctor in his way, but his way was rough and ready and I was thankful that I had never been his patient. Had I been suffering from malaria, I would have been made to sit naked in a tub in the draughtiest place available, such as a veranda, and sponged continuously with cold water – teeth chattering, blue with cold – until either I expired or my temperature sank to normal. This was Dr Burkitt's famous cold-water cure, based on the theory that the parasites which cause malaria and other fevers thrive only at high body temperatures, and perish at normal ones, so that if you can only get the temperature down, you overcome the disease. Apparently the theory worked, and Dr Burkitt cured many sufferers; if he also killed some, they would probably have died anyway. The theory was extended to horses, and became the standard treatment for the disease known as horse-sickness for which no other cure or antidote was known. Many is the hour I had spent sponging down shivering and miserable ponies tethered to a tree while buckets of water were brought in relays. Dread and affection competed equally for ascendancy in the minds of the doctor's patients.

Dr Roland Burkitt had arrived from Ireland in 1911 to start the first private practice in Nairobi.<sup>1</sup> He was a surgeon, not a physician, but in Africa medicine couldn't be shut into compartments. Many Burkitt stories were in circulation, such as the one describing how he had driven a hundred miles or so to a sick woman – he would drive any distance, anywhere, by day or night, in the old rattle-trap of a car, to answer a call – and had stripped her naked, bundled her into the back of his jalopy and driven furiously over bumps, potholes, rocks and rivers to the hospital, stopping at intervals to take her temperature. As they proceeded, the woman's temperature fell and Dr Burkitt removed first his jacket, then his shirt and finally his trousers to clothe his patient. When they arrived at the hospital, Dr Burkitt was naked and the woman fully clad.

That, at any rate, was the story. Another related how a patient, loaded into the doctor's car while in a coma, came round to find that he was sharing the back seat with a dead antelope. The doctor always carried a rifle in his car and would now and then alight to shoot something for the pot when on his errands of mercy. Snakes were a favourite in his diet. Another of his favourite cures was for bleeding.

Chief among his enemies were the ultra-violet rays of the tropical sun, which he considered lethal. Sun helmets of cork or piñon, double terais (two thicknesses of felt with red flannel in between) and spine-pads, also lined with red material and covering the back, were to him essential armour against these ever-threatening rays. Nearly all the Europeans in East Africa at this time held the same views and took the same precautions. I had started the voyage with a handsome new double terai, but it blew off in the Red Sea. 'Hats overboard' was not a cry to galvanise the ship's crew into rescue operations, and the hat bobbed away out of sight.

Next day we anchored off Port Sudan, where passengers disembarked to stretch legs and ride upon camels. Not, perhaps, the most alluring of prospects but I did not want to be left out. Dr Burkitt was horrified. In his powerful brogue he forecast the dire disasters should I venture hatless ashore – dementia praecox, cardiac failure, renal occlusion, possibly even flat feet. Actinic rays softened the brain, rotted the guts and sapped the moral fibre. Having lived since an early age in Africa, and being young, I thought I knew best and went ashore at Port Sudan and had my camel ride. I suffered no ill effects and did not hesitate to rub this in to Dr Burkitt. He bore no malice, merely remarking: 'If God had intended you for a salamander he'd have given you a tail.' I never wore a sunhat in Africa again.

Like all ships plying between British and East African ports, the *Malda* carried a number of colonial officials proceeding on, or returning from, their home leave, which lasted for six months as a rule; and in a very short time they sorted themselves into groups depending on their branch of the service. At the top came the Brahmins, men of the administration – provincial and district commissioners, district officers and officials of the secretariat. Next came men of the various technical services – medical, agricultural, veterinary, educational, police and so on; finally, at the bottom of the heap, employees of the Public Works department and the Railway. Like dairy cows who, on entering their milking parlours, find their way without hesitation to their correct position, each official knew his place. Wives followed suit. It was interesting to see a pecking order so quickly established and so faithfully observed.

Young cadets going out for their first tour of duty were kept at a distance by the Brahmins, but rewarded now and then, like a dog with a chocolate drop, by a ritual 'good-morning'. For their part they were on the lookout for girls to stroll with on the boat deck and admire sunsets that inflamed sea and sky with passionate colours; or, when darkness fell, to lean over the rail and watch phosphorescence shining and writhing as the ship's bow sliced into the waves; or to search the sky for a first glimpse of the Southern Cross.

Tables in the dining saloon were status thermometers. The grandest passengers – a colonial governor perhaps, a visiting politician or extra-rich Americans going out for a safari – sat at the Captain's table. Next in prestige came the table presided over by the First Officer, then the Chief Engineer's, the doctor's, the purser's and so on down the scale. You always changed for dinner. Very early in the voyage a sports organiser emerged, no one knew quite how, from the ranks of the passengers, and thereafter competitive games raged almost without an interval – deck quoits, shuffleboard, deck tennis. Territories in the shape of deck chairs were staked out ear

on and faithfully respected. At eleven in the morning stewards came round with hot soup west of Suez, cold drinks east of the Canal when the ship's officers changed from blue uniforms into white ones.

You took in coal at Port Said and at Aden, and the voyage lasted nineteen days. Then came into view the low green island of Mombasa with its coconut palms and customs sheds, its white lime-washed houses and red-tiled roofs and lush vegetation. The *Malda* steamed slowly between island and mainland into Kilindini harbour, by then equipped with deep-water berths so that you could walk down a gangway on to the island instead of, as in the past, being ferried from ship to shore on tenders.

Mombasa's history is long and bloody; the dogs of war have made a killing here, many killings. Now that they were kennel for the time being the island, lying like a viridian tongue between two mainland lips half-closed over a mouthful of sparkling blue creeks and inlets, presented a gentle aspect to the world. The island of war (its old name) had become an island of colour. bougainvilleas were everywhere, cherry-red, brilliant orange, royal purple, smothering the houses; flamboyants, hibiscus, datu oleander, frangipani, many other flowering shrubs dazzled the eye: wonderful names, wonderful colours. Dark-foliaged mango trees encircled by a dark band of shade arose from the greenery, queer-shaped baobabs with grey glistening boles and outstretching branches stood starkly upright, coconut palms fringed the mainland like sentinels guarding the outskirts of the continent.

The temptation to indulge in lotus-eating is always strong on Mombasa island and all along this coast, which used to be known by the mellifluous name of Azania: white beaches, coral reefs, warmth and somnolence, singing cicadas and brilliant-plumaged birds inhabiting aromatic bush, the rustle of palm-fronds, melodious Swahili words falling softly on the ear. But the impulse had to be resisted; the up-country train left at half-past four. There was time, however, for a visit to the Old Town on the other side of the island, and the old harbour with its immemorial dhows. The time was right for such a visit for the harbour was crowded with dhows from Oman and Dubai, from Jeddah and the coast of Malabar, coming in on the north-east monsoon, the *kaskazi*, as they had been doing for centuries, almost unchanged. And Dr Burkitt was the ideal companion, for he had a house on the mainland and knew Mombasa well. I never visited his house but was told that, like everything else about Dr Burkitt, it was unusual. The walls of both ground floor and upper storey were built only half-way up, leaving a four-foot gap between wall and roof, and wire netting was substituted for glass; agreeable when zephyr-like breezes whispered in from the sea, less so when torrential rain and force-nine gales soaked and flooded everything and everyone inside.

We proceeded, as everyone did, to the big, hot customs shed where dhow captains spread their intricately patterned carpets for sale. Many are the homes of retired East Africans enriched by the glowing colours of a rug bought for a few pounds in that sweltering shed.

Then there were Zanzibar chests, thickly studded with brass nails and also much-sought-after when the dhows came in. Few of them actually came from Zanzibar; most were made in the Gulf ports or in India with the European market in mind. But now again you could find one that had been used for its proper purpose, to stow the clothing and possessions of the sailors. My father had managed to find one such and had bought it for me as a wedding present. It was a Lamu chest, smaller and simpler than the Zanzibar ones and more roughly carpentered. Sometimes I wish that it could tell of its experiences, of the creaking dhows in which it had traversed the Indian ocean, of the ports at which its crew had whiled away the furnace days, drinking endless cups of sweet thick coffee poured from those tall, thin, swan-necked pitchers of the Arab world, while waiting for the monsoon to blow their vessel back to Lamu.

In the old harbour the dhows lay almost hull to hull, their sails furled, their waists populated by sailors in round white caps and brightly printed kekois, cooking on charcoal braziers, chewing betel nut or mira'a, sleeping, gossiping, stowing or unloading cargo. You would not have cared to be one of their women who, when they travel, were packed into a sort of cage made of coconut matting, windowless and airless, swathed in black robes with only slits for eyes, horribly seasick and never allowed to emerge for fresh air or exercise.

The mottled walls of Fort Jesus slope almost to the sea's brink, leaving just enough room for a narrow beach on which men were at work mending the big lateen sails, now made of canvas, formerly of coir matting. There are many kinds of dhow and they have fascinating names: Booms, Sambuks, Ghanjabs, Kotias, Badans, Zarooks, M'tepes, each built in a different sea-port and to a different design. Their cargoes are innocent now – salt fish, dates, henna, copper wire, mangrove poles, cooking pots, ghee – but less than a century ago, could one have stood on the ramparts of Fort Jesus, one would have seen slaves whipped on board, to be packed in layers, one atop the other so there would have been no room to move. How many perished! And these were the survivors of those who had trudged, yoked and fettered, from the far interior. This was an Arab trade, and it was put an end to by the Royal Navy.

Every guide book to Mombasa tells the story of Fort Jesus, built by the Portuguese at the end of the sixteenth century, Kenya's most solid (though by no means oldest) monument to its past. It is a gruesome story of sieges, captures, recaptures, massacres and murders that punctuated three centuries of struggle between Arab and Portuguese for possession of Mombasa and the coast of Azania. One episode in particular, I have often thought, could be made into a powerful drama for stage and screen. It is a tale of revenge.

Yusuf, the Hamlet of the piece, was the son and heir of Hasan, the sheikh of Malindi, who was loyal to the Portuguese overlords. When Yusuf was a boy of seven the Portuguese Captain of Port Jesus, an over-bearing and belligerent man, quarrelled with Malindi's ruler and bribed African tribesmen from the mainland with two thousand pieces of cloth to murder Hasan. He then sent Hasan's severed head to Goa, the seat of Portuguese government, followed by the boy Yusuf, to be brought up as a Christian by Augustinian monks, indoctrinated with Portuguese culture, and groomed to become the sheikh of Mombasa. Translated into Dom Geronimo Chingulia, he was married to a Portuguese girl of good family and, as a grown man, sent back to Mombasa to take over the heritage.

The plan went awry. Back in Africa, the pull of Islam began to loosen the hold of Christianity, and his Arab blood to draw

Yusuf back to his own people. It was said that he paid secret midnight visits to his father's grave and prayed there in the Muslim fashion, and that a Portuguese spy shadowed him and reported his behaviour to the Captain.

On 15 August 1631 the Feast of the Assumption was due to be celebrated in the chapel of the Fort. Thither Yusuf made his way with a band of followers. As the Captain greeted him, he stabbed the man to death and then, in the chapel, similarly despatched the Captain's wife and daughter together with the officiating priest. A holocaust followed. All the garrison in the Fort were massacred followed by nearly all the Portuguese in the town. The women were offered a chance of life – of a sort, in Muslim harems – if they abjured their faith. They refused, and were hurled into a boat and drowned in the harbour.

Predictably, Yusuf did not enjoy a prosperous reign and die in his bed. After beating off an attempt to recapture the Fort by a fleet from Goa, he laid Mombasa waste and sailed away to the Red Sea. When the Portuguese re-occupied the island two years later they found it almost deserted. Yusuf was killed by pirates. History does not relate what happened to his unfortunate wife.

Thus ended a bungled Portuguese attempt to create a 'good native' imbued with the culture of the colonial power, loyal to its authority and trained to govern in its name. After several dreadful sieges and massacres, Portuguese rule in Mombasa ceased on 21 November 1729, when Fort Jesus was abandoned and the few half-starved survivors struggled down to Mozambique in two dhows.

So, after an interlude of three centuries, the Arabs were back to hoist their plain red flag over Fort Jesus. It was flying there in 1933, for Mombasa, together with all this East African coastline, still belonged, in theory, to the Sultan of Zanzibar, the ruler of the residual Arab empire. The British leased a ten-mile-wide strip for an annual rent that had started at £17,000 but had gradually risen, in the face of stiff opposition by the tenant, over the years. This was a British Protectorate, not a colony. Perhaps the distinction was a hair-splitting one, but Arab law continued to be practised and the Muslim faith and various Arab customs to be observed. This was one of those untidy forms of *modus vivendi* that look hypocritical but work pretty well. The Sultan's representative in Mombasa, the chief Liwali Sir Ali bin Salim, was much respected by Europeans, generous in charitable causes and even welcomed in the Mombasa club which, following the general pattern of the day, admitted only European members with an occasional exception, like Sir Ali and the Aga Khan.

The true bringers of peace to this Isle of War were no conquering heroes or bold adventurers but a middle-aged, middle-class consul in Zanzibar, who persuaded the Sultan to accept a Protectorate, and a Glaswegian ship-owner, founder of the British Indian Steam Navigation Company, whose statue, bespattered by bird droppings and looking as if an umbrella should have been included, stands in the commercial centre of the town. It was Sir William Mackinnon who, after years of patient prodding, persuaded a more reluctant government to grant, in 1888, a royal charter to his Imperial British East Africa Company: a charter but no cash, which was subscribed (£250,000) by a number of hopeful philanthropists wishing to open up trade in the interior.<sup>3</sup> Their hopes were not fulfilled; the British Government stepped in to bale out the company; soon after came engineers and surveyors to build the Uganda Railway and, incidentally, to found the club near the foot of the grim fort, with a fine view over the harbour. (And delicious fresh sea food and an agreeable swimming pool.)

The missionaries were here before the consuls and the engineers: amazing men and women (they brought their wives, and nearly always buried their children) who faced terrible privations and imminent death in a hostile Muslim land whose ruling class they offended deeply by taking in and caring for freed and escaped slaves.

In due course an Anglican cathedral, substantial if not exactly beautiful, arose on Mombasa Island not far from fort and club; also a Roman Catholic one not much farther away. It was still a common practice for a young man making his career in Kenya to seek his bride during his long leave, get engaged, go ahead to build or otherwise acquire a dwelling, and then to send for his fiancée. He would be at the quayside to meet her, and very often she would go direct from ship to cathedral, pausing en route at the home of some unknown but hospitable lady to change into bridal attire. How bleak it must have been for a young girl to plight her troth to a man she might not have seen for a year or more, so far from her family, given in marriage by a total stranger. Did these girls feel elated, or afraid? A bit of both, I daresay.<sup>4</sup>

My parents had hoped to meet me at Mombasa but they were over four hundred miles away up-country and could not afford the fare. The Depression had its strangle-hold on Kenya as on everywhere else, and the farmers' plight was almost desperate. A whole bag of maize fetched only as much as would buy one gallon of petrol, if that, and some farmers hitched oxen to their cars to be towed in to their local town for essential shopping, all on credit, and for interviews with their bank managers, all in vain. To make matters worse the most devastating locust invasion in living memory had struck eastern Africa at the end of the 1920s. Swarms blackened the sky, descended on crops and pastures and left behind barren stalks and earth stripped of all vegetation; branches of trees broke beneath their weight and they had even halted trains by smothering the track so that the wheels lost their grip. They left behind a generation of hoppers which advanced in droves greedy to devour anything the swarms had spared and to invade new territories, where they turned into adult locusts and started the whole process over again. In 1931, nearly half the maize crop grown on European farms was destroyed. By the time of my arrival the worst was over, but the threat was still very much alive and would continue for some years.

What had been the Uganda Railway when I first knew it had become the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours and was very much smartened up. Powerful Garrett engines had replaced the old ones that had run on eucalyptus logs, spat sparks which started grass fires and paused for long drinks at almost every station. The old trains had no corridors, so you were isolated in your compartment except when you got out at stations to stretch your legs, and to have dinner at Voi and breakfast at Makindu. You ate in grubby, unadorned dak bungalows lit by safari lanterns; the food was pretty dreadful and the drinks tepid, but you could make new acquaintances or greet old ones and, at Voi, you might very likely hear lions grunting in the bush around. When you got back to your compartment your bedding would have been spread on the hard seats and you would batten down for the night.

Each compartment had its small washroom, equipped with a built-in bottle-opener which Julian Huxley, in a book about Kenya

African travels,<sup>5</sup> adduced as proof of what terrible toppers Kenya settlers were. This was thought to be unfair, because you could get no drinking water on the train and so carried bottles of mineral water and needed an opener when you came to brush your teeth. Even now there was a corridor, a dining car and five-course meals. There were still three classes: first for senior civil servants (who travelled free), the richer Europeans and a sprinkling of wealthy Indians; second for all the other Europeans and Indians; third for Africans, who crowded into trucks equipped with benches, taking their food and a great many small children and babies. There was nothing official about this grading system; if any African had been rich enough he could have travelled first class if he wanted to; the time, none was, or did. I travelled second and paid, I noted in my diary, sixty shillings – quite a lot in those days. Third class, I think, cost eight shillings.

Dust was the bane of the journey, a fine red dust that drifted into the compartments no matter how hard you tried to exclude it, and in the heat of the Taru desert to keep the windows tightly shut would have been to consign yourself to an oven. The dust got into everything, your nose, your eyes, your clothing, and when passengers arrived at Nairobi their faces were brick-red and hair and clothes stiff with the red powder.

But when you set the dust and dirt against the sight that greeted you when you looked out at dawn, they weighed as little as a pin against a pyramid. It was one of the great sights of the world. Even without the animals it would have been spectacular, with the thin pure light of sunrise, the colour of a fine Moselle, flooding over this enormous savannah and picking out every tree, every fence in the surface of the plain; far beyond, the white dome of Kilimanjaro seemed to hover in the western sky. But it was the animals that brought life and wonder to the scene. Thousands, tens of thousands of them could be seen from the carriage window, from pygmy mongooses peering out of their burrows to – if you were lucky – mighty elephants in family parties, from dappled, mild-eyed giraffes like tall-masted ships of the veld to graceful little shiny ‘tommies’ or zebras shimmering in the sunlight: lumbering kongonis, heavy dew-lapped elands, a rhino perhaps, standing fore-square with horn uplifted, silver-backed jackals trotting home to their dens after night’s foraging.

The animals could not, I suppose, be said to be living at peace with one another, because predators were constantly hunting their prey, but only when they were hungry; species did not do battle against species, or herds vie with each other for power and glory; no animal oppressed or tortured another; they shared the pastures, the bush, the shade and foliage of trees, the salt-licks and the drinking places without dispute or rancour. They did not, as Walt Whitman put it, whine about their condition, weep for their sin or agonise over their duty to God:

*... not one is demented with the mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

Even man, the arch-killer, fitted into this harmonious-seeming state of affairs. To the left of the railway line, as far as the eye could see and farther, lay the Maasai reserve; and the Maasai, by and large, left the animals alone. They killed lions to protect their livestock, and young boys might hunt birds with bows and arrows, but otherwise they did not molest the wild creatures. Being nomadic, they had no crops and gardens to protect. Wild animals could come and go as they wished on their seasonal migrations. One of the early pioneers in Kenya, a tough weather-beaten Scot who made a living by trading in cattle, and had penetrated with a few porters far into the then little-known Maasai reserve, told me that when he pitched his camp, somewhere down beyond the Maasai river, the hartebeests and Thomson’s gazelles, the wildebeests and jackals, would come right up to the tent to sniff unfamiliar odours out of curiosity and quite without fear. He said that he had felt some embarrassment, if not reluctance, to raise his rifle against the unsuspecting beasts. ‘You didn’t shoot them, surely?’ I said. He shrugged his shoulders. ‘The porters had to eat.’

At the time of which I write, these great animal herds had not yet been seriously depleted in the game reserves, although outside them they were already being harried and in places ‘shot out’, not by sportsmen, whose bags were strictly limited by licence, but by farmers, black and white. National parks were not to come into existence until 1948, but early in the Colony’s history shooting had been prohibited in game reserves. Poaching was still on an insignificant scale. So the animals, for the time being, had little to worry about provided they did not stray out of the protected areas. While they were extraordinarily quick to learn where they were safe from shooting, the deep urges of migration sometimes betrayed them. These inbuilt compulsions to trek away in search of fresh feeding and breeding grounds overrode the lessons of experience, and exposed them to fatal dangers when they crossed the unfenced boundaries of the game reserves.

In the eight years that had elapsed since I looked out of the window of the train at this variety of creatures grazing and browsing and frisking their tails, a great change had taken place in my own attitude, and that of many others, towards them. In my childhood, I had enjoyed stalking and shooting the creatures of the veld and bush. I had owned and cherished a rifle; learned from my African companions the elements of tracking; collected and cured the heads, taken measurements of horns, read with enjoyment books by professional hunters, and shared the prevailing belief that shooting wild animals was an exciting test of skill sometimes spiced with danger, to be enjoyed by all who loved the countryside and hoped to learn its lore by trudging on foot through bush and forest with every sense alert.

Even before I left Kenya at the age of eighteen, the fact that the end of a successful hunt was the destruction of a beautiful animal had begun to nibble at the roots of my enjoyment. The pleasures of the hunt were undeniable: those early mornings when shafts of sunlight gilded tree-trunks and sparkled on dew-beaded grasses and on a mantle of silver cobwebs; the bell-like call of birds; the monkey-shaken treetops, the air’s purity, the thrilling glimpse of an animal frozen into immobility before bounding silently away.

But that these sensual pleasures should lead to pain and death on a bright morning had begun to seem a sacrilege. Not only that had begun to seem unnecessary. Animal photography was nothing new, but before the development of telephoto lenses it was crude and the best photographs were taken at night, by flashlight, which was difficult, expensive to arrange and attended by more failures than successes.

Now that was changing. People were beginning to realise that you could get as much enjoyment, if not more, from safari and the pursuit of wild animals by shooting them with a camera instead of with a gun. My little pocket brownie had done excellent work on horses, dogs and people, but herds of zebra or kongoni had appeared merely as blurred dots. Now I had brought with me a second-hand Leica, compact and precise, and this was to be my constant companion.

I would like to write that I never slew an animal after my return, but this would not be true. One of eastern Africa's devastating droughts was going on. Crops were wilting, and the wild creatures, made bold by dwindling supplies of food and water, were invading farmlands in a desperate attempt to survive. A number of reedbuck suddenly appeared in my parents' field of maize and started to demolish it. They came at night, and shouts and sticks and flashlights had failed to drive them away. Neither of my parents had wielded a rifle for years, so I volunteered to do so. I shot three of the reedbuck without difficulty – hunger had blunted their wariness – and did not enjoy it; but it was a case of 'us or them' and not a case of sport. There is the inescapable dilemma, the root cause of the animals' doom everywhere – us or them. In the end, a not so very distant end, 'us' must win.

But in the meanwhile the animals on the left-hand side of the railway line were safe in their reserve. On the right-hand side they were unprotected and therefore scarcer, because the land had been fenced into European-owned ranches and, beyond, lay the hills of Ukambani which were closely cultivated by the Kamba tribe; and the Kamba, unlike the Maasai, were hunters and meat-eaters.

The arrival of the Mombasa train was still an event in Nairobi, and most of the population, black, white and brown, seemed to have gathered on the platform to greet relatives and friends. Gladys Delamere had come to meet me. This was naturally an anxious moment, but Gladys was good at putting people of all sorts at their ease. She had a striking appearance – chalk-white skin, jet-black wiry hair, dark-brown eyes – and gave out a sense of vitality, and of tenseness like a coiled spring. A throaty chuckle and a sense of gaiety softened what would otherwise have been a rather formidable presence. She was welcoming, unpretentious and possessed a great store of energy which, at this time, had insufficient outlet; later, when she was elected Mayor of Nairobi, it found that outlet and she proved to be a hard-working and efficient Mayor. Tania Blixen wrote of her that she was like 'a painted wooden doll'.<sup>6</sup> She struck me as the reverse of doll-like, being so animated and unpredictable. People reacted positively to Gladys; either they liked her or they did not. 'I remember her', her youngest daughter was to write years later, 'as somebody who lit up a room as she walked in, smelling exotically of Chanel No 5, usually with a gardenia pinned to her dress and often smoking a Turkish cigarette'.<sup>7</sup> Naturally I stood in awe of her – she was thirty-five, twice married, sophisticated and self-assured – but she did her best to dispel this feeling, and sweet-talked me off to a hairdresser to have the journey's dust removed, and then to Torr's hotel.

Torr's was Nairobi's grandest building, new since I was last there; a red-brick, four-storeyed edifice on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Hardinge Street (now Kenyatta and Kimathi) and was said, I am not sure by whom, to resemble Stockholm's Town Hall. It had become the rendezvous for Nairobi's café society and for safari parties and others who gathered there for eleven o'clock coffee, post-lunch drinks and, in the evening, epicurean meals produced by a Swiss chef, and dancing to a fashionable band.

At Torr's I was introduced to Ewart Grogan, its creator and proprietor, who was discoursing to a circle of admirers, mostly female, at his favourite table in a sort of palm court. He was a handsome Irishman, then in his sixtieth year, tall and upright with remarkable blue and penetrating eyes, dark arched eyebrows, greying hair and an inexhaustible flow of talk. Words poured from his lips like wine at some Bacchic orgy, intoxicating at the time but, when the orgy was over, you wondered what he had actually said. The usual starting point was some idiotic blunder on the part of the government or the crass ineptitude of bureaucracy in general. I was an expert, in his own way, on economics and finance and also, one gathered, on seduction, taking little or no trouble to conceal his infidelities (in more than one instance blessed with issue) from a long-suffering wife whom everyone liked and respected.

Grogan, as he was generally known, had wit, intelligence and eloquence as well as a measure of flamboyance, but there was something about him I personally found unattractive, perhaps a certain cruelty in his humour and outlook, a streak (as it were) of battering-ram. Without question he was courageous; several of his exploits had become legendary, notably his famous walk from the Cape to Cairo to win the hand of his bride by proving to her father that, although without financial assets, he had resources of another kind.<sup>8</sup> This was in 1899, when central Africa was no place to approach with a butterfly-net. Actually the walk was not from the Cape to Cairo, although that was the title he gave his book, but from the northern tip of Lake Nyassa (now Malawi) to Sobat on the upper Nile, but it was gruelling enough, taking him among ferocious cannibals and almost ruining his health.

He had got his girl and, in 1903, arrived in the East Africa Protectorate,<sup>9</sup> just two years after the Uganda Railway had reached its terminus on Lake Victoria. In East Africa he was to make his somewhat chequered career. There was nothing he liked better than to find a vulnerable spot in the government's hide and, like a hornet, puncture it with his sting. A flaw he discovered in the mining laws prompted him to peg claims all round Nairobi and threaten to dig up Government Road, a threat only averted by the hasty summoning of the Legislative Council which passed an amendment within twenty-four hours. Ewart Grogan was a charmer, a cynic, a swashbuckler, a buccaneer born out of time; generous with money, bold in his commercial ventures; when it came to fortune-seeking his scruples weighed, I should guess, about as much as a grain of sand. He had known Gladys well for thirty years and they had shared a number of tempestuous political experiences. He promised to tell me all he knew – or at any rate some of it – about D (as he was always called) and the pioneering days, and in due course he did, but I learnt more about his own exploits and opinions than about D's achievements.

Gladys took me to her home at Loresho, a coffee farm about six miles outside Nairobi where she lived with her three children



by her previous marriage to Sir Charles Markham.

But pleasant as Loresho was, I could pause there only for a night. Two hundred pounds being insufficient to cover expenses had been fortunate enough to secure a commission from *The Times* to write two articles about the goldfields that had recently been discovered in Kenya and Tanganyika, and in particular about those centred on Kakamega, not far from Lake Victoria. A controversy had sprung up, as controversies always seemed to do in Kenya, about the future of this goldfield. So before starting on the biography I had arranged to go to Kakamega to gather first-hand impressions of what was going on.

## Nuggets and Covered Wagons

The gold rush of 1931/33 in western Kenya and northern Tanganyika is a forgotten episode in East African history, but at the time it was a matter of the utmost excitement and promise. In the midst of all the gloom engendered by the slump plus drought and locusts a gleam of light had suddenly appeared. The first discoveries were on an insignificant scale, but they gathered momentum and soon there was talk of another Rand. Farmers raised their last few shillings and departed for the goldfields with a car-load of shovels and kerais – shallow tin basins used for carrying earth etc – basic camping equipment, one or two African assistants and a whole lot of hope. By the time of my arrival at Kakamega, about forty miles from Lake Victoria, upwards of a thousand European would-be miners were encamped there eagerly panning riverbeds and sinking shafts. Most of the gold was alluvial and in the form of tiny particles, but a nugget weighing four to five ounces had been found and everyone was hoping for a major strike.

The district headquarters, or boma, stood in a grove of blue-gum trees which everywhere marked the passage of British district administration, much as mango trees marked the passage of the Arabs. A Union Jack flew outside the office of the District Commissioner, a grey-haired, elderly man called Colonel Anderson, with one leg stiffened by a war wound. He was coping in a most unruffled manner with the unexpected situations that had sprung at him, situations for which no previous experience could have prepared him. The population of his district, I noted, was 385,680, divided into seventeen sub-tribes of a major tribal group called the Abaluyhia who occupied all this region east of the Lake and the Uganda border, known as North Kavirondo.

Like so many things in Kenya, the gold rush had got entangled in politics. This goldfield lay not in a wilderness like the Klondyke, or on the highveld like the Witwatersrand, but in a thickly populated native reserve. The question of land ownership had always been a complex, persistent and explosive political issue, and in 1930, only one year before gold was found, in an effort to stabilise the situation, a Native Lands Trust Ordinance had passed into law. This had defined the various reserves, one for each tribe or sub-tribe, which were to be 'set aside for the benefit of the native tribes of the Colony forever'. You could not be more definite than that. Each tribe was to have its own territory and no one else, whether an African of a different tribe or a European or an Asian was to have any legal rights therein. So much for the use of the word 'forever' in any human affair, as silly as 'lasting peace'; this years on and all this legislation would be swept away; and lasting peace must await the millennium.

Now the question of mining leases had arisen. To sink a mine and to provide sites for machinery and accommodation for miners must mean making use of African land, even if only temporarily. Mining leases must therefore be negotiated. It must therefore appear to those individuals who, in one way or another, had rights over land, that a mining lease gave those rights away. Three years is indeed a cynical interpretation of 'forever'.

But then – to bottle up, also forever, an important goldfield, if such it should prove to be, in the depths of a depression which in the country, a poor one at the best of times, was virtually broke, hardly seemed sensible. It could be argued that a goldfield, by providing revenue that could be spent on education, health, communications, all the things so urgently in need of money, would indeed 'benefit the native tribes of the Colony' as the ordinance had laid down. So it was a dilemma. Much discussion was taking place in Parliament at Westminster, and in the press both in Britain and in Kenya, but no one knew just how to resolve it. Meanwhile leases for one year only were being granted under strict terms to the mining companies who were beginning to set up shop, and a prospector could come in without a permit.

The result was probably the most gentlemanly gold-rush ever known. Not here swaggering figures in ten-gallon hats and a brace of revolvers flinging down bags of gold-dust on the counters of saloons; not here the drunken quarrels and the bloodshed of sharpshooters we had all been accustomed to by the movies. The District Commissioner had powers to keep out, even to throw out any (in his opinion) undesirable character, and a single white policeman with a handful of African askaris had no difficulty in keeping the peace. Most of the prospectors had settled down, often with their wives, either in tents or in simple dwellings called bandas which could be built at a cost of about fifteen shillings from poles and grass cut from the bush. In the evenings the music of gramophone records and bids at the bridge table were more likely to emanate from tents and bandas than drunken altercating and poker calls.

The local tribesmen sold the gold-seekers milk, eggs (tiny ones from tiny hens) at fifty to the shilling, and plenty of fresh vegetables for a few cents. Kisumu, the railway's original terminus, was only forty miles distant. Kakamega itself was green and pleasant, the gardens full of colour, and drought almost unknown, for it rained nearly every afternoon.

What I remember principally were the fireflies. At night, the ridges and valleys round about sparkled with millions of these insects flashing their signals till the countless stars overhead were matched, it seemed, by another canopy of stars below, as if they had fallen to earth and yet stayed in the sky. Part of a mating ritual, I was told, but this did not seem to explain it. Thousands, tens of thousands

of species of insect find their mates without releasing into the darkness, each one, a pinpoint of brilliance.

I stayed in comfort at a mining camp belonging to a syndicate headed by a rich American called de Ganahl, which had a concession on a small river called the Wachecehe near the place where the original find had been made, and I met the original find. He, also, was an American, by name L. A. Johnson, who had settled in Kenya, if settle is the word, in 1910, after a spell on the Klondyke and adventures in the Spanish-American war. In Kenya he had tried flax and gone bust when the flax boom collapsed in 1921; then he had switched to maize and gone bust again when maize prices collapsed in 1930. That had sent him off prospecting in northern Tanganyika, where he had trudged on foot for thousands of miles and found nothing.

Late in 1930 he formed a syndicate in Eldoret, with four shares of £25 each, to finance a final try. The expedition, consisting of himself, his wife Fanny, two other Europeans and five Africans, set forth from Eldoret in two very ancient Fords and what was left of the £100 after buying petrol and one sack of flour, one of dried beans, one of potatoes and several sacks of posho (maize meal). Once again, they had no luck. When the money ran out they headed for home, making their final camp in the Kakamega district near the Yala river. Next day they panned a tributary of the Yala and found gold. Back in Eldoret they quickly registered another syndicate, borrowed money for petrol and returned to peg out claims along the Yala river. That was the goldfield's beginning. By now the first stage was almost over, and the next stage had arrived when companies with capital were moving in with machinery and mining engineers to sink shafts and exploit the reefs from which the alluvial gold had come.

L. A. Johnson I remember as a tall, bony man with a jutting chin and an ill-fitting set of teeth, who looked every inch the tough prospector, and was as uncommunicative as a mule. 'A grunt or two', wrote one of his neighbours, 'a great hoik and hefty spit and the word "Jesus" was L. A.'s usual comment on most subjects.'<sup>1</sup> When the difficulties of receiving news of world events in the outback – this was before the days of wireless – were under discussion, someone asked 'What do you do when the weekly *East African Standard* doesn't arrive?' Mr Johnson's reply was simply 'use grass'. He, at least, did well out of the goldfields, and when he went to the United States for a visit, Fanny wore a necklace of nuggets.

After a night in de Ganahl's camp, I was introduced, next morning, to the technique of panning, to be rewarded by two very small nuggets, little more than grains, but still, gold. So I could capture a little of the excitement: next time they might be nuggets weighing half a pound. (Even then, not a great fortune; the price was £4 an ounce.) Then I was lowered down the shaft the engineers were in process of sinking to a depth of over a hundred feet. The reef was yielding gold in payable quantities and everyone was optimistic, the new Johannesburg was on its way. But that reef petered out. Others were found, more machinery imported and, in 1938, gold was Kenya's second largest export, next to coffee. After that, output declined, syndicates folded and only a little residual mining went on, mostly over the border in Tanganyika. I am sorry to say that I persuaded Gervas to buy £50 worth of shares in a syndicate that couldn't fail called Paka Neusi, which means black cat. (Moonshine Mining Co. was another of the syndicates.) Although our cat wasn't lucky and we never had a dividend, not even a cent.

Perhaps, in the long run, the failure of the goldfield was fortunate for Kenya. Gold would have enriched the country, and we could have done with some enrichment. But the growth at Kakamega of a new Johannesburg would have entangled the country in endless disputes about African rights, land tenure and leases, and destroyed the peace of this generous and smiling countryside. There are no fireflies in Johannesburg.

I came back from Kakamega by way of Eldoret, then a little farmers' township with a single dusty main street flanked by squat timber-roofed shops and Indian dukas (small shops), and by battered looking box-body cars angle-parked under rows of blue-gum trees. Eldoret was the embryonic capital of the Uasin Gishu plateau. Here you heard more Dutch spoken than English – we called it Dutch but it was really Afrikaans.

On this plateau, Afrikaner farmers outnumbered the British, and they had been the pioneers. I had been fascinated by the plateau's story every since I first heard Cecil Hoey, one of the early settlers who reached East Africa about the same time as Delamere, give his account of how, when he was sitting one day on top of a rock called Sergoit watching three lions at play, he saw on the horizon a long white streak which at first he thought was smoke. Then it became too definite a shape for smoke and it looked more like a river, though he knew this could not be. Gradually it grew closer, and he was able to make out through his binoculars a long line of ox-drawn wagons, their covered tops showing as a dusty white. This was the trek of the Boers to the Uasin Gishu plateau in 1908.

They had not trekked up Africa all the way from the Transvaal – tsetse fly prevented that. They had loaded their wagons with horses, tools, provisions, seeds and ploughs and all their other possessions on to a chartered ship in Delagoa Bay and unloaded them at Mombasa. The railway had laid on five special trains which took them to Nakuru where they camped, and began their preparations for the trek ahead.

Some years later I heard another version of the story from an elderly Dutchman who had taken part in the trek. He had been a boy of fifteen or so. By then in his seventies, he was still alert and active, lean and tough as leather, his brown face wrinkled, his hands calloused from a lifetime of handling reins, whips, plough-handles, rifles. His memory was prodigious; every day, every camp, every event had remained stamped as clear as type on his mind.<sup>2</sup>

The leader of the trek, he said, was Jansen van Rensburg, and forty-seven families took part, plus three single men and two Predikants. Some kind of bargain, he believed, had been struck between van Rensburg and the Governor of the day, Sir James Hayes-Sadler: if van Rensburg would bring up not less than thirty families with their wagons and equipment, they would be leased the land on easy terms.

At Nakuru, this narrator said, the Boers bought native oxen and set to work to train them, while a scouting party went forward on horseback to find a route. To reach the Uasin Gishu plateau they had first to climb a heavily forested escarpment which ran

steeply from the valley. There was no road, not even native paths since there were no Africans living on the plateau then. Cecil Hoey used to take safari parties there and testified that the plateau was empty of all African settlements until you reached the Nandi hills beyond the plain. People called Sirikwa had dwelt here once and had left traces of circular stone dwellings, but they themselves had disappeared. Some local historians supposed that they had been wiped out by the Maasai, others that an epidemic had destroyed them. In places, Hoey had come upon collections of whitened bones which may have marked the site of battles long ago.

The Boers' trek began from Nakuru on 4 August 1908, this old man said. The trekkers halted at the foot of the escarpment while the men hacked a path through the first part of the forest and threw rough bridges over its many streams.

Then they started on the long climb. It must have been a wet year, for soon the wagons were bogged down axle-deep in mud. Two, three, even four spans of oxen (sixteen to a span) were hitched together to extricate the wagons, which sank in again as deep as before. Up and up they heaved and hauled, up the towering escarpment. I cannot imagine how they got those wagons up; sheer willpower must have powered them besides the half-trained little beasts. It was bitterly cold. Sometimes they made no more than a mile or two in a day.

At last, they drew clear of the forest to the windswept crest of the escarpment and outspanned at over 6,000 feet above sea level, at a camp called Brugspruit, where they thanked God for their deliverance, and a two-year-old girl died. The great plain lay before them with its waving grasses, green now after rain, its trees and rivers and the vast herds of game which gladdened their hearts. This was as the Transvaal once had been and was no longer. Only one man did not rejoice. That was Cecil Hoey, sitting on a rock observing their advance. 'I went back to camp that night', he later recorded, 'a very sad man, realising that the countless herds of game must now give way to make room for western civilisation.'

The emissaries of western civilisation trekked on until they reached the Sosiani river, beside which Eldoret now stands, where they parted company, each family fanning out to find its own bit of promised land. An Afrikaner who had preceded them, one of three brothers called van Breda, had roughly surveyed it into blocks, and each man took up a leasehold of between 800 and 5,000 acres. Each family built a shack from the trees, grass and earth of its new domain, put up fences, inspanned oxen to simple ploughs and turned the first furrows. They sowed wheat, maize and vegetables. It was the wrong time of year, and all those first crops died. They persisted, and the revels of those lions under Sergoit rock were ended. Wheat is more useful to mankind than lions.

When I saw it twenty-five years later, the plateau had been transformed into a prosperous region of wheat and maize fields, fenced pastures carrying grade cattle (native Zebus crossed with pedigree European stock), flocks of sheep and plantations of black wattle trees, with roofs of farmsteads winking at you through trees that had grown up around them. Roads, telegraph wires, reservoirs stocked with fish and used by sailing clubs, all these had come into being in a remarkably short time and despite such setbacks as the First World War, the slump that followed it and then drought and locusts. The plateau and the Trans Nzoia beyond had become Kenya's major exporting area of wheat, maize, wool and wattle bark and one of the granaries of eastern Africa. Tractors crawled like beetles over the rolling plains, and the little scarred, heroic oxen, like the wild animals, had had their day. This was an impressive achievement in a land where, in the words of a historian of the district, 'patient, tough women used to visit Eldoret once a month and took a shopping trip to Nairobi once in a decade, and spent six weeks on the journey.'

All that had changed in 1924 when the railway reached Eldoret, the first train garlanded with wheatsheafs and bearing the Governor of the day, Sir Robert Coryndon. Eldoret had started with a mud-and-wattle hut to house a post office clerk; then came a District Commissioner whose stone rondavel, plus a humbler one for his clerk, together with an office and a store, cost £167 to build. Next came a policeman, then an Indian called Noor Mohamed opened a store, and an ox-wagon brought the Standard Bank of South Africa in the shape of a safe, a brass plate and a manager who became a famous figure round about, J. C. Shaw. The safe rolled off the wagon when it was being unloaded and, as it was too heavy to move, the bank was built round it. Mr Shaw used to take his morning bath in a tub behind its counter, and then stroll in his dressing-gown to Eddy's bar, which had opened up across the way, for a quick one in preparation for the day's business. This consisted mainly of dispensing overdrafts whose limit was one hundred rupees.<sup>3</sup> Mrs Eddy provided the town's water supply by means of an ox-cart service from the Sosiani river and by selling it by the debbi – an empty four-gallon petrol tin.

Eldoret was then called Sixty-four, the number of the farm which became its birthplace. The name was changed in 1911 at a meeting between the farmers and the Governor, Sir Percy Girouard. By then a second Boer trek had taken place, this time on a smaller scale, and British farmers had taken up land. Among them was Cecil Hoey. To cross the Nzoia river he felled a tree which became known as Hoey's Bridge, and so it has remained, though by now a different bridge. This opened the way to the settlement of the Trans Nzoia district, north-west of the plateau. So the rough out-riders of western civilisation, so-called, spread out, and put to use the land that had lain for long without a master; and the game fell to their rifles.

All this was described to me by Cecil Hoey, who had seen it all and himself been a pace-maker. What is so interesting about Kenya's history is that events belonging by rights to a bygone century, to the era of covered wagons and the Oregon Trail, should have taken place, albeit on a relatively tiny scale, within the lifetime of people still alive. Cecil Hoey had come to East Africa at the turn of the century. He was a burly man, rather slow of speech, with a quiet humour and strong fixed opinions. Times were to change more quickly than his power to adjust to such changes. Some years later, when a new generation of educated Africans had emerged, he and his wife invited me to stay on his farm on the plateau. Then I received a message cancelling the invitation. I had offended against a code he was not prepared to renounce; I had lunched with an African at a Nairobi hotel. To do this was still liable to offend some, though not all, of the older generation of white people. The African in question was Tom Mboya, one of the first of the new breed, a highly intelligent young man who had been an undergraduate at Ruskin College, Oxford; he wrote a book which contained a telling incident. He had been employed as a laboratory assistant by the Veterinary department and was alone in the lab when

European woman walked in, looked around and enquired: 'Is anyone here?' He replied: 'I am, madam.'<sup>4</sup>

So, regretfully, I never saw Cecil Hoey again to hear more of his recollections – he was a good raconteur. He ended his days on the Coast and, after a lifetime spent in up-country Africa, left instructions in his will that he was to be buried at sea.

There is a postscript to the story of the Boer treks of 1908 and 1911 to the plateau. It is in the shape of an item in the Johannesburg *Argus* dated 23 February 1961, less than three years before Kenya's independence.

*Twenty-nine weary trekkers – the vanguard of what they promise will become a mass exodus of Afrikaner families of farmers from Kenya – crossed the Beit Bridge after dark yesterday and spent their first night in their homeland in a Messina rest camp ... The adventurous trekkers agreed that they left Kenya because there was going to be an 'explosion' at independence. Mr Piet Olivier, a prosperous farmer in the Eldoret district, said: 'It will be a much worse place than the Congo when independence comes. The only reason we came now, at the risk of being called cowards, is that we would probably have to leave half our families behind – dead – after independence ...' Mrs Martha Steenkamp had to sell all their furniture in her 14-room farmhouse for Rand 60 – and the Kenyan Government took half in tax.*

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## CHAPTER 3

### Nellie's Friends

The track leading uphill from Njoro township to my parents' farm was so familiar that the years seemed to drop away and nothing had changed, except that perhaps the ant-bear holes in the wheel-tracks were in different places, and the stringy grass in the middle rather thicker. Small totos in their skimpy cloaks feverishly shoos herds of bleating goats out of the way; women in goatskin cloaks and aprons bowed under their loads – one never saw a loadless woman; an ox-cart rumbling down and drawing into the bush with much shouting and cracking of whips; all this was the same. And there were the two umbrella thorn trees bent over the track towards each other as if guardians of the domain, framing between them the small square wooden bungalow, its tin roof rusted to a nameless sort of colour and smothered by a purple-flowering solanum. (Whether the house held up the creepers or the creepers held up the house, as Nellie had remarked, was a moot point.)

Before the car bumped to a halt a surge of dachshunds flowed out to meet me, offering a sea of waving tails and a cacophony of barks. Then came Karanja in his red fez, scarcely changed at all, and then Mbugwa, who had changed a lot, having grown from kitchen toto into a well-built young man, both of them grinning from ear to ear and pumping my arm up and down. Dog pandemonium, fervent greetings, and then Jos and Nellie walking more sedately after them. Neither was a demonstrative person. The evening sun had fallen behind the dark crest of the Mau hills but the valley far below was still flooded with honey-tinted light barred by long purple shadows, and the blue eye of Lake Nakuru winked up at us from the foot of the long, yellow slope of Menengai. Doves were calling with notes like a mellow wine dropping from a bottle; green pigeons flew over on their way to roost, weaver-birds chattered in a thorn-tree just behind the house, goat-bells tinkled in the distance as flocks were driven in for the night.

And yet there were changes. Jos and Nellie had aged, of course, but more than I had expected. Life had been hard for them in the intervening years. The farm, Gikammeh – called after the hyraxes that screeched their heads off every night from the trees – lay on the margin of this aboriginal forest which was full of tall, majestic cedars with fluted bark, festooned with grey beards of lichen and wild olives with their twisted trunks and random branches. Below lay the Rift Valley, bounded on the distant side by the great ranges of the Aberdare mountains. The Njoro river separated our land from the forest. When my parents had come here there had been nothing in the way of civilisation, no human habitations, paths or signs of man, just thick bush, tongues of forest and a number of open glades where creatures of the forest came to graze; buffalo, bushbuck, waterbuck, tiny little suni and others. The only human thumb-print was a flimsy bungalow put there to fulfil the Government's development clauses in the lease. When Nellie first moved it had been full of bags of maize belonging to a trader who had used it as a store.

To turn this stretch of Africa into a farm had been hard work, made harder by all the bush and trees. Everything had to be cleared. Just cutting down the trees, or burning them, was not enough; their stumps had to be drawn before a plough could get to work. For this, a labour force was needed. As no Africans were living round about, some had to be recruited from afar. They came but everything was strange to them, even picks and saws; this was a far country full of dangers, also cold and comfortless, and many of them absconded. There were no tractors then – or rather, Jos and Nellie could not afford one, and the terrain was too rough; the little oxen had to haul and heave at tree-stumps, as deeply embedded as the most obstinate of tooth-stumps in a human jaw.

Gradually, painfully and expensively, trees and their roots were cleared, the bush uprooted and then the small, crude ploughs of the day, some only single-furrowed, were deployed. Maize was sown, fences put up, a cart-track made to the river for water hauling, storage sheds knocked up, and the round thatched huts of the Kikuyu appeared. Nellie has related how, when she arrived at Njoro in 1923 to start the enterprise (with three dachshunds, two Siamese cats and some basic provisions) she found waiting at the station half a dozen Kikuyu employees who had gone on ahead from my parents' coffee farm at Thika, secretly, ready to accompany her to the new land. She was touched at this act of loyalty and affection, but knew that loyalty and affection were not the primary reasons. Word had got round that there was fresh land, virgin land, with plenty of firewood going free, as well as grazing for cattle and goats. A passionate desire for land was, as it remains, in the very marrow of Kikuyu bones. When it came to giving out new shambas, they wanted to be in on the ground floor.

Now clusters of round thatched huts, each cluster surrounded by a palisade of cedar planks, had arisen. When one Kikuyu family comes, others follow. The half-dozen individuals she had found waiting at the station had mushroomed into a sizeable population, each family with its goats and cattle – and its children, many children. Already Nellie had started a farm school.

The small amount of capital Jos and Nellie had to get the farm established was soon exhausted, because the costs of clearing had been higher than they had expected. The bank was negatively firm. Some other source of cash had to be found. There was much talk at this time (about 1927) of a railway to open up Tanganyika's southern highlands, which lay about two hundred miles south of the line from Dar es Salaam to Kigoma. They were sparsely inhabited, well watered, presumably fertile, and only awaited, in the opinion

of enthusiasts, enterprise and expertise to become a land of milk and honey, a 'second Kenya'. Moreover, there were plans to build a railway to link this region with the central line, and surveyors were already at work. Tanganyika's Government was issuing leases on favourable terms, and a minor land rush had started, with several of Kenya's leading figures, including Delamere, involved.<sup>1</sup>

The opportunity seemed too good to miss. Jos and Nellie joined a little cavalcade of battered cars and one lorry which bumped for more than five hundred miles over rudimentary roads, the travellers camping by night beside their vehicles, to the promised land. Jos stayed down there in a half-built bungalow without doors, windows or furniture, living on the most basic kinds of food. He was rather old for this sort of existence, being fifty-three.

Nellie got a lift back in a lorry and returned to Njoro to build herself a mud-and-wattle hut on the plain below Gikammeh where what were called the pipeline farms. This plain was waterless, and part of it had formerly belonged to Delamere – he had called it Equator Ranch. All it needed to be profitably farmed was water. So he laid a pipeline from a river on the Mau escarpment; then he divided the ranch into five-hundred-acre sections, provided each section with a water tank and a patch of wattle trees for firewood, and let it off on very easy terms. This was to further his overriding aim, which was to settle as much of Kenya's highlands as was not in native occupation with farmers of European stock.

The pipeline farms were being taken up; few of the newcomers had experience and equipment for breaking land; Nellie had to help both. She formed a syndicate with two friends, moved her ploughs and oxen down to the plain (she called her dwelling Pigge Nook) and set to. Being treeless, this land was much easier to break than Gikammeh had been. For company she had the dachshund and her embroidery – her hands were never idle. She was out supervising the ploughing and harrowing from sunrise to sunset. At one time she had ten teams, each of sixteen oxen, drawing three-furrow ploughs at work on these pipeline farms, and she even acquired two second-hand tractors and trained their African drivers. One of the drivers drove a tractor all the way down to Jos in Tanganyika to help out. Neither man nor tractor returned.

Jos had decided to plant Turkish tobacco, which fetched a higher price than the Virginian kind; with a two-hundred-mile journey by wagon before you even reached a railway, a high price for your produce was essential. But Turkish tobacco plants are not so hardy as the Virginian. His first crop started splendidly, and then was totally destroyed by frost. By this time the prospect of a railway had receded. Moreover Jos's health had deteriorated. (He still had some pieces of shrapnel embedded in his chest, left over from the First World War.) He returned, sadly, to Njoro.

Then came the Depression. No need to labour the point about the catastrophic fall in prices. I know that Nellie sold a number of fat porkers for one shilling each. Neither she nor Jos was a complainer, and only when I returned to the farm did I realise just how hard times had been, and still were. The ponies had been sold, so Nellie walked about the farm, and Sunday morning rides into the forest which had been so much enjoyed, and games of amateurish polo at the club, were no more. The old Ford had been converted to run on paraffin, which was cheaper than petrol; it spluttered and choked, and its journeys, which were strictly rationed, ended all too often in a call for oxen to come and tow it home for yet another cleaning of plugs and carburettor. When the telephone charges rose to £13 a year the telephone had been removed.

All this did not quench my parents' optimism. Jos was working on plans to start a small hotel on Mombasa island, a plan which really could not go wrong. He had borrowed six hundred pounds from a sister-in-law, and taken on a partner who was supervising building operations at Mombasa. All Jos's previous partners had proved to be broken reeds, and this one was to be no exception.

Nellie took me round the farm to see many new enterprises, several of which were aimed at growing things that no one else had thought of, and for which a market might therefore be found. Almonds were one. Kenya imported almonds – not, it was true, on a large scale, consumption being virtually confined to the needs of three confectioners in Nairobi, but no one in Kenya grew them, here was a gap that could be filled. Nellie did a lot of research, and the house was full of pamphlets about stocks, varieties, the art of grafting and culture generally. Some sturdy little trees from South Africa were established in a small plantation.

Then there were angora rabbits, attractive bunnies with long, white, silky fur. I forget where she had discovered a market for angora wool, but she had, and corresponded at length with prospective buyers who were prepared to take her crop. The rabbits were in home-made cages behind the kitchen, and in Nellie's little office, full of files and seeds and catalogues and dachshunds and knitting, were carefully kept pedigrees and mating records; it was all done on the soundest scientific lines. The one task she really hated was punching holes in the rabbits' ears for identification. They had long, silky, floppy ears and screamed when these were punched.

Another project, which I think came later, was breeding white mice for the veterinary laboratories near Nairobi. The laboratory supplied her with foundation mice, and at first they bred prolifically. Then things went wrong, and they began to eat each other. I suppose one might say that Nellie anticipated the actions of the animals' lib movement by some fifty years. Disgusted with the whole affair, she took the white mice into the forest and set them free.

Profits from these and other projects lay in the future; her principal standby in the present was the kikapu trade. (The kikapu is a large woven basket with handles, adaptable to almost any use.) She had always delighted in vegetable culture and grew the most excellent produce under irrigation by the riverside. Once a week she filled a number of kikapus with a selection of vegetables, loaded them into the car and spluttered off to Nakuru where, if she reached it, she delivered the kikapu to the doors of her customers and thought for five shillings a time.<sup>2</sup>

The doyen of the Kikuyu on the farm was Njombo, who had come to us at Thika as a lad, and signed on as a syce, or groom. With the move to Njoro he had changed course, and was now the headman. All the Kikuyu on the farm were squatters: that is, the head of each family was given a shamba of indeterminate size, as a rule about two or three acres, where he built his huts and where his wife or wives, grew their crops. His sheep, goats and cattle were allowed to graze on the undeveloped parts of the farm, which all

provided the family with firewood. All this was free. In return, the squatter undertook to work for six months of the year for the farm's owner, and for the usual wage. This was a low one, but the families were self-supporting on their plots, and if they had surplus they usually sold it, though they were not supposed to.

This was a system that had grown up spontaneously to meet the conditions of the time, when farms were being made out of bush and there was plenty of land for everyone. It created difficulties later, when undeveloped land grew scarcer and people multiplied. Today it is hard to realise how sparsely populated the country was at the start of British rule. The usual estimate was two and a half to three millions up to the early 1920s when the increase began, slowly at first, then with gathering and now frightening speed, doubling every fifteen or sixteen years.

During my absence Njombo had become an elder, though he was not really old; people, in general, married young, and passed into the elders' grade when their eldest son was circumcised, which normally took place when the boy was between twelve and fifteen years of age. So a man of thirty-five or so could be an elder, and therefore entitled to sit on the kiama, a council of elders who met to settle disputes and impose fines (in sheep and goats) on offenders. The Kikuyu were a disputatious people, so there were many cases, some of which went on for years, for the kiama to hear. A lot of these involved disputes about the bride-price paid by a young man's father to the father of the bride.

Circumcision, bride-price, kiama – the whole social system of the people had been transferred in microcosm from their homeland to European-owned farms. This had advantages for both sides. For the Kikuyu, there was no traumatic break with custom and routine; life went on much as before in a new environment. If the altitude was too high to grow bananas, you switched to potatoes instead. From the employer's point of view, he had a stable and reasonably contented work-force living with their families on the spot, and unlikely to vanish overnight; for certain tasks he could call on women; and the gathering of firewood helped to clear his land.

Where the squatter system could not operate, as for example on big tea and sisal plantations, men had to be recruited on contract, without their wives, housed in 'labour lines' which, though no doubt adequate, looked ugly and dreary, and fed on prescribed rations – an altogether harsher and cruder business for the labourers. The Kikuyu were on the whole reluctant to join recruiters' gangs, whereas people from the Lake Victoria basin, especially the Luo, were more willing to forsake their homes.

Njombo, now that he was an elder, had become more dignified, less prone to laughter, than before. He wore a heavy goatskin cloak trimmed with tiny shells, a great many bangles and charms, and a snuff-horn suspended from his neck by a fine chain made by a Kikuyu smith. I always admired the fineness of these chains made with the crudest of tools, and with a bellows fashioned from the hind leg of a goat.

Njombo's face had become quite wrinkled, and so had that of his wife Wanjui, who greeted me warmly in their round thatched hut with its fire burning in the middle – the fire, lit on marriage, must never be allowed to go out – and three rounded cooking stones. There was no chimney, so the smoke had to find its own way out through the thatch. Naturally this made the atmosphere inside thick and chokey – there were no windows – and at first your eyes smarted and you coughed. But you got used to it after a while. Smoke had covered the timbers supporting the roof, and everything else inside, with a thick black crust that glistened in the firelight. Wanjui offered me a calabash of uji, a gruel made of home-pounded maize-meal which I had always found dull and rather sour, though herbs from the bush were used as flavouring. I had brought Njombo one or two simple gifts – I think a blanket and a metal cash-bag in which people stored their shillings buried in the earthen floors of their huts. We conversed in our basic Swahili, a fine language when properly spoken but alien alike to Europeans and to the up-country tribes, so we did not speak it properly, but used a kind of kitchen version nicknamed Ki-settla. As Swahili was a Bantu language, the Bantu-speaking tribes found it much easier than English to learn, and you could get along in it throughout most of eastern Africa.

While Europeans also found it easy to learn, some did not trouble to speak even the Ki-settla version well. There was a story of a man who, about to leave his farm for the day, summoned his headman to give instructions. He had a flock of valuable high-grade sheep of which he was particularly proud, and his final words were: 'Chinja kondoa yote, chinja sana', which he thought meant 'Look after all my sheep, look after them very well.' The headman looked surprised, but replied 'ndio, bwana' – yes, sir – and when the farmer returned to find a hundred sheep with their throats cut lying in rows on the lawn. Unfortunately he had confused the word 'chunga', which means 'look after, care for', with the word 'chinja', which means 'kill'.

Njombo had prospered and so had his eldest son, Mbugwa, who was now on my parents' household staff of three, or four if you counted the kitchen toto. Karanja was the cook, Mbugwa was Nellie's personal 'boy' and Jos had, as his, one of the few non-Kikuyu on the farm, a Kipsigis ex-askari. The term 'boy', then in universal use, has come to seem derogatory and insulting, as of course in English terms it is; these were men, not boys. On the other hand French waiters do not object to being called garçons, so far as I know. At the time, no one thought anything of it; it was just the custom; now it is seen as an example of colonialist arrogance.

It might be asked how Jos and Nellie could afford any servants at all, however low their wages, in such hard times. Strictly speaking, perhaps they could not; but to do without them in the circumstances would have been virtually impossible. Firewood had to be hewn, sawn and carried; washing done by hand, often by banging the garments on stones in the river; paraffin lamps cleaned; the old wood-burning Dover stove kept stoked, and so on; there were no labour-saving devices. Without help, there just would not have been time to get through all the work in a day, let alone to run the farm as well. The kitchen was a smoke-filled hovel full of Karanja's friends and relatives looking in for a cup of thickly sweetened tea. Nellie, who enjoyed cooking, had given up worrying about hygiene and become a virtual exile from her own kitchen. Had she cleared it of its shifting population, shockwaves would have spread throughout the neighbourhood, and even beyond.

Mbugwa possessed a wide grin, a lively sense of humour and a stutter. On the first occasion when Gervas came to the farm, (Gervas) brought with him a trick he had picked up somewhere, a variation of the three-card trick, played with three little bells which



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