

ADVANCE REVIEWS

“This book evokes the feelings of young school kids in an absolutely unique situation at a time of great worldwide change. The happy and not-so-happy times are faithfully remembered and the setting of the great plains of central Tanganyika (Tanzania) in an era before television, cell phones, reliable electricity supply or decent transport, makes for a book that one cannot put down.”

— Graeme Berry (an alumnus of that place and times), United Kingdom

“Brilliant! Having lived in Africa for 40 years, during and after colonial rule, I avidly search bookshops, now that I have returned to Britain, for books about life on that continent. There are many available, written by short term visitors to Kenya, South Africa, the Congo and elsewhere but they seldom convey what life was like for people living in these places during the past 60 years. Kongwa Hill, like "Africa House" by Christina Lamb, falls in to a very different category. The author experienced life as a schoolboy in East Africa, with many good times but also a lot of hardships. He describes a way of life that will never be repeated but is a part of history for every African Nation. Compared to the life of the average schoolboy in Manchester or Toronto in the 1950s, Kongwa probably will sound exciting, but with parents seen perhaps twice a year, no television, wild animals and life-threatening bugs in large numbers and, later, terrorism, life was not a bed of roses. Sadly, the number of people still alive to remember life in East and Central Africa during the early post-Second World War years are becoming fewer and fewer with each passing year but they, and anyone else with an interest in Africa, will find this an enthralling book.”

— John Harrison, United Kingdom

“I was fourteen when I read this book, around the age the kids were in this story of boarding school days in Africa. I was amazed at the experience, jealous of the freedoms kids had then but scared for some of the dangers and violence too. Boy, much of it would be totally illegal today. It’s a cool book which I think was intended for grown-ups, but pretty exciting for teens who are interested in boys (and girls) adventures in wildest Africa – wish I could have been there.”

— Callum O’Neill, Vancouver Island, Canada

“Having been born and raised in East Africa, I related to the author’s memories and descriptions of life. The songs of the birds and the sounds of the bush that are unique; the colours, the dryness, the vastness, the native people and their amazing history, all came flooding back. Like the author, once you have sampled living in Africa, you never really leave it behind. A good read and highly recommended for anyone with a taste for Africa.”

— Fiona Firth, Australia

“Feels like I am there, a young boy growing up all over again – unexpected pleasure, joy and pain in a world completely new to me. Strange to feel the qualities of what it must have been like as a Brit in an African colonial setting – I love this book!”

— Ted Weir, Vancouver, Canada

“A wonderful account of not just the author’s life in Tanganyika but an excellent record of the children growing up in a country where they had to go to a boarding school, lost in the bush and far from home. So close to my own experience, it brings my memories flooding back.”

— Barbara Laing (an alumna of the place and times), United Kingdom

“The author captures a fascinating time in East African history. Travel with him into the richness and adventure of a boarding school in the wilds of late colonial Tanganyika – a great read.”

— Elvin Letchford, Salt Spring Island, Canada

“An unusual British boarding school in the middle of nowhere, Africa, was brought to life for me by the author’s memories and astute observations. What a remote and wild place to grow up!”

— Leona Bridges, Alberta, Canada

“It is the landscape that remains with me still... the heat, the sand, the isolation. And how a boy's experiences begin to reveal the hidden secrets of that vast and empty space.”

— Heather Birnie, Alberta, Canada

THE SLOPE OF KONGWA HILL



A boy's tale of Africa

ANTHONY R. EDWARDS

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PUBLISHING HOUSE



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“Memory always distorts, and memories of childhood, tinged inevitably with nostalgia, distort most of all. You remember women lovelier, men nobler, houses loftier, horizons wider than they really were.”

— Elspeth Huxley

DEDICATION

To my friends and former colleagues
of Kongwa School.

And to my ever-patient wife, Imelda,
who has been a bit of a writer's widow for these last few years.

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KONGWA

Kongwa is a dry place
Very, very dry
Where the sun is always shining
And no clouds are in the sky.

There are no flowers to look at
But only prickly thorns
And when the day is ended
Your clothes are rather torn.

But Kongwa is a nice place
And 'tis a happy school
And although the children have to work
There is some time to fool.

—*K. Bakewell, 3A Juniors (1955)*



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PROLOGUE



KONGWA, Tanganyika Territory, 1950

THE BULLDOZER'S ENGINE WHINED AS ITS EXHAUST coughed a stream of black smoke skyward. Then the complaining, war-surplus Caterpillar D7 veered off-course with a seized left track and, with a muffled thump, collided with a massive baobab tree. John Sorrel, wrestling with the beast in blinding dust, cursed his luck as he anticipated another delay in the day's work.

The burly Sorrel, heavily muscled, and deeply tanned from exposure to Kongwa's burning sun, was muddied with sweat, wearing only his shorts and 'tackies' on his feet. As with many of the men, the discomfort of a shirt that would fill with dust, yet be ringing wet, led him to do away with it when working on a 'Cat.'

They'd been using D7s for knocking-down smaller baobabs, so hitting one wasn't the problem. But this had proved inefficient for clearing millions of acres in the unending bush of central Tanganyika. That's why the new technique had been adopted. Two Cats ran parallel, a hundred feet apart, tethered by the world's toughest anchor chain. The D7s bulldozed their way through the bush, dragging the chain between them creating mass clearings, at the same time using the rippers on the machines' rears to churn the soil.

The chain was immovably snagged. Sorrel hadn't been quick enough to cut the motor. Now, with the transmission lever still engaged in 'forward' and the left track seized, the rear of the giant machine, still tethered to the second D7, dragged off-course.

"Oh no! Bwana, no!" Sorrel's African assistant cried out as he realized, too late, that the tree they'd hit held a huge bee's nest in its upper branches. In moments twenty thousand killer bees swarmed. Seconds later, large numbers descended upon Sorrel and his assistant.

Sorrel reached desperately for the throttle so he could stop the dozer, but before he could, the swarm swirled about his face, completely distracting him as he swatted frantically at the angry bees. At the same time, the D7's right track kept on rotating, creating a dense, red dust-cloud as it skidded on the rock hard earth.

"Jump, man, jump!" Sorrel yelled.

The two leaped but were overwhelmed by bees before they hit the ground. They ran, screaming, trying to get away from the swarm, waving their arms furiously, shaking their heads, trying to cover their faces, rolling in the sand, anything, to escape death by a thousand stings.

From his position fifty yards away, mechanical engineer Harry "Dusty" Miller and his assistant had been working on a field repair of another D7. At this moment they were hunched against an intense, swirling, deep-red dust devil some one hundred feet high. The sandpaper-like vortex engulfed them, tore at their flesh and threatened to pull them off their feet. Then it was gone and the men straightened, coughing and rubbing dust from their eyes as they became aware of the screams from the men under attack from the bees. They watched, for a moment frozen in horror, powerless to do anything. Then Miller ran to his Rover parked in the shade of a nearby acacia tree. He reached over the Lee Enfield carbine, set ready in the event of an altercation with lion or rhino, grabbed a walkie talkie, and called urgently: "Hello, Base, this is Miller, are you there? Come in – come in!"

"Go ahead, Mr. Miller," came the startled response from a newly-married young English lady guarding the radio at Kongwa's base camp. She, with her hitherto soft, pale English complexion, was busy rubbing another dollop of Cold Cream into her arms in her attempt to control the newly-acquired dryness of her skin.

“I have an emergency,” Miller rattled off. “Sorrel and his assistant are being attacked by killer bees. Their damned Cat’s stuck in drive, out of control. I need medical help for the men and any help I can get to shut down the Cat. I’m not jumping on that bloody thing until help gets here and I’m bugged if I know what else to do. Just get people out here – now!”

“That’s just terrible, Mr. Miller, I’m so sorry,” the suddenly alarmed radio lady responded, hastily setting aside her jar of Pond’s. “Where are you? Where should I send everyone?”

“Number five unit, north-west quadrant and hurry for Chrissakes or these men’ll be dead.”

“Yes, Mr. Miller. I’ll get help right away. I’ll let you know when they’re en-route.”



THAT HAD BEEN A MOST UNWELCOME COMPLICATION in Harry Miller’s bad day, yesterday. It had taken forty minutes for the emergency crew to arrive at the scene. Miller had done what he could to comfort Sorrel’s assistant but it was too late for Sorrel. There was not a lot he could do. You couldn’t equip, never mind train, hundreds of engineers and other field operatives on how to guard against every danger. With big game, insects and reptiles you took your chances. It was a hazard that came with working in the bush.

The bees that had not stung the men had disappeared; those that had were dead, lying on the sandy terrain in dark, furry clumps but mainly on the faces, necks and backs of the prone men.

John Sorrel was pronounced dead at the scene, death later formally determined as a result of anaphylactic shock. He’d received over nine hundred vicious stings all over his largely exposed body. His African assistant, more dead than alive, had received three hundred or so and was rushed back to Kongwa’s new hospital. It appeared, a day later, as though he would survive.

That darn D7 was still bucking, trying to get somewhere when the emergency crew had arrived. They’d noted the abandoned bees’ nest, swinging precariously and about to be completely dislodged. Two of the men, in a feat

of some daring, had half jumped, half climbed aboard the bucking bulldozer in order to get at the controls and shut it down.

Now, this morning, Miller had been called – well, *summoned* might be a better word – for his second round of bad news. He was to appear at the office of the man in charge of Kongwa’s ground operations, Major-General Desmond Harrison, formerly British army, desert campaign.

When Miller arrived, he found Harrison in the dubious protection of his white-ant-eaten, tin-roofed, office building, seated in his captain’s chair, re-lighting his burlled, walnut briar and exhaling roiling clouds of smoke into the turbulence of the ceiling fan.

“Ah, there you are, Miller,” he gestured with his pipe for the new arrival to be seated, while withdrawing a grubby handkerchief from a pocket to wipe his neck of sweat. “Bad affair that incident with Sorrel,” he said. “Damnably bad actually. Fine man, Sorrel. Shouldn’t have been driving the bloody Cat. Not his job, you know. Fine engineer, not a driver.”

“Well I—” began Miller, swatting at the cloud of flies that had descended on his sweaty face and shirt while he attempted to respond.

“—I know, no need to say anything, he was helping out, shortage of drivers and all that. Must get more Africans driving the Cats, don’t you know? I’m accelerating the training program immediately. Soon have sufficient numbers that way, wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, sir, I’m not sure that—”

“Anyway, ’nuff of that. How’s your wife? All right, is she?”

“Hazel’s doing very well, sir. Helping out with teaching the children in the school classroom you set up, sir. Good move that—Goddamn these flies!”

“Big improvement from the tent, what? Glad you approve. Probably expand a bit if we get any more children. You have a daughter, don’t you?” Harrison squinted through swirling smoke.

“Yes, sir, two actually. The older one, that’s Hazel, she’s nine—”

“—Wife’s Hazel, first daughter Hazel? Bit confusing, I should have thought. Oh well, what the heck, easier to remember, I expect.”

“Well, actually—”

“—Anyway, ’nuff of that. None of my business. Not what we’re here to talk about. Tell me, Miller, how’d you like to move to Mkwaya?”

“Mkwaya? Never heard of it, sir. Where is it?”

“On the coast, don’t you know? Southern Province, down near Lindi, Mikindani, that area. Staging post, what? The brass at the OFC wants to get Nachingwea going so I need good mechanics down there. Roads impassable. Vehicles can’t handle the conditions. Need good engineers and you’re the best. Thought you might like it. Later on, when the railway from Mikindani to Nach is complete, we’ll move you up there... Plenty of action there too.”

“Actually, sir, I was rather looking forward to some long leave next summer. I’d like to take the family home for the Festival of Britain. I’ve not been able to get away since arriving here in ’48.

“We’ll talk about that nearer the time, Miller. Should be able to work something out.”

“Then, there’s the question of schooling for my children, sir,” Miller went on. “With Hazel being nine and all... I don’t expect there’s any sort of a school in Mkwaya. Soon she’ll be old enough for secondary school and, as you know, there isn’t a boarding school for Europeans in Tanganyika. Looks like I’m going to have to send her out of the country; Nairobi, maybe. Even here we’ve only got the one classroom for all ages.”

“I’m planning on a second class, Miller, split up the ages a bit, build something for a half dozen boarders. Get the little whipper snappers set up properly. Can’t manage with all age groups together. No, you’ll see, we’ll soon have a proper school up and running. When we do, you can send your children up here. Fly them from Nach to Dar; quick train ride to Kongwa and – *voilà!*”

PART ONE

THE FOREIGNER



CHAPTER ONE



TRAIN TO KONGWA, 1952

THE SHRILL WHISTLE FROM THE PANTING STEAM ENGINE alerted us to our imminent departure, then a disembodied voice intoned over crackling speakers that we were about to leave and for all to “stand clear of the train.”

“Goodbye,” I sniffed.

The guard waved his green flag, there was a barely perceptible jog against couplings, and the train nudged forward. The carriages were crowded with two hundred or so European children; four, five or six little bodies leaning out each open, wood-framed window. Tearful mothers reached up lovingly, some jogging alongside, oblivious to jets of steam from the train’s exhausts that embraced them as they clung to their children before fingers were torn apart by the train’s inexorable progress. The pall of engine smoke left hanging in the still air had been stirred by the movement of the carriages beneath, enveloping those on the platform in clouds of muddy darkness as it created roiling eddies of light and shade and left some rubbing their eyes. With Mum and Dad two hundred miles away, I’d hung back from the window, leaving the strangers to it. I’d managed a polite goodbye to Mr. and Mrs. Kherer, the

colleagues of my dad who'd been looking after me. Then I'd blinked back my tears, hoping no one would notice. *Boys don't cry. Boys don't cry.*

Feeling lost, hot and uncomfortable, I'd sunk back into the maroon leather bench seat, already sticky with someone's sweat, and watched in dismay the departure activity around me.

I became attuned to the slow *click-click* of the wheels over the rail joints as it built faster into a *clickity-clack* when we passed through marshalling yards and picked up steam. I felt forlorn and took no notice of the boys around me as I sat in the silence of my heartbroken world. The others, who had quietened down once we'd left the station, slowly came out of their dismal silence and started finding something to talk about. I just sat there watching them, amazed they could so quickly forget leaving their parents, knowing they would not see or talk to them again for nearly six months.

Presently our modest pace slowed to a sedate *click-click*, as the train rolled through a sun-baked shanty town with its flaring shelters of corrugated iron, battered metal signs, flattened cardboard boxes, and palm-thatched roofs. Tall and stately coconut palms reached snobbishly for the sun way above the desolation below where dried-out, scrubby thorn bushes survived, rooted in baking white sand.

I was wide-eyed at what I was seeing and how different this was from my cloistered experience in England. Less than a week ago I had been in London town, with its bustling shops and noisy traffic, its historical buildings and dirty factories... and its rain. Now this. *Where am I?* I asked myself. *What am I doing here? I came to Africa to be with my parents, not go off on a train into the middle of nowhere with people I don't know, or care about.*

I stared out the window lost for words. Throughout the passing village smoke from the cooking fires hung like a pall, diffusing sunlight into dark grey shadows. Large and buxom African women draped in gaily coloured kangas, heads covered in kilembas, tiny watoto swaddled on their backs, squatted by open fires stirring their pots of posho, the staple for the evening meal. Chickens, disturbed in their grazing by a cyclist, scattered, letting out irritated clucks before returning to that patch where food had seemed plentiful. Shenzie dogs, bedraggled, flea-bitten and bearing wounds from recent fights with their canine neighbours, slunk between dwellings, searching end-

lessly for something, anything to eat. I didn't feel for the dogs. I cared only that I was alone in myself and no one cared for me.

The train slowed to a crawl and I watched in amazement as older African boys ran alongside. They were dressed in binding seams, all that was left of a vest, and khaki shorts filled with holes and ripped with tears that revealed smooth black bottoms. *Crikey, they're almost naked; is that allowed?* I wondered as the sight of them intruded on my sad thoughts.

The children held out their hands as they caught my eye.

"Baksheesh, baksheesh," they called, through radiant smiles and glistening white teeth, hoping I'd be the generous bwana kidogo who would toss them a ten cent coin or two, those ones with the hole in the middle. But not me. Not today.

The repetitive chuffs of the locomotive grew louder and faster as the maroon-painted Garrett locomotive of East African Railways and Harbours (E.A.R.& H.) was given its head and our speed picked up. I stared with indifference at the change as our route became lined with vegetation. Thick, impenetrable-looking forest bordered the line a verdant green, with huge, soggy leaves, damp with humidity, tied together with lianas as thick as a python and as long as the train itself.

I should have been interested but I wasn't.

I missed Mother and Father terribly. Funny how you can miss something you've rarely had. Because the climate in Nigeria, where they'd lived, was so unhealthy, my parents left me in England, at age three and a half, to attend Cable House, a boarding nursery school. As if that wasn't bad enough, I often remained with the principal and her family (she owned the school) during the holidays when my parents couldn't get home from Nigeria, which was more often than not. I don't mean to be unkind. She was a dear lady who was always very good to me. But, it's not the same as your real parents, is it?

I remembered well that first day at Cable House even though I'd been so young. We must have travelled by train and bus because I was being carried by Allan, a friend of my mother whom I heard talk of in later years, as we walked down the country lane to the school which occupied a former stately home. I do not recall if they told me where I was going or whether I understood it from their conversation but I was bawling my eyes out. I knew I was going to be left behind.

At age seven, I was moved – attending Allan House, a boarding prep school with strict discipline and the first of many experiences of being caned for the slightest behaviour infraction, imagined or real.

Parental visits from Nigeria were few in my first nine years of life and could be counted with three fingers where my father was concerned. Now, I was in Africa at least, but not much better off.

I cannot know how I would have developed had we remained in England and experienced a normal home life. I do know, as a somewhat delicate child because of severe asthma and a skin rash – something that did not elicit sympathy from most other children – that I became somewhat reclusive and a loner. I would make friends but usually only a few. Otherwise, even though surrounded by others, I preferred my own company whenever I could get it. Which at boarding school wasn't often.

The other boys in the compartment got noisier, snapping me back to the present. I ignored their talk, instead taking notice of my surroundings. I scanned the polished oak walls and fittings. Brass fixtures flared a sharp brilliance as shards of afternoon sunlight streamed in and shadows traced themselves according to the train's direction. High on one wall was a map of the rail route from Dar es Salaam to the end of the line at Kigoma, on Lake Tanganyika, some seven hundred and eighty miles away. I peered closely and noted disappointedly the spur that led off the main line at Msagali. There were two stations on the spur, the first Kongwa, the second Hogoro. The map confirmed we were on the correct route. I felt even more down, and sighed; we would reach Kongwa eventually. I turned to the opposite wall and gazed at a landscape print of a passenger train crossing the savannah, with graceful giraffes necking under flat-topped acacias.

When one of the boys said, "Come on, chaps, let's see what it looks like with the bunks up," I took notice.

As I stood, I asked the one who wanted to put the bunks up, "Why do we need bunks?"

"To sleep, of course. We'll be all night on the train," another boy answered for him.

"Oh, yes," I said. "I'd forgotten. So when will we arrive?"

"It takes about twenty-two hours to get there," said a third. "It's a long way, you know, and it depends on what happens along the way. These trains

don't run faster than twenty-five to thirty miles an hour. My dad says the problem is the rail lines are narrow gauge."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, the lines are too close together, of course. They're a little over three feet apart; most rail lines are about five feet. I don't know why they build it that way 'cept it's cheaper or something. Anyway, my dad says trains that run on narrow gauge mustn't travel fast or they'll tip over on the curves."

"Really?" I asked, elated with the idea of our carriage rolling onto its side and wondering, hopefully, if that would mean Kongwa was cancelled and I could return to Lindi.

The first boy was leading the way in raising the bunks. We lifted the back rests of the bench seats to make a third and fourth. Then the others climbed on those two to lift a fifth and sixth above them. With them in position the first boy lay down on one of the lowest and called, "I bags this one."

"I bags the other bottom one," called the second and promptly laid out on it to establish his claim.

"I bags a top bunk," I chipped in before I was left with no choice and hastily scrambled up high to claim my territory.

"Let's lower them again," the fourth suggested after surveying the assembly with five of us in place. "It's way too early for bedtime and we haven't got anywhere to sit, man."

I was encouraged to join the conversation. Several of us were new to the school and didn't know what to expect.

"My name's Edwards," I said, after a little coaxing. "I arrived from England six days ago. My home's in Lindi now. That's where I've been for the last five days 'til I flew to Dar es Salaam to catch this train."

Kenneth Aranky, who was slim and tallish, with dark, almost black hair, olive skin and a long but angular face, told us who he was. Tony Shed explained it was his second term and his nickname was Sheddy. He was about my height, lightly built yet muscular and quick to smile. He was self confident and acted like everything was under control. His dad was an engineer and worked on projects in Dar es Salaam harbour. Sigurd Ivey followed Sheddy in turn, then Mike Jenner and the evidently brainy one of the group, Stewart Berry. It turned out I was the only one recently from England.

"You flew to Africa, eh?" asked Ivey. "Boy, I sailed on a ship with my

mum. My dad was already here. I don't remember a whole lot about it 'cos I was only eight, but I liked it a lot. I want to be a sailor when I grow up."

Ivey had moved from Britain two years earlier. He had ancestors that may have hailed from Norway but he wasn't sure. He was taller than any of us and had a smiling, V-shaped face that displayed an easy-going nature. He was wearing school uniform like we all were, khaki shirt and shorts with khaki socks and brown shoes.

"Did you have a celebration on the plane when you crossed the line, Edwards?" Ivey asked. "Like we did on the ship?"

"What line?" I asked.

"You know, when you cross the equator, they have this celebration with the old man of the sea, Neptune and his helpers, and you get dunked in water and covered in coloured paints made with ice cream and stuff. Boy, it was fun."

"No, they didn't do that on the plane; although there was a sort of celebration of two New Year's Eves."

"Two New Year's Eves?" chipped in Jenner. "How can you have two New Year's Eves?"

"Well, the captain told us when the clocks were chiming midnight in Dar es Salaam and then, again, three hours later when it was midnight in Britain. Some of the grown-ups asked for more drinks when he did that."

"So where do you live?" asked Sheddy who seemed not to recall I'd already mentioned Lindi.

"Lindi," I repeated. "That's south of Dar es Salaam. I've only been there five days and we haven't got a house to live in so we stayed in a hotel. I left yesterday by plane. It was my third flight this week."

"Wow, what's it like?" Jenner wanted to know. "I've never flown in a plane."

"I haven't been to Lindi," Aranky interrupted. "I remember once being taken to Malindi but I think that's in Kenya. Do they have ice-cream shops in Lindi?"

"No."

"They only have one in Dar," Berry interjected with a knowing air, "and that only opened about four weeks ago. I shouldn't think they'd have one in Lindi."

“Well, I know about the one in Dar,” retorted Aranky. “It belongs to my parents.”

“Golly, really?” we enthused as we stared at him in admiration. “Can you eat as much as you like any time you want?”

“No. My dad says the ice cream is for sale and if I want some, I must use my pocket money like anyone else.”

That didn't sound quite so much fun; *what a mean dad*, I thought.

“I don't think we've even got a toy shop in Lindi,” I changed the subject.

We resumed our stares out the window to contemplate our deprived life... and I my new world.

At dinner time, the restaurant car's portly and superior-looking maître d' – dressed in his bleached white kanzu and a green, velvet waistcoat with brass buttons, crimson lining and gold braid, his head topped with a scarlet fez – walked the length of the train's long corridors tapping his xylophone in a lethargic diner's concerto. There was a general every-boy-for-himself movement into the train's corridor, causing school teachers to flatten themselves against the windows before they recovered their composure and asserted their authority.

“Everybody just stop where you are! Back to your compartments, please! We'll let you know when it's your turn.”

It was going to take many sittings for all to get a meal. When our turn came, we hurried through several carriages to reach the restaurant car; scurried by the galley kitchen with its indescribable heat and the clatter of feverish activity through the open doors, and then into the dining area.

I found a seat next to a window. The table for four was covered with a brilliant white tablecloth adorned with matching serviettes sporting the E.A.R. monogram. Two small lamps with tiny shades and tassels were mounted on the wall and another stood in the middle, flanked by small vases displaying posies of carnations. Four place settings of heavy, monogrammed cutlery completed the table top. There was warmth about this car with rays of a vivid sunset streaming in on the polished oak reflecting a deep, golden glow that I liked. Tony Shed slid in beside me but there were two boys already at the table, so that split up our group.

“Hello,” said one as we sat. “I'm Grandcourt, and this is Keller.”

Keller acknowledged me with a nod; we recognised each other. Keller, with his bleached white hair and I thought Scandinavian appearance, turned out to be German. He'd flown from Lindi with me on the same plane but we'd not spoken.

"His name's Edwards. I'm Shed."

The waiter was not long coming. I noticed grown-ups ordering from menus while we were brought our food directly, no choice, just eat what you're given. It was roast beef and Yorkshire pudding with new potatoes, veggies and gravy served on heavy, monogrammed china; it was good so we had no complaints. The four of us got into conversation but soon the two of them were talking to each other, with Shedly and me doing the same.

The clickity-clack of the wheels, the rocking of the train and the pitch blackness outside that followed the golden sunset, made the restaurant car warm and comforting. It was a strange feeling really. I had left home, no doubt there, but I wasn't at school yet. I was in a kind of no-man's-land, a nether-world where, I liked to think, school jurisdiction – and discipline – were not quite yet in force.

If only I could enjoy school as much as I'm enjoying this train ride, I thought.

Shedly brought me back from my daydream.

"So, with you being a new boy and all, do you know what house you're in?"

"Yes, my dad received a letter from the school. Uh, Livingstone," I said tentatively. "Does that sound right?"

"Yes it does, jolly good. I'm in Livingstone too. I wonder which house you'll be in."

"But I just said Livingstone."

"Yes, I know, I didn't mean that sort of house. We live in individual houses in Kongwa. There aren't any big school buildings like in England. The houses we live in used to belong to families that have gone and so now they're used by the school."

"That sounds nice," I said. "With kitchens and sitting rooms?"

"Not any more; they did have. They still have the rooms, of course, but now they're all bedrooms. The bedroom has four beds in it; the sitting room

has four beds in it, and what was the kitchen has one or maybe two beds in it, depending. It's the prefects' room. You know about prefects, I suppose?"

"Yes, I bloody-well do," I felt irritated at the thought. "I was at boarding school in England and they had prefects. Mean ones, too."

"Did they make you fag for them?" Sheddy asked.

"Of course... and sometimes, even when a prefect had nothing for you to do, they'd make you stand there and wait until they thought-up something."

"I hate that so much."

"These houses," I asked, "are they like we had in England, you know, were they all joined up in long rows?"

"No, they're individual. They were for married people, pretty small. Most are about fifty yards apart with a choo in between."

"What's a choo?"

"A toilet, you know, a big drop. It's also called a dub."

"What big drop?"

"There's no flush, no water, just a hole in the ground."

"You mean they don't have real toilets, not even in the house?"

"No, well, a few of them do, but most don't, it just depends."

"Oh."

"And we walk a helluva lot."

"What?"

"We walk miles and miles and miles every day."

"Why?"

"Because, like I said, the houses are far apart. So are the classrooms. They used to be offices; so's the Head's office and the mess and the sports fields. The girls are miles away from the boys, obviously, and the Juniors are miles away from everybody, so we have tons of walking to do. And that makes fagging even worse, 'cos if a prefect wants you to fetch things that are far away, you have to walk all that way, man."

"So how big is the school?" I asked.

"I dunno; maybe a mile long. My dad says the school area is two hundred and seventy acres big so whatever that is in miles, you know, square miles. It's not all being used yet, there're still a lot of empty buildings, but the school is growing so fast it'll soon use them all. The grown-ups that used to

live in the houses probably didn't mind all the distances 'cos they had cars. I'm telling you, it's big. Soon as I'm in Seniors I'm bringing my bike."

"You can bring a bike?"

"Yup, once you're in Seniors. And it's bloody hot in Kongwa; you'll be asking your parents if you can bring your bike too."

"But I haven't got a bike," I said, embarrassed. "My mum won't let me have one."

Sheddy stared at me, clearly amazed.

Not being a bike owner, I lapsed into silence again as I thought about how unfair she was.



BY 8 P.M., THE CONDUCTOR, IN HIS UNIFORM of grey jacket embroidered with a crimson East African Railways logo, and grey trousers, was moving through the train asking about bedding requirements. Not long after, shoeless train porters, in khaki shirt and shorts, were lugging large maroon canvas bags containing rolled up bedding, squeezing down the pinching corridors and into each compartment, there to make up the bunks. Our four companions had disappeared again.

Sheddy and I stood in the corridor gazing out the open window into the pitch-black, catching sight of fireflies or sparks from the engine, I wasn't sure which. The chuffing of the engine noise, the hooting as we approached unguarded crossings, the smell of coal smoke, all wafted in on the train's slipstream. Then Sheddy was called by someone and wandered off. It struck me that I'd never seen darkness like this before. Perhaps if I'd been old enough during the war with its black-out? But I was only little then. Now in England everything was lit up at night. But in this moonless African night it was definitely black.

By the time I returned to my compartment Berry and Jenner were on their bunks, noses into books.

"Have you seen Sheddy?" I asked.

"He's a couple of compartments along," said Berry. "I think he went to listen to Grandcourt play his mouth organ."

I wandered the corridor until I heard the music. The bunks were not

made up. Grandcourt was sitting in a far corner against the window, right foot drawn up, his heel resting on the bunk he was sitting on, both hands cupping the mouth organ to his lips in a loving clinch as melancholy sound filled my ears. He was playing country and western music and this was the first time in my life I'd ever heard it. I found the music bitter-sweet. It lifted me when Joe played *Hey, Good Lookin'* or dropped me down again with *My Heart Cries For You*. It made me yearn for Lindi where I could be with Mum and Dad. A sadness gripped me even though there was no one to sing the words, so I wasn't sure whether to like it or hate it.

"Everyone back to their compartments!" called a prefect dressed formally in school dress uniform of white shirt, long grey trousers and a striped school tie that matched the zebroid, green, black and gold stripes of his blazer. His uniform was finished with posh, brown, polished shoes. "Come on now, everybody back. The 'boys' can't complete making up the beds with you lot blocking the corridors. Besides which it'll soon be lights-out so we want you in your bunks... now!"

One chap, three compartments away thought the rules didn't apply to him. "C'mon, Glynn," he said, "I'm older than this lot; I'm going down the end to see the others."

"You'll do as you're bloody-well told," responded the prefect. "Or explain yourself to Fergie. Now get in there and settle down."

"Who's Fergie?" I asked of no one in particular.

"Mr. Ferguson," said Sheddy. "He's Livingstone Junior boys Housemaster as well as an English teacher – and more likely to find a reason to cane you than any of the others," he added as an after-thought.

"Oh no, not again," I shuddered, as I thought about Allan House.

Minutes later, having shed our clothes, we'd squeezed flat into our bunks, with barely enough height to rest our heads on upturned palms, as we read. Then I had a thought to do with the prefect who'd barked the order down the corridor.

"Who was the one who ordered us to bed, Sheddy?" I called down to him.

"You mean Glynn Ford?" Sheddy asked, sticking his head out the side of his middle bunk as he looked up. "The one dressed in blazer and all?"

"Yes, that one."

“Glynn’s house prefect for Wilberforce and some say the second highest prefect in the school. A chap called Robin Hoy is Curie’s house prefect but he’s also Head Boy. We haven’t got an official second to Robin. I think that’s what Glynn is anyway. He’d be Head Boy if Robin left. He won’t get a chance now.”

“Why?”

“This is his last term. Many of the top Seniors will leave in June when school breaks up. Glynn’ll be leaving then, I heard. It’s a pity in a way; the Wilberforce chaps say they like him.”

Lights were switched off. The clacking of wheels and motion of the train brought on drowsiness, then sleep... for the others. Why I had to be the exception I didn’t know. I’d finished reading and was content with the ride. My mind was in turmoil as my thoughts ran with the excitement of the day, yet also was haunted with sadness at being far from home. If the train journey didn’t come to an end, then maybe everything would be all right.

My thoughts drifted to my new-found friends. Sheddy seemed to like me which was nice. He was a good-looking boy and I could see how he would be popular. I was amazed at how easily he beat another boy at arm wrestling even though the other chap was bigger and heavier. And when he talked about some of the things he built with his dad at home I knew he must be pretty clever.

Berry was different. We hadn’t talked much yet but I liked him too. He was of light build and I thought it wouldn’t take much to knock him down. His arms and legs were thin. He had thin, blond hair and an angel face. He seemed brainy though. I recognised him as similar to a boy I’d known at Allan House; always reading, seemed to be good at learning, popular with the teachers. I guessed I’d be asking him for help with maths prep from time to time.

Aranky was good at sports. Sheddy said Aranky usually got to be captain of the football team he was playing in. I don’t suppose he’ll be pleased with me not joining in on account of my asthma.

Ivey I thought of as organised; everything for him had to be just so. He was tall and I thought probably strong; he appeared happy with a constant smile. I judged he was a practical sort, probably less daring than someone like Sheddy? I hoped we’d become friends.

It was cosy in my bunk on the train. Occasionally it chugged along at quite a lick. At other times I'd wake because there wasn't any movement. We'd stopped again at one of the numerous halts that governed this train's progress. I heard hushed conversations outside our window and the squeak of a trolley. Peering out I saw a high pole and a lamp smothered with insects. It spread a yellow pool of light over a couple of bodies prone in a sleepy haunch. The cicadas were shrilling. Far away, a cockerel crowed. A full moon had risen to my surprise after the earlier blackness. Now its luminescence lit the scene. I heard, from way up front, the impatient hissing and clanking of a steam engine anxious to be on its way. After a while I grew weary, settled back and closed my eyes.

CHAPTER TWO



ARRIVAL

I'D BEEN DREAMING ABOUT MY FLIGHT from London. We'd taken off in the morning of New Year's Eve and flown first class. We'd landed to refuel in Rome, Cairo, Khartoum, Entebbe and Nairobi. The journey was luxurious and infinitely exciting. People look back now and call the '50s the golden age of air travel. They're right.

Even though I'd heard Africa was hot I was amazed to discover just how so in Cairo at two in the morning and how stifling the air could be when mixed with mosquito spray that Egyptian ground staff used when they came aboard. They walked up and down the aisle and sprayed something called 'Flit' in the air all over us. The sprayer had a hand pump like for a bicycle with a tin can at the end out of which the spray came through a nozzle. "It's to keep the mozzies at bay," I was told.

It had been a thrill when I'd spent time in the cockpit with the captain while the first officer socialised in the cabin. And oh, the excitement after that thirty-hour flight when we'd circled Dar es Salaam and I'd first set eyes on millions of coconut palms. It had been super meeting up with Dad. Here I was, in Africa, with both parents and the promise of a family future for the first time in my nearly ten years of life... together at last.

That joy had lasted an hour or two before my heart sank.

Mother and Father had met with a business colleague of his who lived in Dar, Franz Kherer and his wife, Jean. I'd been exploring the hotel when Dad called me over to join them in the lounge where they were having drinks. After ordering me a lemonade, he'd said, "There's something we want to ask you, chum. Seeing as you'll be leaving for school in Kongwa by train, from here on January 7th, we wondered whether you might prefer to remain with the Kherers for the duration of the week rather than journey to Lindi with Mum and me. You'll be in Lindi for only a short time, it seems hardly worth it?"

My heart sank. I'd been in Africa only a few hours when Mother and Father were going to leave me already!

"When will you be leaving?" I'd asked, looking sadly down at my hands.

"Tomorrow morning, chum, very early. Plane takes off at six."

"How long will I be away in Kongwa?" I'd followed up, tears welling as the full appreciation that I'd soon be far away in boarding school once more, finally sunk in.

"Well, Kongwa School has just two terms a year," he'd said, "so you'll be gone five-and-a-half months."

"Five-and-a-half months!" I'd reacted wide-eyed in horror. "And I'll have seen you for one night!"

"The time is short, I'm afraid, but that's the way it worked out."

I'd taken no time at all in reaching my decision. I'd wiped the tears from my cheeks as I told Dad, "I want to travel with you and Mum to Lindi, even if it is for just four days, and I don't care how early I have to get up."



THE TRAIN SHUDDERED AS THE CARRIAGES JERKED against their couplings. Perhaps I'd slept and was dreaming as I woke because I hadn't realised we'd stopped. Wondering what station this was, I moved to peer through the window. I caught sight of the moonlit sign on the fence at the end of the platform as we rumbled by; 'MOROGORO,' it read.

I think someone told me Morogoro's about half way, I muttered to myself.

I glanced at my watch with its luminous dial. For a moment I thought I'd forgotten to wind it, then I realised it was reading four in the morning. It was early still.

A little after six, I was awakened by the noise of others. With golden sunlight spilling through the shutters and the chatter of voices in the corridor, there wasn't to be any sleeping in. Stewart was first to the hand basin, standing there naked as he washed his face and hands and then under his arms. I'd noticed the night before when we got undressed that the others weren't wearing a vest or underpants; I was the only one who was. Well, you had to in England; it was so cold most of the time.

"It's too hot here," I was told. "You don't need them."

"Well, if you others aren't wearing any, neither will I," I proclaimed and shed mine there and then.

As we struggled about getting dressed with no room to do it in, we heard girls in the corridor on their way to breakfast. Ivey thought that the right moment to drop the louver blind on the compartment door that hid the interior from passers-by in the corridor and through which piercing rays of sunlight had been filtering. The thud caused the girls to glance in, where they saw the naked Stewart, spotlighted in the newly-released sunlight, glancing quickly and nervously around at the sound. The girls broke into convulsions of laughter at seeing a naked boy. Hands to mouths they giggled their way down the corridor. Ivey was impressed with himself and laughed out loud; we joined in as Stewart frowned in annoyance while hauling the blind back into place.

"I s'pose you think you're really funny!" he said.

Jenner lowered the blind on the other window revealing a wonderful view. Stretching as far as the eye could see, bathed in the glow of this brilliant sunrise was countryside of burned gold. Scrub grass dotted with golden acacias intermingled with msasas and a few mopani trees, all rooted in Martian red soil, seemed to stretch forever. Breaking the horizon were the necks of a squad of giraffes, but much closer in zebra and wildebeest in their thousands mingled and grazed in an orgy of perpetual motion.

Most of the animals displayed a studied indifference to the train's passing, but not so the Thompsons gazelle that had been drinking at a water hole. Heads erect and alert, ears twitching and noses taking the air, these gazelle were not so blasé and began moving off to give us distance. I was disappointed

when we lost sight of the herds and were left with only the long shadow of the train bouncing over the uneven earth and the now empty savannah beyond. Except, that is, for a pack of jackals trotting purposefully in the direction of the animals we'd left behind.

Sheddy was last up and slowest to get ready, so when Stewart asked me, "Want to go for breakfast?" I nodded and we swayed our way down the narrow corridors to the restaurant car.

"You're too late for this sitting," asserted Miss Strong, the Senior mistress. She had assumed command on behalf of the girls who had, through their wisdom and foresight, taken over the restaurant car completely. "You'll have to wait. I suggest you go back to your compartment and wait for the gong."

We beat a hasty retreat from all this female flesh, two of whom I recognised as they eyed us and whispered to each other, hands cupped to ears. The one was Annalise Van Buren whom I'd teamed up with, along with her brother Egbert, in Lindi. She thoughtfully decided not to acknowledge me now that we were on the school train. Her friend was the other girl, perhaps a year or two older, whom Annalise had sat with on the plane to Dar. It would not be good to be seen in female company. I thought I heard the whisper from Annalise though, "See, Hazel, he was on the plane with us, the one I was telling you about."

We returned to look for the others and found a compartment where bunks had been returned to daytime positions. There was space to share company with Alder, Priestly and Neil Thompson, a Junior's prefect, who was regaling those two with his adventures hunting with his dad.

"Yes, come and join us if you want," he invited. "I was telling this lot about some of the hunting trips I've been on with my dad up in the area close to the Ngorongoro Crater and the Serengeti Plains and—"

"—Where are they?" I interrupted.

"Up in the north of the country," Neil answered. "You know, west of Arusha. You know where that is, I suppose?"

"No, I'm new to Africa."

"Oh, well, that's where they are. Anyway, that was how we bagged the elephant," he said, turning back to the others. "I'm telling you those tusks were huge. I couldn't lift either of them no matter how hard I tried."

Neil was a good-looking boy, quite tall, with a continuing smile and a quiff in his honey blond hair that made him seem a friendly sort.

“What did you do with them?” inquired Alder.

“My dad sold them to some Indians, man. They do all those carvings out of ivory like you see in the shops. I think they probably sent the tusks to India where they do the work; I dunno really, something like that. I’m not much interested in the ivory; it was just the excitement of the hunt.”

“Did you see the zebra and wildebeest we passed some way back?” I enthused, not wanting to be left out with my observance of wild animals.

“Yeah, man. They’re nothing, man. You can see those animals and more besides almost anywhere, man. They’re two a penny; you don’t even bother with those, man. Now if you want to talk lion, that’s something else.”

I listened entranced as Neil told us a story of a lion kill with his dad. I was kind of fascinated with the detail but also disappointed at the same time. I couldn’t see the point of killing animals and, surprising for me, I spoke up and said so.

“What’s with you, man, you some kind of sissy? That’s what a man does, man, he hunts. It’s the challenge of man against animal with all their cunning and ability to survive in the bush. It’s tough, eh, I’m telling you, man, it’s not easy. You need to grow up, man.”

Chastened, I kept quiet after that and listened a little longer until we heard the xylophone. I leaped up, grabbed Berry and headed for the restaurant car.

There were two spaces left, at different tables. Robin Hoy seemed to be organising this shift, “You, what’s your name?”

“Berry.”

“You sit here, man... You?”

“Edwards.”

“Take that seat there and join in with them, see?”

I found myself at a table that included Ivey’s familiar face.

“Hello, I’m Edwards.”

“Lugt.”

“Meyer.”

The two older boys looked down at me in a pitying way.

“Where’ve you been?” whispered Ivey.

I told him of my visit with Berry to Neil Thompson's compartment, and the stories he was telling about hunting with his dad.

"He's a good sort, Neil, you know," said Ivey. "I've heard about him and they say he's jolly decent. Not like some prefects."

"What's for breakfast?"

By the time we'd finished and were returning to our compartment, the train drew into Kilosa. Sheddy was close behind.

"We can get off the train for a bit," he said. "It'll be in Kilosa for a while. Let's go for a walk and see what we can see, eh?"

"Are we allowed to do that, you know, get off the train?"

"Oh yes, it's allowed in Kilosa."

"All right, you lead. We'll follow."

Sheddy opened the door at one end of the carriage and descended the steps. Ivey and I followed, me feeling nervous because we would be in trouble if the train started up again and we couldn't get back on.

"Don't worry about that, man, it'll be here for a long time; it was last time. They have to wait for another train coming from the other direction to pass us and you can see it's not here yet."

I felt better as I noticed other boys and teachers had got off too. Soon there was a crowd milling about in the red dust.

Sheddy led us through a door to the station's waiting room where there were a number of parents with children ready to join us on our school-bound trek. One little girl, too young to be coming to Kongwa, was crying, it seemed because she was about to lose her brother to this inland migration. Sitting at a bench was a boy I judged about my age, with thick Coca-Cola glass spectacles, looking grim and tearful as his mother attempted to comfort him with words like, "It won't be so long and soon you'll be home again."

As if five-and-a-half months isn't long, I thought. His parents are lying to him too.

There was a counter behind which an indifferent looking Indian was standing, the proprietor of the biltong he had for sale. Sheddy spotted it, crusted looking antelope meat that had been hung from trees to dry while being marinated by flies. I thought it looked revolting but he got excited and said he must have some.

"Ten cents plis?" from the Indian.

Sheddy hunted for change but couldn't come up with any.

"I'll lend you ten cents," I said.

"Oh, would you, that's jolly decent," said Sheddy. "Thanks a lot, man... I'll pay you back, do you want some?"

"No, thanks."

I didn't say anything but to me biltong looked like something you might sweep up off the floor and place quickly into the dustbin.

We wandered through glass doors into the blinding sunshine. I screwed up my eyes, gradually letting the light back in. There was a row of cars parked on the sandy street. Most seemed to be Peugeots but there were several Land Rovers and one or two others like the Austin Hereford, looking amazingly clean given its surroundings, and a shiny new Vauxhall Cresta.

I became vaguely aware that, somewhere far away, a whistle blew. Sheddy was gnawing on his biltong and had got Ivey to try a piece.

"Look at this rattle trap," I said.

I'd spotted a Land Rover that must have come off safari not long since. It was caked in dried mud and was open to the world without a windscreen and no rag top and no cushions to sit on. It had flat iron seats and a slightly curved iron back to lean against, both welded to the chassis.

"Boy, they'll need cushions or something for those seats. Imagine bounding around in the bush with no springs on that lot," said Ivey.

"They're tough, man, those Rovers are built tough," Sheddy said again, as he tore at the solidified biltong like a lion with a new kill. "They're designed to stand up to the East African roads and there's not a car in the world that's tougher."

"What about a Jeep?" I asked, having seen a Hollywood war movie, in which the military dashed around the front lines in Jeeps, with no doors and no roofs and no windcreens.

"Oh, they're not a patch on a Rover," asserted Sheddy. "They're pansies in comparison. There's nothing can touch a Land Rover."

"Where've you been?! What're you doing? Do you want to miss the train?"

Mr. Chambers rattled off the questions in agitation with Hoy by his side. The two had burst through the station's exit searching for us and had come panting up at a sprint.

“The train was about to leave and someone said you weren’t on board, so we had to stop its departure. Now come on, the three of you, hurry now, run and don’t stop ‘til you’re back on the train!” he called breathlessly as he clipped me a clout on the back of my head (against which I had ducked, but alas not quickly enough). We ran for the train in full flight.

“And don’t get off again ’til we arrive in Kongwa!” he called after us.

We jumped on the steps along with Chambers and Hoy further along. Even as we climbed on board the train inched forward.

By the time we’d returned to our compartment amid the buzz of boys wondering what trouble we’d be in, the bedding had been removed and the upper four bunks tucked away. Our friends were not there so we sat facing each other at the window, watched the unending landscape of savannah, and talked of things that matter to nine-year-olds.

“That was funny, Ivey, when you lowered the blind on the door and made Berry jump with those girls looking in. They laughed all down the corridor.”

Ivey smiled. “I couldn’t resist it,” he said glancing at Sheddy. “Berry strikes me as a bit shy or something. He’s a decent chap but needs to open up a bit.”

“I like him,” I said. “Seems to be brainy.”

“Me too,” said Sheddy, “but I tell you what. I wish someone would lower the louvers in one of the girls’ compartments so we could see in on them when they’re naked,” he laughed.

I smiled but wasn’t sure I agreed. I hadn’t discovered girls and the idea of them in the buff held a little curiosity perhaps but no great appeal. Ivey changed the subject.

“I’ve got a Hornby Dublo electric train.”

“You have?” I exclaimed wide-eyed. “Boy, you’re lucky. Do you have it set up somewhere or do you have to put it together each time?”

“Oh it’s all set up,” said Ivey with a grimace as though that should be obvious. “I have a table-top set-up on a ping pong table. It has landscaping and marshalling yards and freight trains and passenger trains and all sorts of things, with signals and level crossings and bridges.”

I was almost breathless with excitement. “I haven’t seen anything like that outside of Hamley’s,” I said. “That sounds spiffing!” Then I fell into

silence for a moment. "I haven't got an electric train," I confessed ruefully. "I did have a clockwork one in England but it got left behind."

"Clockwork is old hat. If your parents ask you what you want for Christmas, you jolly well tell them you want an electric gharri-ya-moshi," he announced with a head toss. "They're smashing."

"Gharri-ya-moshi?"

"Yes, that's a steam train like this one. I s'pose you can't speak any Swahili being new from England?"

"No, I know 'Jambo,' and that's about it. Do they teach it at school?"

"They don't give Swahili lessons anymore. If you like I'll teach you a bit now," Sheddy offered. "I speak it well. I was raised by my ayah, that's an African nurse who takes care of you. Saved Mum a lot of work."

And there followed my first Swahili lesson with Sheddy and Ivey outdoing each other to teach me as many expressions and as much vocabulary as they knew and could think of in the enthusiasm of the moment. "Lete chakula tafadhali (bring the food, please)." "Mimi nasema kibanda kiko wapi?" (I said, where is the hut?)

We stopped at tiny villages that looked as though they hardly warranted a stop. There might be a few tidy-looking kibandas. There were always the shanties. There was nothing else here. No reason to live here, it seemed, except this was the way it had always been. But what depressed, now in the brilliance of the African sun, were scenes of horror. I looked out at ghastly examples of injured or malformed humanity; people who appeared as though they'd be better off dead.

"Why have we stopped again?" I asked, feeling uncomfortable at the sights. "We always stop at these places but no one gets on or off, near as I can tell."

"Well, it's a long train," replied Sheddy. "You can't see either end. Most probably they're taking on water for the engine. If you were at the back, at the guard's van, you'd probably see a few letters or parcels being unloaded for a nearby mission, something like that."

"I can't believe the horrific things that have happened to these poor people. Oh my gosh, look at that man there with the huge leg and foot."

"It's called elephantitis," said Sheddy. "I've heard it's terribly painful. I don't know how he gets around."

“Elephantiasis,” corrected Berry. “There’s only one ‘t’.

“You sure?” asked Sheddy.

“Yes, believe me.”

“Elephan... what?” I asked.

“Never mind.”

“How about that poor bloke over there, seems to have lost both eyes and a foot? What could have happened to him?”

“And what about that chap?” asked Sheddy, pointing. “Look, over there.”

I followed Sheddy’s finger. There was a boy, about thirteen, with his skin covered from head to foot in the most awful rash, with open sores, bleeding and suppurating wounds being plagued by flies. I turned away. I couldn’t look as I thought about my own skin rash which wasn’t a patch on what that African was enduring. I wished the train would leave. I felt sorry for them yet I didn’t want to see their misery.

It was a relief when we ambled forward. But even as we did, there was a late arrival of younger watoto carrying sugar cane and fruit. These runny-nosed boys ran beside the train as it picked up speed calling out, “Muwa, Muwa,” in their attempt to sell lengths of cane to hastily bargaining school children leaning almost too far out the windows to reach the fruit below them. And there were others bearing oranges that could be bought for a bargain, green skinned and tasting delicious. “Machungwa, Machungwa,” the dusty watoto called as they ran, clutching hand-woven baskets to their heads as they tried to look up and keep up.

Lunchtime came, with more juggling of people and tables for the restaurant car. This time I was seated opposite Venables. I’d noticed him up and down the corridor; he was the one with the weeping sister I’d seen in Kilosa. But he seemed shy, even more than me, and we’d not got talking. Now here he was, peering at me across the lunch table through his thick spectacles.

“Are you a new boy too?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m a new boy and I’m new to Tanganyika. I haven’t been here a week yet, out from England.”

“Oh.”

The conversation went one-sided for a while before I decided I was not

so much the quiet sort in comparison. It might take a while to get him going. But, it was lunchtime, so why not try? I told Venables of my experiences in English schools and how little I saw of my parents. He seemed impressed and loosened up after a while.

“I only know Africa,” he said. “I’ve been at a day school in Arusha, but my parents have been transferred to Kilosa and now this’ll be my first term in a boarding school. I’ll be a Junior.”

“Me too.”

It was close to two-thirty when we steamed into Gulwe. This was the closest point of population to Kongwa, I was told, and the place where the train would be split into the carriages that were going to Kongwa and the carriages of the mainline mail that was en route to Kigoma.

“Come... take a look,” Sheddy called me to the window on the corridor side. There in the distance was a mountain range. “They’re the Kiborianis,” Sheddy assured me with a shove of his chin. “We’ll be going in that direction soon. Kongwa’s on the other side of the mountains.”

“Why are we waiting?” I asked. “We seem to be just sitting here... again!”

It wasn’t long before, with an extended whistle followed by some friendly toots, our train ambled forward. Not much later we heard the stilted and deliberate click-click, clack-clack as we crossed the points at Msagali, diverting off the mainline of rail and heading towards those distant mountains.

We arrived at about three-thirty amid much engine whistling. After winding through the hemming Kiboriani foothills, the hillsides covered with scraggy and denuded forest, the landscape abruptly opened to an expansive vista. No savannah, no trees but the occasional baobab, nothing but aloaceous scrub stretched north into the haze of mountains at the distant horizon.

With a final whistle our train came to a squeaky halt.

“Everyone remain on the train until you’re told to disembark,” a disembodied voice called down the corridor. Then the locomotive was de-coupled, switched tracks and departed, racing back to Gulwe, there to re-link with the mainline mail.

Sheddy and I leaned out the windows on the southern side of our abandoned coaches. Looking forward, we could see a small, shoe-box building some hundred yards distant. It was standing close to the rail line in the

rich, red sand, amid a huge, whirling dust devil and blowing tumbleweeds. I guessed it was the official terminus. It was built with hollowed concrete bricks the same colour as the sand blowing around us. Its tiled roof was coloured similarly. Under the apex of the roof, facing the direction from which we had arrived, a large engraved concrete sign set into the bricks proclaimed the legend: 'Kongwa.'

CHAPTER THREE



THE SCHOOL AT THE END OF THE LINE

FOURTEEN MILES SOUTH OF THE TRAIN SIDING, the low, blue Kiboriani Range stood shimmering in the late afternoon heat. “Those mountains were climbed by Stanley during his search for Livingstone,” said Sheddy. “You know about Stanley and Livingstone, I suppose?”

“David Livingstone, I presume?” I responded holding out my arm for a mock hand shake.

Lying half way between us and those mountains was a low hill.

“That’s Kongwa Hill,” said Sheddy, “and the school buildings are along its base.”

“But I can’t see anything.”

“I know, everything’s pretty small, but between here and the hill is where the school is and that’s about all there is to Kongwa. See over to the right, that big hill, that’s Leopard Hill. And can you see the little one in front of it, it’s quite small from here, looks almost hidden but anyway, that’s Church Hill.”

“Hello, chaps,” Anthony Paton from the third compartment joined us at the window. “What are you looking at?”

“Sheddy’s telling me about Kongwa. I learned in geography in England that this part of Africa was savannah but it doesn’t look like what I expected savannah to look like from the pictures in the books.”

“Well,” responded Paton, “there are mostly msasa and acacia trees and savannah bush between Kongwa and those mountains, but...”

“The hills are covered in trees,” I said.

“Pretty scrubby ones, yes, that’s because, well, you can’t see from here,” Paton continued, “but from around the base of Church Hill there’s a donga, it’s quite—”

I frowned.

“A donga, you know, a ravine,” Paton said. “You know, rain water from the hills runs down and forms a river; dried up most of the time. So anyway, I suppose because of the donga, it’s sort of forested around the base of the hills, if you can call those trees, sort of like what we just came through on the train. But from here on north it’s just bush and baobabs, nothing else. Mostly that’s because the baobab trees and the scrub were cleared for groundnuts.”

Berry caught up with us, and joined in as we gazed out the window.

“What groundnuts?” I asked.

Berry jumped in. “After the war, they had an idea for farming this area and other parts of Tanganyika for growing groundnuts. You know what groundnuts are, I suppose?”

“Yes, I do. My dad told me. We called them peanuts in England.”

“I know,” said Berry.

“They’re also called monkey nuts,” added Paton.

“Anyway,” Berry continued, “the Groundnut Scheme was to be massive so they could grow millions of tons of nuts, thirty million acres in fact and maybe even more after that.

“Come off it, surely you mean three million?” I queried doubtfully, as I thought about how if you put all of England’s farms together in one big patch it would probably be less than three million acres.

“No, I meant thirty million. Anyway, after four years they gave up on it on account of no rain.”

“If there’s hardly any rain where do they get water from?” I asked. “Is there a lake?”

“No, there isn’t,” said Berry. “There’s an underground spring or something

in Sagara, about forty miles away, so water gets piped from there. My dad says the development here should really have happened in Sagara but no one seems to know why Kongwa was built instead.”

“There’s a lake in Mpwapwa,” chipped in Paton.

“Anyway,” continued Sheddy, “everyone left Kongwa and all the buildings and equipment and stuff were left here. You should see the graveyard. They have a dump where all the abandoned bulldozers and graders and ploughs and all sorts were dumped. It’s out of bounds, of course, but there’s tons of stuff to raid if you want.”

“And they wrecked the land and drove the animals away,” Paton added with a frown. “My dad and I hate that they frightened the animals away.”

“Come on,” said Sheddy. “I know you like animals an’ all, but there’s plenty around still. They didn’t go killing them all off.”

“Enough of them,” retorted Paton with a sniff.

Berry continued, “So anyway, with all those old buildings they decided to make a school out of them. I mean, they’d already started a school and there were plans to build more buildings but then they didn’t need to on account of, like Sheddy said, everyone left Kongwa and all the buildings that were already here were abandoned.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” I asked.

“My dad has a book about it, that’s how. He told me to stop reading Louis L’Amour and read something intelligent. Do you chaps like L’Amour? I think he’s the greatest Westerns writer ever. Anyway, the book about Kongwa was kind of boring but my dad wanted me to know about it. You’re going to school there, he said, so you ought to know something about where you’ll be living and studying, blah, blah, blah.”

We paused to ponder Berry’s words and the pressure from our dads to learn about such things.

“There’re plenty of animals still,” Sheddy continued, “although, Paton’s right, not as many as there used to be. But that’s because they drifted away, not because they were all killed. Anyway, they don’t grow nuts here anymore; maybe that’s why the animals are returning.”

“They are?” queried Paton. “That’s not what my dad says.”

“Alan Wood,” said Berry.

“What about him?” I asked. “Who’s Alan Wood?”

“The bloke who wrote *The Groundnut Affair*, the book I was telling you about.”

“Before they cleared the land,” Paton picked up again, “there were tons of wild animals here. Lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo, rhinos, as well as zebra, gnus and antelope of all sorts.”

“What’s a gnu?” I asked.

“It’s another name for wildebeest,” said Paton.

“Don’t forget the crocodiles in the rivers,” added Sheddy.

“Yes, along the way,” Paton agreed, “but not here, there aren’t any rivers near Kongwa. Anyhow, now there’s only a few animals in the area. They moved away because of the activity. My dad’s a game warden, you know, he knows about this stuff. I go into the bush with him all the time when I’m at home. If there’s any animals left when I grow up I’m going to be a game warden too, or maybe a vet.”

“You’re laying it on a bit,” said Sheddy. “I’ve seen herds of impala and gazelle and antelope, even Eland and waterbuck. Oh, and giraffes when we’ve gone on school outings. You see hyenas nearly every night from our houses; you watch tonight, Edwards, you’ll see.”

“And there’re baboons,” Berry added.

“And more dudus than you want to know about,” said Sheddy.

“Dudus?”

“You know, insects – mosquitoes that give you malaria; there’s all the flies in the world here, well, most of them; horse flies that bite like a horse and stink bugs.”

“And,” said Berry rising to the occasion and joining in the let’s-scare-Edwards-undercurrent, “don’t forget the tsetse fly that gives you sleeping sickness, the hornets, and the killer bees – the Africans call them wembembe. They’ll kill you, man.”

“That’s right. Tons of workers died from killer bee attacks during the groundnut scheme,” Sheddy confirmed with a serious nod to Berry. “Well, maybe not tons, but you know... you’ve got to be careful when you see their nests in the baobabs. Don’t go close, don’t even walk under them. The bees might attack even without a cause.”

My jaw dropped. “Blimey, you chaps are giving bloody good reasons not to come here,” I said. “How does anyone survive?”

“Most don’t,” said Sheddy. “There’s only a small percentage’ll make it out alive!”

I frowned.

“I’m joking.”



WITH THE DYING ECHOES OF THE STEAM ENGINE disappearing behind the hills, boys, girls and teachers returned to the silence, punctuated only by the clack and whir of a solitary locust. We’d been told to disembark and now milled around on the sun-baked sand, hunching our backs to the rust-coloured dust devils, and contemplating the newly abandoned train carriages standing so out of place, in the middle of nowhere. Far down the end, the girls were gathered around the tiny station building. As we talked I stared incredulously at this new scenery. What a difference from England. The chaps at Allan House would never believe it.

“There’s no one to fetch us,” I said. “Have we arrived early?”

Aranky, who’d caught up with us, jumped in. “They’ll have waited ’til they heard the engine’s whistle. That lets the staff know we’ve arrived. There’s no telephone here but they’ll have heard the whistle and then they’ll come.”

He turned out to be right, for several open-back, decrepit, Bedford lorries rolled up about a half hour later, driven by masters who must have arrived days earlier. The war-surplus lorries were in bad shape, tail boards were flapping loose and their disintegrating wooden siding looked barely strong enough to retain anything.

At the other side of the station building I saw what looked like buses arriving but I wasn’t sure in the swirling dust. The girls were being herded that way.

“Attention, everybody,” called Ian Longden, Livingstone’s house prefect. “Select the closest lorry and climb aboard. If one is full, find another or, if they’re all full, wait your turn. They’ll be coming back for another load.”

“Come along, Venables,” I called as Sheddy disappeared in another direction. “Let’s get on this one.”

We scrambled up, followed by dozens of others, found a spot to stand, and awaited the next move. At the last moment Sheddy came running up

and squeezed onto the packed lorry as it pulled away on a sandy, corrugated track.

The gharrie's complaining engine groaned under our weight, packed like sardines standing up, but headed resolutely for the school. The sun beat down, blinding us in its late afternoon angle to the horizon. The track's loose, red sand was kicked up in a roiling, unending cloud that swirled about us in our slipstream. The jarring of the corrugations rattled the bones as we swayed from side to side trying not to fall, chorusing extended whaaaaaahs and aaaaaahs as we clung on to each other.

There were small, one-level buildings as we turned south onto tarmac. It was a half mile of the only paved road in Kongwa. We passed a shack or two then a cluster on our right; "That's the hospital," said Aranky. Next to it was a small, green oasis surrounded by hedging.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Kongwa Club," responded Sheddy, who'd squeezed his way close to us. "Only for grown-ups, of course, except we'll be going there for swimming lessons when they've built the pool. It'll be the only one in Kongwa. Last term we went to a pool in Sagara, the place Berry told you about, but that was the only time. The Club's got two tennis courts, if you wanna learn to play."

A hundred yards up we turned left, onto sand again and came to a stop among a wide-spread collection of single-level, L-shaped buildings. As we piled off the lorries, we were directed to a particular building some thirty yards away.

"That one over there with the slab in front, is the mess," a prefect pointed. "Dinner is waiting for you. It's a bit early but that's the way it is for today. So, go find yourself a table or go where you're directed by the prefects up there."

We strolled toward the mess gazing at the large slab with a drain in the middle that was located outside the kitchen but hesitated as we rounded the end of the building, not sure where to go. I looked around and asked, "What happened to the girls? First they were all over the train, now I can't see any."

"The dames eat at the other end there," said Sheddy, "and its doors are on the other side, so they were probably taken in their buses 'round the back. You

won't see much of them except in class; there's not supposed to be mixing outside the classrooms 'cept maybe on sports days."

"That was something," I said. "We were loaded into those rattletraps while the girls got buses. They didn't look very good but seemed in better nick than our lorries."

"Yes, well, the dames always get favoured treatment," said Sheddy. "They're girls, after all."

"What are those buildings down there for?" asked Goggles. (Venables had already been tagged with this nickname on account of his thick spectacles.) We were looking at several, single-level, dark wood structures with flaring, corrugated-iron roofs that were blinding if you caught them at the right angle to the sun. It seemed like there might be something like six rooms in each. The buildings had open air corridors built around their front.

"They were offices, now they're classrooms for Seniors mostly. That one over there, see, to the right of that smaller baobab, that's administration. The Headmaster has his office in that building... and his sjambok."

"What's a sjambok?" I asked naively.

"It's like a cane, only it's a whip. Not one like Lash Larue uses, you know, the cowboy in the comics?"

"Lash Larue's smashing, man; he's got a bull whip."

"Well, not that sort of whip," continued Sheddy. "A sjambok is about yeh long," he said stretching his arms wide. "My dad says it's carved from one piece of hippo hide. At the tip it's not much bigger than a screw driver, 'cept it's rounded, and then its shape widens until its big enough to grip like a handle the other end. If you get beaten with that it's a thousand times worse than anything else."

I felt chilled; so they whip boys here! "How do you know?" I asked. "Have you been whipped with it?"

"No, they don't use it on Juniors. I asked my dad about it in the hols because two Seniors got a public caning with it last term because they'd run away from school. They were caught by the conductor on the train 'cos they'd not bought tickets. Anyhow, if you watched those two when they got six of the best, well, you'd know why you wouldn't want to feel it."

As we loitered around the mess, prefects dressed for dinner in long grey trousers, tie and blazer beckoned us indoors to find a table. Glynn Ford

directed Goggles, Sheddy and me. Sheddy was allocated the last seat to be filled at a table for seven at the far end, while Venables and I were the only two to be sat at an unoccupied one. The table was covered with a muslin netting to keep crowds of flies off. Underneath we liked what we saw: plenty of spam and salads, bread, butter and that sort of thing. Every table was similarly dressed. As we sat down and removed the net I noticed the walls. On each side of the mess, for its entire length, were mounted growling and snorting heads of lion, leopard, water buffalo, rhino, eland, kudu and others. Paton was right, they had been shooting animals. Later I learned the creatures had been shot by former employees of the scheme as well as Senior school boys and teachers on their hunts for meat for the school. The heads were mounted on wooden shields, made by boys in the woodwork class.

No sooner had we sat down when we were approached by a teacher. "Everyone has to take anti-malaria, quinine pills. Here's your first Palludrin, see you swallow it right away, please. In future you'll find one to take with your lunch every day."

Goggles and I, still the only two at the table, tucked in. Having got over my amazement at the animal heads, I focused on how this room was full of small tables, rather than extended trestle tables like I knew from my previous schools. It looked like a restaurant in here. Venables guessed that this was because the mess had belonged to The Groundnut Scheme, which he knew lots about from his dad who was employed by the Overseas Food Corporation (O.F.C.).

"The mess was probably a cafeteria, open most of the day for family meals or small groups; that's why the individual tables."

"Oh, I get it."

Now, because every table had to have a prefect, a place was set for a seventh person at one end.

"It's good scoff," I said.

"Plenty of it too," Venables replied. "Not the piffling amount my dad said we might get because of the famine in Tanganyika. He said it was especially bad in Kongwa on account of no rain. I once heard him talking with mum saying they'd been having trouble getting enough meat for the school."

"What does your dad do?" I asked.

“I don’t really know, something to do with supplies, I think; doesn’t tell me much. How about yours?”

“He got a new job, working for a Dutch company. It’s called – let’s see if I can say it in Dutch – Twentsche Overzee Handel Maatschapij. Well, something like that anyway. They call it T.O.M. for short. Anyway, he’ll be importing and exporting stuff, I think; that’s about it.”

We kept scoffing until the second convoy drew up and off-loaded a new surge of arrivals. A number of them, including a Junior’s prefect, were directed to our table. As the boys arrived they reacted in horror. But for a few scraps, Venables and I had enjoyed a good repast and eaten nearly everything.

“What do you think you’re doing, you bloody idiots?” the prefect yelled. “You’ve eaten all the food. Don’t you know this table was laid for seven, not two? How could you eat it all and leave us hardly any?”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know, no one told us, we didn’t know, did we, Venables?”

“No, we didn’t know, no one told us. Can’t they just bring more?”

“You greedy bastards,” chipped in another who looked aggressive and I instinctively knew would bring me much trouble. “They need beating up, man,” he said and turned to the prefect.

“Shut up, Viljoen,” said the prefect as he turned back to us. “Now what are we supposed to eat? Where do you expect us to get food from now you’ve had our shares? You know you’ve eaten almost all the food for seven? Godverdomme, man, you piss me off, eh.”

We were stricken at this attack and instantly ashamed, as our conversation about plenty of food and the famine among the Africans suddenly took on new meaning. My averted eyes came to rest on the lion head on the wall behind the prefect’s head, its mouth open in a roar, its massive fangs I could just imagine dripping blood, adding to the menace that I now felt. Goggles and I shrunk into our seats.

“Why couldn’t someone just bring more, like they do at home?” I repeated Venables’s question.

“Because they’ve already put out food for seven, they’re not going to bring anymore until tomorrow,” the prefect snarled. “They haven’t got any more food, dom.” His voice became louder as he shouted at us in his Afrikaner accent.

Just as I thought he or Viljoen might lay into us with a punch, a teacher came scurrying over to find out what the noise was about, now that everybody in the mess was looking over their shoulders in our direction.

“These two greedy bastards have eaten all the food, sir. There’s none left for us, sir. So now I suppose we’ll have to go hungry tonight, sir.”

I had the frightening thought that my first caning in Kongwa was imminent.

“You will not swear or use the word bastard,” the teacher asserted to the prefect with a frown, an angry tint to his voice. “I don’t want to hear language like that now or at any time! Is that clearly understood?”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Now calm down and be quiet.”

Turning to Venables and me, he asked with a kindly squint, “You’re new boys, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” we admitted in duet but in relief at his tone.

“Hmm, don’t suppose you know the routine yet.” He turned to the prefect. “An honest mistake, I’m sure, but do not concern yourself; we can get more food sent out. You five should take your seats and I’ll arrange with the kitchen to have your table replenished. Now, let’s not hear any more noise, please. This was an unfortunate mistake, not intentional, so just cool down, will you.”

“Yes, sir,” the boys grumbled.

As soon as the teacher disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, we were glared at by the five as they took their seats. The prefect shook his head. Still angry but in a subdued voice, he seethed, “You’re lucky. Shuttly saved your bacon. I hope you’re not in my house because if you are it’ll be the worse for you. Anyway, now you’ve finished eating you can leave, get out of my sight!”

We hadn’t finished and still had a few scraps but were not about to argue. Venables and I left, glad to be out of there.

After dinner, Juniors were called to form crocodile lines by the Housemasters for Livingstone, Wilberforce, Nightingale and Curie. There were twenty-seven in each line. Although we were Juniors we would share the same phase as the Senior boys but would be in different houses consisting of more or less our own age group. Mr. Ferguson led the way to our houses

following a lengthy walk. Even though I'd been warned of this I was surprised. "Are we going to be walking this far all the time?" I asked Venables.

"I don't know, man, I'm new like you, but Sheddy told us everything was far from everything else."

As we arrived at phase 3, I and several others nearly jumped out of our skins at the raucous shrieks that accompanied our arrival.

"Oh golly, what's that?"

"Only tree hyraxes, they won't hurt you," said Sheddy. "They just make a helluva din when they're startled."

"Yish."

Then I got refocused as I discovered the houses. Rows of small houses were now our dorms, if that was the right word. There were nine of us allocated to a house and that included the prefect. Our prefect was Clive Knight.

"You didn't see me on your train because I wasn't on it," he replied to my question. "I live in a place called Urambo, further west from here, past Tabora if you know where that is."

"But how did you get here?" I asked.

"By train from the opposite direction, from Urambo to Dodoma, then by bus to here. I, and some others from up-country, arrived earlier this morning."

Clive was only about six months older than me but he was senior to the rest of us and he held a prefect's authority. I took a liking to him. He seemed different from the prefects I'd been used to.

The other boys in our house included: Sheddy, Goggles, Berry, Gunston, Aranky, Priestley, Jenner and MacLachlan. The first thing I noticed was that there was a toilet in the house.

"We're lucky this time," said Sheddy, "may not be in future terms."

Once we knew our beds and unpacked our cases, we rushed out to play. I noticed we were close to a hill. Sheddy said, "It's Church Hill, the one I showed you from the train. It's the one with the donga at the base, just at the end of this row; I'll take you there soon as we get a chance."

Having eaten we had time to spare. I didn't join in any games but when I noticed Venables wasn't around I went looking for him. He was lying on his bed looking forlorn. He'd been crying and when I spoke he started again. He was trying not to but he couldn't help it. I sat on his bed next to him; I

was feeling low too. A feeling of melancholy washed over me, not helped by these Spartan rooms and the memory of my happiness in Lindi just two days ago. I put on a brave face.

“I say, cheer up, Venables, old chap. I know how you feel, really I do, I feel pretty rough myself, but it won’t do for the others to see you blubbing.”

I expected he would be teased; I’d had enough of that at Allan House and had no reason to believe it would be any different here.

“I say, why don’t we go outside and walk around like the others, see what gives and all that.”

“I don’t want to go outside! I don’t want to be here! I hate this place!” he shouted with unexpected venom. “I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! And I want to go home!” And with that Venables burst into another fit of sobs and buried his head in his pillow.

I didn’t know what to say. We were all right for the moment, with the others outside. Then I heard quick footsteps and a rather tanned Matron came bustling down the corridor. She wore a white housecoat and on her head full of short, brown curls, a small cap I suppose you’d call it, not unlike nurses wore. She was slim, probably middle aged, although all adults look old when you’re nine or ten, with a bit of a stern face; a bit like Mrs. Stick in one of those Enid Blyton books. I stood to meet her.

“Please, Matron, my name’s Edwards. I’m afraid Venables here is very sad and is crying.”

Matron assessed the scene and said, in her matter-of-fact Yorkshire accent, “You may leave us, Edwards, while I have a talk with Venables.”

“Yes, Matron,” and with that I wandered through the door and onto the stoep.

Not much later, with the last shards of sunlight having blinked out behind Leopard Hill, it was dark. The noise from the insects’ chorus and the hyrax’s shrieks were drowning as Matron called us out for a nightcap. We brought our fat, general issue china mugs with us and she poured us either hot milk or Ovaltine. I selected Ovaltine as I couldn’t stand drinking milk, much less hot.

While we were standing around drinking in the spill of light from a nearby house, there was rough play going on between a couple of boys. One

of them backed into me as I was taking a sip from my mug, bumping it into my teeth.

“Ow!” I howled, clutching my hand to my mouth to catch the chipped china that I’d felt break away on contact. “Be careful, you clot, this is hot and now you’ve made me break my mug.”

“Sorry, Edwards,” Viljoen laughed. “Maybe that’ll teach you not to eat everybody else’s dinner.”

Matron came hurrying over to check on me.

“Did you spit out the china fully?” she asked.

“Yes, Matron.”

She examined the mug then said, “Let me see your mouth. Show me your teeth.”

I gave a cheesy smile.

“I’m afraid that’s not china you spat out, Edwards. That was a piece of one of your front teeth. Does it hurt?”

“No, Matron.”

“Good. Well, finish up your Ovaltine. Come on, everybody, drink up, bed time.”

Back inside, I sat on my bed in pyjamas, examining the itching around my ankles. My skin not only had the rash to cope with but was aggravated by burrs from the long grasses. The scabs had brushed off and my raw skin had stuck to my socks. I sat on my bed, gingerly peeling the socks down, trying – without success – not to open up the sores. But as the sock was peeled away it took newly-forming scabs with it and opened several wounds.

“All right, everyone,” called Clive. “That’s enough noise. You all need to calm down. I want you to brush your teeth and get into bed.”

It wasn’t long before Matron arrived for inspection. After a quick scan of our room and its state of tidiness, her eyes came to rest on me.

“What’s wrong with your ankles, Edwards?”

“Please, Matron, I don’t really know. But I did have this skin problem in England, actually it was worse than it is now, it seems to have healed a bit, but anyway, my ankles still have these sores and they’re really itching because of the prickly things in the grass.”

“Hmm, what do you put on them, ointment of some sort?”

“No. Fuller’s Earth, Matron. We stopped using ointments, didn’t seem to help much.”

Matron moved in to take a closer look. “Sprinkle on your powder then. I want you to come see me before bath time each day so that I can inspect those ankles. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Matron.”

“I see you have the same problem on the back of your hands too?”

“Yes, Matron.”

“Anywhere else?”

“Behind my knees, Matron. But my knees and hands aren’t as bad as they were. They seem to be getting a bit better.”

“I don’t want those sores going septic, so mind you come and see me each evening. Now listen, boys, I want you all to settle down, please. Is everyone all right?”

There was a chorus of “Yes, Matron.”

“Good. Lights out now. Goodnight.”

“ ’Night, Matron.”

I’d watched Venables whenever I’d looked up from sock peeling. I’d not seen him crying any more although he was still withdrawn. Matron must have got him to feel a little better. He’d been watching me with my socks and gave me a weak smile in the grey darkness as he pulled his sheet over himself and said, “ ’Night.”

CHAPTER FOUR



DREAMS AND DONGAS

I COULDN'T SLEEP. AFTER THE EXCITEMENT of the day, reality had caught up. I sympathised with Venables and now my emotions were running high too. I felt miserable as it all sunk in. I was stuck here for months. If it was anything like Allan House, who knew what misery lay ahead, especially with those blokes at the dinner table, and that one, Viljoen, who was in Livingstone too although not in my house, thank goodness. Thanks to him I have a broken tooth already... on my first day! Worse yet was what Sheddy had told us about the sjambok. It wasn't hard to imagine that one teacher or another would find a reason to use it on me sooner or later. Tears of sadness ran down my cheeks and I dried them off with my sheet. After a couple of sniffs I nearly gave the game away.

"Is someone blubbing?" Sheddy's sleepy voice came out of the darkness.

No one answered, least of all me. I stifled my sniffing and finished wiping my tears so no one would know.

I tried changing my thoughts to happier occasions but could only come up with Miss Evans. When the parents didn't come home on leave from Nigeria, which was most of the time, and because neither my grandparents

nor any other family member were in the position to look after me, my parents had to find somewhere else for me to stay during school holidays. Allan House could not take me in like Cable House had done, so I travelled to Miss Evans' boarding home, alone on the train, with a label round my neck, under orders from the guard to remain where I was until I was escorted off the train in Bournemouth. Amazing that I should think of that place as a happy time! But there had been some fun, especially when we went out in the pony and trap.

I remembered helping harness the pony and backing him into the trap. The trap could seat the six of us and have room for Miss Evans too. As we stepped on the bottom step, the trap would tip on its axle with those huge wheels rimmed with metal felloes. Miss Nash, who was Miss Evans's assistant, always went on ahead in her Austin 7, taking the picnic basket with her.

I loved those pony rides. Perhaps it was the unhurried clip-clop along sequestered country lanes in the New Forest with its umbrella chestnut boughs that would let shimmering specs of sunlight dapple through, or coming across an open glade with its green, undulating and sun-drenched countryside sentineled with fine old English oaks and elms, watercress-lined streams and bringing to mind thoughts of Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham (although that took place in Nottingham Forest, of course); or further along peeking through breaks in high bracken, hawthorn and wild rose, or thickets lined with blackberry, brilliant yellow gorse, elderflower or the many purple shades of heather. Of watching cows chewing the cud, and the grass in the fields alive with buttercups, clover and daisies with furry bumblebees flitting from one to the other; of looking for a way to cross streams with sparkling dragonflies and thick with bulrushes and later drawing up to an old stone church that had stood there a thousand years – all induced an unhurried charm toward life.

We'd walk the farmers' fields keeping closely to the bridle path and along the fence lines, clambering over stiles and nervously making sure the cows were not hiding a bull among their number who would chase us away from his ladies. We gathered buttercups and held them under each other's chin to make sure we were as nice as we thought we were, while others made daisy chains for fun or perhaps to give to a girl a boy was sweet on. Later, back at the summer home, we loved looking after the pony, grooming him, feeding

him carrots and lettuce or an occasional sugar lump, and hitching him for rides into the village where we might be treated to delicious Wall's ice cream, if we were really good. But these thoughts didn't help much. I was too hot and threw off my blanket as the memories of England lingered and my mind wandered to home, which for me was wherever my parents happened to be.

I barely knew my dad. He hadn't even seen me until I was two-and-a-half. We'd been together while he was on long leave on three occasions during my nearly ten years of life. I'd seen a bit more of Mum but not a lot, not compared with my friends who seemed to have parents all the time. My mind wandered again, this time to our plane landing in Dar es Salaam. *Golly, it was only a week ago.*

After we'd landed, we'd got through customs and immigration in seconds and into the reception hall. Happiness! There'd been Dad, a beaming smile; hugs all around; together at last. Dad was dressed in the de facto uniform of colonial Africa, white short-sleeved shirt with two breast pockets which carried a diary or notebook and an array of coloured pens; white shorts, white long stockings or socks up to the top of the calves and brown slip-on walking shoes. Casual wear was khaki and short brown socks, if any, and sandals.

Trunks were collected and loaded into the boot of the Peugeot, and off we'd driven to the city centre, where we'd stayed at the Metropole Hotel. Dad recalled how, while he was in England, I'd gone on about wanting a 'bus 'n coach 'n jeep.' To greet me, he'd tried to find a toy that would impress and had come across in Dinky Toys a double-decker London bus, a motor coach and a Land Rover. I'd found those three awaiting my arrival in our hotel room. They were accompanied with an apology, "Sorry, chum, I wasn't able to find a Jeep. I hope a Land Rover will be close enough."

"They're smashing, Daddy, thank you very much, they're just super!" Then, not long after that, they'd sounded me out on remaining in Dar with the Kherers for those few days before leaving for school. Well, I'd had my say about that.



THE DOUGLAS DAKOTA OF EAST AFRICAN AIRWAYS had lumbered lazily down the runway and lifted off in the cool dawn air at 0600. That flight to

Lindi was the first hop on a milk run that took the plane around the bush stations of the southern province, before returning to Dar es Salaam that night. It made the trip three times a week. The languid climb gave opportunities for views of the larger city as it clipped the coconut palms, catching sight of the beautiful homes and crystal beaches of Oyster Bay, while streaks of sunlight penetrated the early morning cloud cover.

“Look,” said Dad. “That’s the Kherers’ home over there, near the corner of those two roads.”

Alas, I hadn’t picked it out in time before we flew on.

Gradually, the plane had gained altitude and edged over the aquamarine coral waters, to follow the coast on its southerly flight, to its first touchdown, Lindi. That early-morning flight had been a smooth ride. Dad pointed out Mafia Island looking like an atoll in the azure blue sea off to the east, and I studied every inch of the coast as we followed its endless miles of unpopulated, sandy beaches. There were bays recessed into the land protected by rocky outcrops; further on mangrove swamps would pervade with their thick, bushy leaves and grotesque roots shooting out of sodden sand to the point of high tide water. Wild coral reefs abounded.

The Dakota banked inland to line up over massive sisal plantations that stretched seemingly forever, before landing in Lindi – an hour and a half since we’d left Dar es Salaam. Mr. Salvini, a tall, young, wiry-built and bespectacled Hollander, sent out from the Netherlands to assist my dad, greeted us. He would provide our lift into town in a small, red, Austin pick-up with just enough room in the front to seat my parents in addition to himself. We hung around waiting until a couple of African servants – who they called ‘boys,’ which I thought funny because I was a boy and they looked like grown-ups to me – filled the pick-up with boxes and cartons from the plane. Those were followed by our suitcases, all dumped in the open back. To my surprise, Mr. Salvini told me, in his thick, Dutch accent, “You should hop in the back, Tony; there’s not enough room in the front.”

I gladly did so, thinking *this is going to be fun*, and the ‘boys’ followed. I nuzzled a wedge between a couple of the larger cartons or cases where I expected I could sit and enjoy the ride. I’d never ridden in the open back of a pick-up, so didn’t know what to expect.

The twenty miles drive to town through sisal estates was corrugated and

dust-laden. It was rutted, pot-holed and intersected with, for now, dry river beds. Progress was slow to preserve springs and shock absorbers. Eventually, battered and bruised, we found tarmac on the edge of town, then wound the last few hundred yards along a beach front drive, and came to a squeaky halt outside the Beach Hotel.

The Van Buren couple, who were Dutch, were the hoteliers of 'The Beach,' and, expecting our arrival, they came out to greet us. They were trailed by a curious daughter, Annalise, a year or two older than me, her brother Egbert some five years younger than her, a hanger-on or odd job man, Tony, and a mutt named Binty.

"Leave everything in the pick-up for the 'boys' to attend to," counselled Mr. Van Buren.

So, I'd disengaged from lettuce, carrots, squashed tomatoes and other produce that had been my cushion for the journey, hopped the sides and followed the entourage through the entrance pillars.

In the German colonial style, the hotel was wide open. Doors, walls and windows were few and far between, replaced by arches and open space that encouraged the flow of sea breezes. It was all so different from the tiny homes and shops of England, mired under rain clouds, cold, with tiny rooms and doors from which hung draft curtains. The wide-open patio, overlooked by a long bar with its listless fans, was in such contrast, so different, so inviting. It presided over the sun-drenched beach and the ocean shore that washed gently beyond. The palm fronds rustled in the breeze, creating a cooling effect from the broiling heat and humidity.

I couldn't remember much about the hotel's services but know I enjoyed being there, and wished it would last forever. I'd noticed my father and others refer to the hotel as 'The Dysentery Arms.' I've since learned it was a term of endearment, as it was a mnemonic attached to many bush hotels. I was thoroughly happy. I was with my parents, it was hot, there was sun, sand and sea, and there were two other children to play with. I would be there almost five days and enjoyed every minute.

Mum and Dad and I sat around talking for a while after dinner that first night. Dad asked, "So, chum, what did they teach you at Allan House about East Africa, or Tanganyika, once they knew you'd be moving here?"

"Well, Dad, they told me how it's the largest country in East Africa and

we looked at it on an atlas. They said Tanganyika is larger than France and Germany put together. They told me it's a protectorate, not a colony, whatever that means. It was explained that East Africa is the name given to Kenya and Uganda as well as Tanganyika, the three countries together, you know?

"Uh huh, what else did they tell you?"

"Really, Les," chipped in Mum. "You're putting him through his paces a bit, aren't you? He's only nine."

"He goes to school to learn. I would expect a prep school like he went to should inform him of this sort of thing; it cost enough, goodness knows."

"Well, Dad," I continued, "they told me about those countries because they're all three linked by things like airlines and railways, like East African Airways, right, the plane we flew here on?"

"Right," said my dad. "What else?"

"They said Africa's countries are going to become independent some day. See, I asked them about Nigeria and the Gold Coast where you used to live, and they said they might be the first to be independent."

"What do you know about the Africans?" asked Dad.

"They said there are a lot of tribes in Tanganyika, I forget how many, maybe fifteen or twenty, I think."

"And?"

"The tribe where my school is, is called Gogo but they're a smaller tribe than some of the others... Oh yes, and they also told me most of the country doesn't have people because it's too arid and kind of deserty... no water."

"Uh, huh, anything else?"

"Well, there's lots and lots of wild animals which I have to be very careful of, like lions and elephants, especially here in Tanganyika where there's a large area called... hmm, let me see, what was it called... Ser... I don't know, Ser something."

"Serengeti," said Dad, "the Serengeti Plains. It seems they got you off to a good start. We may talk on this a bit more tomorrow."

"It's getting late," said Mum. "Time for your bed. Come on, give your dad a hug and I'll take you to your room."

Although I'd gone to bed late it was difficult to sleep. The bedroom was large but featureless – just four walls and a ceiling fan that revolved squeakily

and didn't seem to help. A white cone mosquito net shrouded my bed. There were louvered French doors that opened to the balcony. After Mother had left, I got out of bed to step out onto it. There I'd stood gazing at the stars and the sea. The sky was so clear, so sparkly. The moon was nearly full. Down below, just the other side of a low concrete wall that divided the grounds from the beach, wavelets bathed in moonlight washed in endless repetition.

My ears filled with the amazing sounds of the night, dominated by the chirruping of cicadas, punctuated with the croaks of bullfrogs and backed up by countless insects singing in harmony. I'd returned to my senses when I heard the interweaving contrails of a mosquito zeroing in. It went into a dive, like a German Stuka and landed in an explosion of silence on my neck. Instinctively I slapped at it as I retreated to my bed and the protection of the net, there to think on the excitement of the day until the slowly revolving fan mesmerised me to sleep.



ANNALISE AND EGBERT SEEMED GLAD FOR MY COMPANY. They were the only two European children in Lindi beyond infancy. That first morning they'd taken me in tow to show me around. As we passed any African pedestrian they would mutter something about elephants.

"Why do you keep talking about elephants to those people?" I'd asked.

"Elephants? We're not talking about Jumbo's!" Egbert had replied with glee. "We're saying hello or good morning in Swahili. 'Jambo' means hello, why don't you try it?"

I'd chuckled, feeling a little foolish, but after a while plucked up the courage.

"Jambo," I said to a passing native.

"Jambo, bwana kidogo," came the reply. "Habari yarko?"

All I was looking for in response was 'Jambo.' But no, the chap responded asking questions in Swahili that I couldn't understand. I'd kept to English after that. We'd explored the beach and picked for shells. I'd rolled up the legs of my long, grey, warm, winter trousers, slipped off my shoes, peeled away my socks from the sores on my ankles and broiling feet, and paddled.

“Mind out,” Egbert had yelled at one point. “Don’t tread on that!”

I’d frozen and looked down at a huge jellyfish.

“That’s a Portuguese Man o’ War,” Egbert told me as I’d stared at it, caught in the shallows and washing ashore.

I stepped quickly aside when he’d yelled, “Those things sting bad,” and remained on the dry sand where I could keep a close watch on where I was treading. The beach was alive with crabs and we’d had fun chasing them.

We’d still not caught any when we heard the urgent call of the parents. “Annalise, Egbert, Tony, where are you? Lunch time.”

It had been a good lunch. A seafood concoction of Mrs. Van Buren’s, served in a large clam shell, was delicious. Lobster, prawns, clams and barracuda were caught close-inshore by local fishermen who could be found daily touting their fresh catch for sale. I’d never eaten anything like that in England; this sort of food simply wasn’t available, well, unless you had an awful lot of money. Food had come off the ration from the war years only two years earlier but that didn’t mean that exotic food of this sort could be readily come by, or afforded.

During lunch we’d been warned not to walk the beaches in bare feet: “The ‘jiggers’, you know.”

“What’s a jigger?” I’d asked.

“A jigger is a tiny worm-like sand flea,” said my dad. “The female burrows into your foot and can cause an infection. It can be serious because you can end up with lost toes or tetanus.”

We’d worn slops after that, bought that afternoon when we’d gone to The Lindi Store to buy me suitable clothes. We’d emerged with me sporting a khaki, short-sleeved shirt and shorts.

I’d stayed at ‘The Beach’ for what was left of the week, but my parents said they’d be living there many months. Letters home were to be addressed care of the Beach Hotel, until they’d registered a post office box.

There wasn’t any vacant office space either. Father and Salvini had taken over a bedroom in the hotel, and made it into an office. T.O.M. was building a block of flats that would house us and other employees on the top floor, with office space on the ground floor. We’d visited the block under construction. It was there I’d met Carlos, an olive-skinned and handsome Italian bachelor with a sparkle in his eyes and a character full of charm. Carlos was the local

builder and would tell me, in time, many stories of the great engineering legacy of the Italian people.

In discovering Lindi with Annalise and Egbert, I'd talked with some of the Indian proprietors of the larger stores, they being surprised to note a new European child in town. In this simple act of exploring I'd found freedom, a huge change from the cloistered and oppressive boarding environment I'd been used to all my life. It had been exciting being out with my new friends; no grown-ups holding hands or telling us what to do or where to go. I was nearly ten and it was the first time in my life I'd done that; but it was short lived.

There'd been brief confusion a couple of nights earlier, whether I would have all day of Sunday, the 6th in Lindi, a chance to delay departure by precious hours – or virtually no time at all.

“As you now know, chum,” said Dad, “East African Airways’ three-times-a-week flight alternates its timetable. On the one run, the plane lands in Lindi on its first call of the day. On the alternate trip, Lindi is its last stop of the day at about five in the afternoon. Depending on what it’s doing, you’ll have to leave pretty early on Sunday or quite late in the day. I’ll be popping around to the EAA office in the morning to find out.”

Oh, what happiness. It turned out I'd have the better part of Sunday to spend with parents and my new friends, rather than taking off at eight in the morning. That 5 p.m. flight would fly direct to Dar. If I'd gone on the milk run, I'd have had an all-day, hedge-hopping, and air-sick flight to Mtwara, Nachingwea, Songea, Iringa, Mbeya and finally Dar es Salaam. Dad told me I could expect taking the roundabout route might happen from time to time, on future trips.



SUNDAY LUNCHTIME HAD BEEN AND GONE. ANNALISE, who was also going to Kongwa, had left with her parents for the airfield along with Egbert, not quite six or old enough to attend, tagging along. He would start school in September. Behind them, we'd pulled out in the pick-up. We hadn't been long at the airfield before we'd spotted a plane descending from the south.

“That’s not the usual E.A.A. flight,” Dad said with a frown as it touched down. “It should be a Dakota, not a Lodestar.”

“And it doesn’t have any E.A.A. markings,” I said.

“The plane has been borrowed while the DC-3 is in for service,” said a man who overheard our conversation and seemed to be in the know.

Hugs and kisses, but bravely no tears, were dispensed.

“Bye, darling, write soon,” said Mum.

“Cheerio, chum. See you in June,” said Dad giving me a brief hug.

Then I’d climbed a couple of steps into the fourteen-passenger Lockheed Lodestar. It had arrived with a few people on board, one a girl wearing Kongwa school uniform. I judged her to be a year or two older than me. Annalise knew her for she immediately went and took the seat by the older girl’s side where they were instantly into non-stop chatter punctuated with frequent squeals of laughter.

Soon we were airborne. Sitting alone, I gazed out the window at the infinity of Africa below. I was amazed at the clouds above us. As far as the eye could see, tiny puffy well-spaced clouds filled the sky, breaking up the deep blue heavens and casting tiny dark shadows on the ground. It was to become a source of amazement for me over the years to gaze upwards from a walk and see these thousands of cotton swabs that seemed never to cast shade when you were on the ground, for the sun seemed unrelenting.

The Lodestar ferried us safely to Dar es Salaam, where Mr. and Mrs. Kehrer met me and took me to their lovely home lost among the acres of palms of Oyster Bay. I thought about it, with its rancher style, terra cotta tiled roof, white, smooth, stucco finish, large, open windows protected by wrought iron burglar bars, spacious, nicely furnished and beautiful in the evening, with the indirect lighting of the table lamps that Jean Kherer favoured. My bedroom annex was connected with the main house by a breezeway that caught the fresh ocean wind and lowered the humidity. The insects had been loud, and the curtains rustled constantly in the breeze. I’d climbed under my net and was tucked in.



WE WERE WOKEN BY MATRON. “WAKEY, WAKEY. Time to get up,

everyone. Come on now, up you get, no sleeping in. There's not much time 'til breakfast."

There was a scramble for use of the bathroom, with two if not three trying to wash themselves and brush teeth at the same time. We were not long getting ready. I stepped into the already hot sunshine and was rustled up by Clive to join the line for inspection. Matron checked our hands and behind our ears for tell-tale dirt and looked for a presentable appearance. As she did so we glanced up at the noisy chirruping coming from squadrons of gaily-coloured birds flying overhead.

"They must be parakeets," I said to Goggles. "They're so beautiful."

"Kasukus," he replied. "The Africans call them kasukus."

The line moved out, following the beaten path to the mess. As we walked, in between glancing up at the extraordinary numbers of kasukus flying noisily above, I thought about the dinner table following our arrival yesterday.

"Gosh," I turned to talk over my shoulder to Sheddy, as I kept my eyes open for Viljoen further back in the line, "I hope we don't have the same prefect at the table as when we arrived. He really yelled at Goggles and me."

"We weren't divided by houses then," Sheddy replied. "We were allocated the nearest tables available. Now it'll be organised by house. Those blokes weren't even in Livingstone, were they?"

"The prefect wasn't, I haven't seen him again, or the others, except for Viljoen. He's in Livingstone and was one of them."

"Don't worry about him," said Sheddy. "Our prefect will almost certainly be Clive."

"What's for breakfast, do you think?" I asked.

"Oh they have all the usual, you'll see. Sometimes they give us Marmite; do you like Marmite?"

"Love it."

"Well you can have mine. They have this concoction of margarine and Marmite mix; can't stand the stuff..."

Our Juniors' classrooms, Forms 1 to 4, were close to Church Hill and the Donga. They were housed in three oblong buildings. Fergie brought us to attention sharp at eight-thirty, rapping his desk with a blackboard pointer.

"All of you just settle down now. I want quiet, please. You boy," looking directly at me, "what's your name?"

“Please, sir, my name’s Edwards, sir.”

“Edwards, yes, a new boy,” he said. “Who else here is a new boy or girl?” A bristling of arms went up. He wrote down the names then said, “Right then, here’s what we’re going to do. Firstly you’ll go to the storeroom at the end of this building. There you’ll be handed text books, exercise books, pens and nibs, pencils and rubbers, geometry squares, together with any other items they may have for you. I want you to go and fetch everything, and return immediately. I expect you back within a few minutes.”

When we returned and settled down Fergie told us, “Among other things, I take the lead in putting on plays in this school. It all derives from English culture and literature, which we will be learning together over the next few terms, for those of you who remain in Kongwa long enough, that is. We will put on one play at half term. What is of interest to me is finding out who of you respond with the greatest enthusiasm to acting. During your Senior year this will become a much more important factor. So think of this as a recruiting period, when you’ll get the chance to show your mettle. Any questions so far?”

A girl put up her hand.

“Please, sir, is this for boys and girls, sir?”

“No... er, your name, girl?”

“Pam, sir, uh, Pamela Shaw.”

“No, Miss Shaw, this does not include girls, I’m afraid. The fact is there are other activities more suited to girls. Your Senior Mistress, Miss Strong, will be advising you about that in due course. Needless to add we will not normally be taking up classroom time with play readings; they are strictly extra-curricular, after-class hours.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Excuse me, sir.” Another girl put up her hand.

“Yes, Miss McCormack, you may speak.”

“Please, sir, will the plays you put on only have boys in them, that is to say, parts for boys to play? I mean, you know, do the plays have girls in them, sir?”

“Well, it depends on the play,” replied Mr. Ferguson. “The one I have in mind for this term, entitled *Any Body*, has boys’ roles only. However, in the Senior years there will be plays with girls’ roles.”

“So I suppose, sir,” went on Miss McCormack with a knowing smile, “boys will have to play girls’ roles?”

There was a titter from the girls, which had been the point of the question; Miss McCormack knew the answer before she asked it.

“Yes, Miss McCormack,” with a sigh, “boys may well play girls’ roles. Now can we get along, please?”

Mr. Ferguson continued, “I want to assess your reading skills. We will have each of you, and that includes you girls – you can benefit from the reading exercise anyway – come to the front and read a passage from this book. I want you to read with as much feeling and projection as you can muster. Right then, we’ll begin with you there, sitting next to Edwards, it’s Westley, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, Westley, sir.”

“Yes, Westley. Come on up to the front and read your passage.”

And so it began. Each of us took our turn but no matter how modest I wanted to be it was clear who best knew how to read.

“Edwards, I’m impressed with your reading. Where were you before you came to Kongwa?”

“I was at a prep school in England, sir. It’s called Allan House.”

“Hmm, well, clearly that accounts for it.”

Actually I’d been a fluent reader by the time I got to Allan House from Cable House, my nursery school, but I didn’t dare correct him.

“Tell me, Edwards, does the idea of acting in plays appeal to you?”

“Yes, sir, if you think I’d be any good, sir. I’d certainly like to give it a try, sir.”

And so Fergie went through the list of boys, including among others Berry and Jenner, recruiting those who were interested. After we’d read our paragraphs, Fergie explained that *Any Body* is set in the lounge bar of a pub, hence no ladies.

“The publican – I have you in mind for that role, Edwards – is the bartender and takes the lead role from behind his bar. Then there are the customers and the detectives and, of course, there will be a dead body because of the murder. Notwithstanding the nature of the drama it is a comedy, so we won’t be getting too gory.”

“Ooooooh,” the boys groaned. We’d anticipated high drama, blood and gore. Then the bell rang and it was end of class.

Westley was a handsome boy, stocky, with a twinkle in his eye and a ready smile. He walked with me on the open ground to the north side of the classrooms, which is where we took our breaks. It was recognised by its open space of hard-baked, sun-drenched, shade-free, red sand, sprinkled with derelict, burning-hot vehicles like the old First Aid caravan with its washed-out red crosses. With that, the skeletal remains of a pre-fab building and the donga, we had all the makings of a natural playground boys could want. The girls were less well catered to but once in a while the tomboys were allowed to join with us so long as they agreed to be either a lady who was tied up as a prisoner and needed rescuing or maybe a nurse dressing our wounds. They obviously couldn’t be doctors because, after all, they were girls. Most girls preferred to cluster in whatever meagre shade they could find, talking and laughing among themselves ninety to the dozen.

As we descended the steps Westley asked, “So what’s your Christian name?”

“Tony. And yours?”

“Douglas, but my nickname’s Pepsi. I’ve been coming here for two terms now but you’re a new boy?”

“Yes, only recently from England. Why Pepsi?”

“I don’t know. I forget why I got that name. You read awfully well. Fergie’ll like you in his drama class.”

“He seems to think so, but I’ve never thought about acting. We’ll see. How about you, why don’t you join?”

“Neah, it’s not me to do acting. Don’t think I’d like it. But I tell you what you will like and that’s the donga. Let’s go there.”

We strolled over to the tree-scrub and brush that lined the eastern ridge of the donga. “We haven’t got time to climb down it now, break’s too short, but maybe we’ll go this afternoon and I’ll show you a thing or two. There’re some great hideouts down there; it would be mushee if you had a dame with you.”

“A girl?” I asked incredulously. “You play with girls?”

“Not play, you know – have a girlfriend.”

“Oh... well... I, er, don't know much about that. I've never had a girl-friend. Not sure I want one.”

“Well I haven't got one either, yet, but I think I will one of these days.”

I changed the subject. “What house are you in? I'm in Livingstone.”

“I'm in Wilberforce. Our houses are not far from yours, maybe a bit closer to here. We don't have as far to walk as you.”

“What's it like in Wilberforce?”

“It's pretty good. I like it. The prefects are nice enough, our house prefect's a chap named Glynn Ford. I've heard it can be rough in Livingstone; it seems to have more bullies than any other house; is that true?”

“I heard about Glynn on the train, Sheddy told me.” I responded. “I don't know much about Livingstone yet; I haven't been here long enough. I hope not. So where are you from?”

“Kigoma; it's at the opposite end of the line of rail from Dar. Not many people, less than a hundred Europeans, my dad says. But it's a neat enough town next to Lake Tanganyika.”

“I didn't think I'd seen you on the train. So how do you get here? Does your train come to Kongwa like ours did?”

“Neah. We, that is my sister Susan and I, take the mail train from Kigoma and get off in Dodoma. It takes two days and two nights to get that far. My dad has business colleagues there so we stay with them overnight. Then, next day, we and other kids catch the buses specially chartered for the school.”

Hmm, same as Clive, I thought.

Doug and I talked a little more as we peered through the brush into the donga but soon the bell rang and it was time to get back to class. I liked Doug; I thought we'd get along. It was a pity though that he was in Wilberforce; that would make it harder to get together during free time.

CHAPTER FIVE



A GOODY-GOODY

BY TORCH-LIGHT WE PEERED AT THE Morse code message that one of us had found pinned to the kitchen wall. It was after lights-out, we were out of bounds, the hyraxes were shrieking and we would be in big trouble if caught. It wasn't scary enough with the noise of the night and the threat from the unseen in the pitch black. Now we were in a deserted house, reading a message that clearly proved we had stumbled upon something we weren't supposed to know about. We looked around at each other in our new-found dilemma.

"Now what are we going to do?"

Aranky took the lead. "I can't understand from this what's going on so we can't tell any teachers, especially not with us being out-of-bounds and after lights-out an' all. I think we should put the message back up on the wall and leave it. We can come back again, tomorrow maybe, and find out if there're any replies, like with new messages. We can't tell teachers anything 'til we're sure there's crooks around and what they're up to."

"He's right," said Paton. "Let's get back to our houses before we get in any real trouble."

It had been less than a week since our arrival when someone had come up

with the idea, enticing chaps like me, who were called goody goodies, to go along on a raid of deserted houses. Our house ran close to the donga, which must have been about fifteen feet deep and twenty feet wide. The depression provided endless opportunities for hiding during games of cowboys and Indians, or for hunting insects, snakes or lizards. The donga was the western boundary of the school. The other side of it, where the abandoned houses were, was out of bounds. The donga itself was not.

Using our penknives as screwdrivers, we robbed the houses of the electrical parts like switches, lamp holders and the contents of fuse boxes. There was not a lot you could do with the parts but, if you acquired enough of them, it was possible to build constructions that pleased us. Some pieces with moving parts were in high demand and made for good swopping currency.

I, like a few others, should have been more alert maybe, but we were taken in when someone ‘discovered’ the Morse code message on the kitchen wall. Led on by the Cubs, as we realised later, we returned the next night to investigate further. For several nights we went back, each time coming upon a new message in Morse, until finally we naïve ones began to suspect what was going on. The Cubs had been planting false messages, and no one was more pleased with himself than Aranky. It was a fun game of imagination though, and during the ensuing weeks the Cubs taught the rest of us Morse; Semaphore too.

These late night raids had involved close shaves with trouble. Clive said we were taking major risks. He knew from personal experience about Fergie’s willingness to beat boys with a kiboko. He’d been on the receiving end many times and seemed to be learning, if not to give up mischief, then certainly to be better at avoiding being caught.

One night a new raid was planned that was even scarier than the Morse code expeditions. It involved the empty houses of phases 5 and 6. There were twenty-five or thirty of them deserted and pristine, with their electrics intact. Sheddy was enthusiastic. So were Gunston, Jenner, Rushby, Aranky, Priestly and Paton. Goggles and Berry were hesitant but I, seeking to fit in, cajoled them into it.

Matron had made her rounds, and before long others from Livingstone were gathering around Clive’s house. It was central command.

Once everyone had arrived, Clive addressed us. “It’s important that this

raid be done carefully. Fergie's always looking for trouble. If he catches us we won't be able to sit for a week so be really quiet, okay? Have you got torches with you?"

There was a chorus of no's and yes's and pairing off.

"There's no moon tonight so, apart from your torches, all you've got is the stars. It's good for not being seen but it's bad for not being able to see where you're going. It's a helluva trek to phase 5 so I hope you're all wide awake. So follow me, okay? Dead quiet and don't use those torches unless you have to."

"Clive?" Sheddy asked in a hushed tone.

"What, Sheddy?"

"Maybe we should spread out a bit, I mean, one long line of us stands a greater chance of getting caught."

"You're right; however, not everyone knows how to get to phase 5, especially in the dark, so that's why I thought we should do it this way."

"I know how to get to phase 5, so does Edwards."

"Well, if you like, we'll split into two then. You lead half the chaps and I'll take the other half."

We followed the track by starlight, keeping close to the edge of a culvert so we could vanish into the bush in a second if discovery threatened. It led to the tarmac road that divided our present phase from the unoccupied phases. Here we paused. Clive's group had disappeared. There was no sight or sound of them. They must have made fast progress. On Sheddy's command, we dashed across the tarmac and melted into the bushes the other side. Now there was no road to follow, just hard-baked paths weaving through the dried out bushes. But they were good for keeping us out of the tall grasses, among which who knew what danger lurked.

After many minutes Sheddy paused, turned and bade everyone keep down in a crouch, finger to lips, "Sssshhhhh."

After peering ahead Sheddy turned and whispered, "It seems clear. I can see the first of the houses. I don't know where Clive is; I can't see a sign of him or his group. He must've found another part of phase 5, or maybe he's at 6. So let's get to the closest buildings. Once inside, we shouldn't be spotted, so long as we don't use the torches too much."

Before long we arrived at the first house.

“Okay, you four, you can have this one. The rest follow me. This is the outside choo I told you about,” said Sheddy as we moved along the line of houses. There were twin choos set between each house, maybe twenty-five yards from each house. As we continued along, we passed the fourth house. With everyone else accounted for, Sheddy and I went into it along with Ivey and Gunston.

“Oh look, this is super,” I said. “A fuse box. There’s going to be all sorts of stuff in here.”

I set about dismantling it using my Swiss Army knife. Sheddy glanced at it and said, “That’s a good one, Tony, but I’m going into the loft.” With that he asked Gunston to help him up. The gypsum board that was the ceiling was already damaged and had large holes.

“Gunny, let me sit on your shoulders. Maybe I can reach the cross beams through the hole there. Now, try not to wobble, see?”

“Uh, huh, you’re heavy, Sheddy. Grab those beams quickly. I dunno how long I can hold you, man.”

Sheddy gripped the beams and launched off Gunston’s shoulders, swinging in the air, then hauled up his legs so he could get in place. Then he called Gunston, “Wanna come up?”

“Yes, but how?”

“I’ll lie on these beams and we’ll grab wrists. I’ll lift you high as I can but soonest chance you get you must leave go and grab a beam. Then do the same with a second one, okay?”

“Okay, Sheddy, I’m ready.”

Gunston slipped his grip first time and dropped to the floor but after the second try he made it. Soon the two were crawling the rafters looking for the electricians.

I didn’t see Gunston fall. I was too busy picking apart the fuse box, until I heard the yell followed by a solid thud. I turned to see him as he rolled over.

“Ow, my arm!” wailed Gunston. “I may have broken it.”

Sheddy swung down, pocketing his gains on the way and checked his friend.

“You’ll be fine,” he decided in his authoritative way, after running his hands all around Gunny’s arm. “There’s no break so it’s probably a sprain.

It'll heal. No skin broken so Matron will never know. Seems like we've finished here. Let's scarper and meet at the baobab I showed you."

That night we returned safely, and the next day most of us swapped parts with others who coveted what we had. They would come up with items such as gob stoppers, an Eagle comic, a catapult or a penknife.

It was the third raid that brought this pastime to a painful end, at least for most of Livingstone's Juniors. Several weeks had passed so it was time for another foray. Clive was insistent we not go. He'd been caught on other things and been caned. He talked it over with prefects from the other houses but was unable to persuade them we'd gone far enough. And so it was, that after having gathered at another house many of Livingstone's boys set out on a raiding party. We of Clive's house were not pleased.

"Come on, man," appealed Sheddy. "Let's go, man. We've been before and never been caught. What's the matter with you, man?"

"I said no," said Clive. "No one from this house is going."

"But why?" I whined. "Everyone else is. We've always gone before."

"No."

"Come on, Clive," said McLachlan. "Let those go who want to go. It's us'll be in trouble if we're caught, not you if you stay back."

"I said no, and I mean no."

"We know that not everyone else has gone," I carried on. "There's several houses where some chaps have gone and not others. Why can't you be like those prefects, and just let those of us who want to go, go?"

"Because I said so, and I'm not prepared to discuss it any more. Get back to your beds and shut up," he said irritably, "or I'll spank you myself."

Some hours later, we were woken by a kerfuffle outdoors. We scrambled to peer through the mosquito mesh to the black outside. We couldn't see much but we could hear urgent and muffled voices and running footsteps, mixed in with the noise of the insects and bullfrogs of the donga, and what sounded like an adult voice calling out from far in the distance but we couldn't be sure. Clive came through from his room and, after peering through a window, urged us to our beds.

"Go back to sleep right now, you hear me. No one is to be awake. Lie down and say nothing. Almost certainly Fergie will come around on inspec-

tion. I don't want anyone to even be awake when he walks in." And with that he retreated to his room.

It wasn't long before I heard our door handle turn. Someone entered, almost certainly Fergie, I could tell by the walk and beside which who else would it be? But the identity of the figure wasn't revealed because he was in deep darkness behind the brilliance of his lantern. It had an exceptionally strong light beam, and he shone it on the head of every boy in the room. I know because, as the one furthest from the door, I dared to keep an eye open as he entered. As the beam of light moved from head to head and approached me, I closed my eye and feigned restlessness as I turned to face the other way. I opened an eye at the wall and saw my shadow. The beam moved away, and then I heard the gentle click of the front door closing as Fergie withdrew. Moments later we were sitting up as Clive came through.

"Boy, that was a close shave. You lot are bloody lucky that we were all here and in bed. At least he knows none of us were on the raid."

The following day Fergie called a house meeting in the art classroom at four o'clock. We stood around the room facing the front, as he called our attention and launched into a tirade.

"As you know," he shouted, determined to sound angry, "we're here because of the boys who were outdoors, misbehaving after lights-out last night. You are nasty little thieves, despoilers of property and irresponsible in the extreme; especially you prefects who not only permitted this to happen, but participated. All prefects here, with the exception of Knight whose house was not involved, are hereby demoted from privileges until further notice. With the exception of Knight's house, you are all horrible, despicable little people who are to be severely punished. You may argue that while some among your number went on the raid, you personally did not. Well, that's tough. Just one boy missing from your house means that all from that house will be punished so I don't want to hear any protests."

I caught Paton's eye across the room, where he sat next to a boy named Jones. His house was one where some but not all had been missing from their beds. Paton hadn't gone on the raid. I gave him a weak smile in sympathy. With that Fergie picked up the six-foot-long blackboard ruler and called us by name.

"Jones."

“Yes, sir.”

“Come forward. Now, bend over and touch your toes. No, straighten up again.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Move the table out of the way; I need more space up here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, now, stand here, bend over and touch your toes.”

And with that instruction, Fergie gripped the blackboard ruler with both hands, swung it back over his shoulder like a golf club, and brought it down onto Jones’s behind. Again he did it. Then again.

“Right.”

Jones straightened up, red in the face and grimacing.

“Next, Paton.”

I averted my eyes.

And so it went on until he reached each prefect. “Bend over. You’re a prefect and should know better. You’ll receive six.”

Thirty-one backsides, and plus or minus ninety nine strokes later, Fergie had finished beating every boy in Livingstone, except the nine of Clive’s house.

Later, I reflected that it would have been better had our house gone on the raid. Being let off the hook led to teasing and bullying of the goody goodies.

“Oh look, there’s Edwards, he’s a good boy.”

“Yes and Goggles. What are you two, mummy’s boys?”

“Scaredy-cats to go on the raid, eh? Scared of Fergie’s kiboko?”

“We didn’t go on the raid because Clive wouldn’t let us, that’s all. We’re not goody goodies.”

“Oh yes, you are,” said Viljoen in his Afrikaner accent, as his best friend Potgieter and he came up close and gave me a push.

“Hey! Bloody well leave him alone,” shouted Venables. “We’re not doing anything to you.”

“It’s not what you’re doing to us, jong,” said Potgieter. “It’s what we’re going to do to you.” And with that he punched me in the chest and sent me staggering.

“I said, leave him alone,” cried Venables, his last words before being punched to the ground by Viljoen.

I came back and lashed out a punch at Potgieter but he fended it off and landed another on me sending me down. It would have got a lot worse but a couple of others who’d paused to watch spotted Matron coming, and hissed the warning code, “Cuss-cuss. Cuss-cuss.”

Viljoen and Potgieter broke off the attack, with Viljoen warning, “You’ve got off lightly this time, jong. Next time I see you and there’s no Matron around, then you’ll know what I mean, my boy, you’ll be sorry.”

Moments later Shedly appeared from our house. He hadn’t seen the altercation but he sensed it.

“What happened, Edwards, Venables?” he asked glancing at Potgieter and Viljoen as they walked away. “Were those two giving you trouble?”

“They were starting to beat up Goggles and me, Shedly.” Then in a subdued voice because Matron was passing, “They stopped when they were warned Matron was coming but they’ve threatened to get me and Gogs another time when no one’s around.”

“Oh, they have, have they? Well, maybe I’d better let them know that if they want to get you they’re going to have to get past me first.”

“I don’t want you in trouble too, Shedly. I have to fight my own battles.”

“If it’s fair, yes. But it’s not fair to pick on you when you’ve done nothing to them, especially when they know you’re not a boxer and they both are. That’s bullying and I don’t let my friends get bullied. Don’t worry, Viljoen knows me well; I beat him in the boxing tournament last term; he and I are going to have a talk later on.”

“Thanks, Shedly, I really mean it, but...”

“But what?”

“I can’t let you fight my battles all my life. I wish I could defend myself.”

“I can teach you to box or you could join classes.”

“I don’t think I’d be any good at boxing, Shedly. I just don’t think it’s something I could ever do, and besides which I’d get asthma.”

“Well, how about wrestling? I’ve seen you play wrestling with the others in the afternoons. You seem to do that without getting asthma.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ANTHONY R. EDWARDS

TONY WAS BORN IN LONDON, ENGLAND, IN 1942. He spent many formative years in Africa and was drawn to return in 1962 after completing his college education.

Tony's professional life included photography, television, advertising and anthropological research. It turned out Tony was born a bit of a nomad, following, as he did, his career to Britain, Rhodesia, Zambia, South Africa, the United States and Canada. Fortunately for him or perhaps because it was meant to be, Tony's wife, Imelda, whom he met in South Africa, enjoyed the same wandering spirit.

In 2004, Tony and Imelda settled on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia, Canada.