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WEST *with the* NIGHT



Beryl Markham

"[Markham] can write rings around all of us who consider ourselves as writers . . . It really is a bloody wonderful book."

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY



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West With The Night

Beryl Markham



For

MY FATHER

I wish to express my gratitude to Raoul Schumacher for his constant encouragement and his assistance in the preparations for this book.

I speak of Africa and golden joys

HENRY IV, Act V, Sc. 3

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BOOK ONE

Message from Nungwe

HOW IS IT POSSIBLE to bring order out of memory? I should like to begin at the beginning, patiently, like a weaver at his loom. I should like to say, 'This is the place to start; there can be no other.'

But there are a hundred places to start for there are a hundred names — Mwanza, Serengeti, Nungwe, Molo, Nakuru. There are easily a hundred names, and I can begin best by choosing one of them — not because it is first nor of any importance in a wildly adventurous sense, but because here it happens to be, turned uppermost in my logbook. After all, I am no weaver. Weavers create. This is a remembrance — re-visitation; and names are keys that open corridors no longer fresh in the mind, but nonetheless familiar in the heart.

So the name shall be Nungwe — as good as any other — entered like this in the log, lending reality, if not order, to memory:

DATE — 16/6/35

TYPE AIRCRAFT — Avro Avian

MARKINGS — VP — KAN

JOURNEY — Nairobi to Nungwe

TIME — 3 hrs. 40 mins.

After that comes, PILOT: Self; and REMARKS — of which there were none. But there might have been.

Nungwe may be dead and forgotten now. It was barely alive when I went there in 1935. It lay west and south of Nairobi on the southernmost rim of Lake Victoria Nyanza, no more than a starveling outpost of grubby huts, and that only because a weary and discouraged prospector one day saw a speck of gold clinging to the mud on the heel of his boot. He lifted the speck with the tip of his hunting knife and stared at it until it grew in his imagination from a tiny, rusty grain to a nugget, and from a nugget to a fabulous stake.

His name eludes the memory, but he was not a secretive man. In a little while Nungwe, which had been no more than a word, was both a Mecca and a mirage, so that other adventurers like himself discounted the burning heat of the country, the malaria, the blackwater, the utter lack of communications except by foot through forest trails, and went there with shovels and picks and quinine and tinned food and high hopes, and began to dig.

I never knew what their digging got them, if it got them anything, because, when I set my sma

biplane down on the narrow runway they had hacked out of the bush, it was night and there were fires of oil-soaked rags burning in bent chunks of tin to guide my landing.

There's not much to be seen in light like that — some dark upturned faces impassive and patient, half-raised arms beckoning, the shadow of a dog slouching between the flares. I remember the things and the men who greeted me at Nungwe. But I took off again after dawn without learning anything about the success of their operations or the wealth of their mine.

It wasn't that they meant to keep those things concealed; it was just that they had other things to think about that night, and none of them had to do with gold.

I had been working out of Nairobi as a free-lance pilot with the Muthaiga Country Club as my headquarters. Even in nineteen-thirty-five it wasn't easy to get a plane in East Africa and it was almost impossible to get very far across country without one. There were roads, of course, leading in a dozen directions out of Nairobi. They started out boldly enough, but grew narrow and rough after a few miles and dwindled into the rock-studded hills, or lost themselves in a morass of red muram mud or black cotton soil, in the flat country and the valleys. On a map they look sturdy and incapable of deceit, but to have ventured from Nairobi south toward Machakos or Magadi in anything less formidable than a moderately powered John Deere tractor was optimistic to the point of sheer whimsey, and the road to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, north and west through Naivasha, called 'practicable' in the dry season, had, when I last used it after a mild rain, an adhesive quality equal to that of the most prized black treacle. This minor defect, coupled with the fact that thousands of miles of papyrus swamp and deep desert lie between Naivasha and Khartoum, had been almost flippantly overlooked by a Government road commission which had caused the erection, near Naivasha, of an impressive and beautiful signpost reading:

To JUBA — KHARTOUM — CAIRO —

I have never known whether this questionable encouragement to the casual traveller was only the result of well-meant wishful thinking or whether some official cursed with a depraved and sadistic humour had found an outlet for it after years of repression in a muggy Nairobi office. In any case there the sign stood, like a beacon, daring all and sundry to proceed (not even with caution) toward what was almost sure to be neither Khartoum nor Cairo, but a Slough of Despond more tangible than but at least as hopeless as Mr. Bunyan's.

This was, of course, an exception. The more travelled roads were good and often paved for a short distance, but once the pavement ended, an aeroplane, if one were at hand, could save hours of wear and toil behind the wheel of a lurching car — provided the driver were skilful enough to keep it lurching forward at all. My plane, though only a two-seater, was busy most of the time in spite of competition from the then barely budding East African — not to say the full-blown Wilson — Airways.

Nairobi itself was busy and growing — gateway to a still new country, a big country, an almost unknown country. In less than thirty years the town had sprung from a collection of corrugated iron shacks serving the spindly Uganda Railway to a sprawling welter of British, Boers, Indians, Somalis, Abyssinians, natives from all over Africa and a dozen other places.

Today its Indian Bazaar alone covers several acres; its hotels, its government offices, its race course, and its churches are imposing evidence that modern times and methods have at last caught up with East Africa. But the core of it is still raw and hardly softened at all by the weighty hand of British officialdom. Business goes on, banks flourish, automobiles purr importantly up and down Government Road, and shop-girls and clerks think, act, and live about as they do in any modern settlement of thirty-odd thousand in any country anywhere.

The town lies snugly against the Athi Plains at the foot of the rolling Kikuyu Hills, looking north to Mount Kenya and south to Kilimanjaro in Tanganyika. It is a counting house in the wilderness — a place of shillings and pounds and land sales and trade, extraordinary successes and extraordinary failures. Its shops sell whatever you need to buy. Farms and coffee plantations surround it for more than a hundred miles and goods trains and lorries supply its markets with produce daily.

But what is a hundred miles in a country so big?

Beyond are villages still sleeping in the forests, on the great reservations — villages peopled with human beings only vaguely aware that the even course of their racial life may somehow be endangered by the persistent and irresistible pressure of the White man.

But white men's wars are fought on the edges of Africa — you can carry a machine gun three hundred miles inland from the sea and you are still on the edge of it. Since Carthage, and before, men have hacked and scabbled for permanent footholds along the coasts and in the deserts and on the mountains, and where these footholds have been secured, the right to hold them has been the cause of endless dispute and bloodshed.

Competitors in conquest have overlooked the vital soul of Africa herself, from which emanates the true resistance to conquest. The soul is not dead, but silent, the wisdom not lacking, but of such simplicity as to be counted non-existent in the tinker's mind of modern civilization. Africa is of an ancient age and the blood of many of her peoples is as venerable and as chaste as truth. What upstart race, sprung from some recent, callow century to arm itself with steel and boastfulness, can match the purity the blood of a single Masai Murani whose heritage may have stemmed not far from Eden? It is not the weed that is corrupt; roots of the weed sucked first life from the genesis of earth and hold the essence of it still. Always the weed returns; the cultured plant retreats before it. Racial purity, true aristocracy, devolve not from edict, nor from rote, but from the preservation of kinship with the elemental forces and purposes of life whose understanding is not farther beyond the mind of a Native shepherd than beyond the cultured rumblings of a mortar-board intelligence.

Whatever happens, armies will continue to rumble, colonies may change masters, and in the fa

of it all Africa lies, and will lie, like a great, wisely somnolent giant unmolested by the noisy drum rolling of bickering empires. It is not only a land; it is an entity born of one man's hope and another man's fancy.

So there are many Africas. There are as many Africas as there are books about Africa — and as many books about it as you could read in a leisurely lifetime. Whoever writes a new one can afford a certain complacency in the knowledge that his is a new picture agreeing with no one else's, but likely to be haughtily disagreed with by all those who believe in some other Africa.

Doctor Livingstone's Africa was a pretty dark one. There have been a lot of Africas since then, some darker, some bright, most of them full of animals and pygmies, and a few mildly hysterical about the weather, the jungle, and the trials of safari.

All of these books, or at least as many of them as I have read, are accurate in their various portrayals of Africa — not my Africa, perhaps, nor that of an early settler, nor of a veteran of the Boer War, nor of an American millionaire who went there and shot zebra and lion, but of an Africa true to each writer of each book. Being thus all things to all authors, it follows, I suppose, that Africa must be all things to all readers.

Africa is mystic; it is wild; it is a sweltering inferno; it is a photographer's paradise, a hunter's Valhalla, an escapist's Utopia. It is what you will, and it withstands all interpretations. It is the last vestige of a dead world or the cradle of a shiny new one. To a lot of people, as to myself, it is just 'home.' It is all these things but one thing — it is never dull.

From the time I arrived in British East Africa at the indifferent age of four and went through the barefoot stage of early youth hunting wild pig with the Nandi, later training race-horses for a living and still later scouting Tanganyika and the waterless bush country between the Tana and Athi Rivers by aeroplane, for elephant, I remained so happily provincial I was unable to discuss the boredom of being alive with any intelligence until I had gone to London and lived there a year. Boredom, like hookworm, is endemic.

I have lifted my plane from the Nairobi airport for perhaps a thousand flights and I have never felt her wheels glide from the earth into the air without knowing the uncertainty and the exhilaration of firstborn adventure.

The call that took me to Nungwe came about one o'clock in the morning relayed from Muthairi Country Club to my small cottage in the eucalyptus grove near-by.

It was a brief message asking that a cylinder of oxygen be flown to the settlement at once for the treatment of a gold miner near death with a lung disease. The appeal was signed with a name I had never heard, and I remember thinking that there was a kind of pathetic optimism about its having been sent at all, because the only way it could have reached me was through the telegraph station at Mwanza — itself a hundred miles by Native runner from Nungwe. During the two or three days the

message had been on its way, a man in need of oxygen must either have died or shown a superhuman determination to live.

So far as I know I was the only professional woman pilot in Africa at that time. I had no freelance competition in Kenya, man or woman, and such messages, or at least others not always so urgent or melancholy, were frequent enough to keep me occupied most days and far too many nights.

Night flying over charted country by the aid of instruments and radio guidance can still be a lonely business, but to fly in unbroken darkness without even the cold companionship of a pair of earphones or the knowledge that somewhere ahead are lights and life and a well-marked airport is something more than just lonely. It is at times unreal to the point where the existence of other people seems not even a reasonable probability. The hills, the forests, the rocks, and the plains are one with the darkness, and the darkness is infinite. The earth is no more your planet than is a distant star — if the star is shining; the plane is your planet and you are its sole inhabitant.

Before such a flight it was this anticipation of aloneness more than any thought of physical danger that used to haunt me a little and make me wonder sometimes if mine was the most wonderful job in the world after all. I always concluded that lonely or not it was still free from the curse of boredom.

Under ordinary circumstances I should have been at the aerodrome ready to take off for Nungwi in less than half an hour, but instead I found myself confronted with a problem much too difficult to solve while still half asleep and at one o'clock in the morning. It was one of those problems that seem incapable of solution — and are; but which, once they have fastened themselves upon you, can neither be escaped nor ignored.

A pilot, a man named Wood who flew for East African Airways, was down somewhere on the vast Serengetti Plains and had been missing for two days. To me and to all of his friends, he was just Woody — a good flier and a likeable person. He was a familiar figure in Nairobi and, though word of his disappearance had been slow in finding attention, once it was realized that he was not simply overdue, but lost, there was a good deal of excitement. Some of this, I suppose, was no more than the usual public enjoyment of suspense and melodrama, though there was seldom a scarcity of either in Nairobi.

Where Woody's misfortune was most sincerely felt, of course, was amongst those of his own profession. I do not mean pilots alone. Few people realize the agony and anxiety a conscientious ground engineer can suffer if an aeroplane he has signed out fails to return. He will not always consider the probability of bad weather or a possible error of judgement on the part of the pilot, but instead will torture himself with unanswerable questions about proper wiring, fuel lines, carburation valves, and all the hundred and one things he must think about. He will feel that on this occasion he must surely have overlooked something — some small but vital adjustment which, because of his

neglect, has resulted in the crash of a plane or the death of a pilot.

All the members of a ground crew, no matter how poorly equipped or how small the aerodrome on which they work, will share equally the apprehension and the nervous strain that come with the first hint of mishap.

But whether storm, or engine trouble, or whatever the cause, Woody had disappeared, and for the past two days I had been droning my plane back and forth over the Northern Serengeti and half the Masai Reserve without having sighted so much as a plume of signal smoke or the glint of sunlight on a crumpled wing.

Anxiety was increasing, even changing to gloom, and I had expected to take off again at sunrise to continue the search; but here suddenly was the message from Nungwe.

For all professional pilots there exists a kind of guild, without charter and without by-laws. It demands no requirements for inclusion save an understanding of the wind, the compass, the rudder, and fair fellowship. It is a camaraderie *sans* sentiment of the kind that men who once sailed uncharted seas in wooden ships must have known and lived by.

I was my own employer, my own pilot, and as often as not my own ground engineer as well. As such I might easily, perhaps even justifiably, have refused the flight to Nungwe, arguing that the rescue of the lost pilot was more important — as, to me, it was. But there was a tinge of personal sympathy about such reasoning that weakened conviction, and Woody, whom I knew so little and yet so well that I never bothered to remember his full name any more than most of his friends did, would have been quick to reject a decision that favoured him at the expense of an unknown miner choking his lungs out in the soggy swamplands of Victoria Nyanza.

In the end I telephoned the Nairobi Hospital, made sure that the oxygen would be ready, and prepared to fly south.

Three hundred and fifty miles can be no distance in a plane, or it can be from where you are to the end of the earth. It depends on so many things. If it is night, it depends on the depth of the darkness and the height of the clouds, the speed of the wind, the stars, the fullness of the moon. It depends on you, if you fly alone — not only on your ability to steer your course or to keep your altitude, but upon the things that live in your mind while you swing suspended between the earth and the silent sky. Some of those things take root and are with you long after the flight itself is a memory, but, if your course was over any part of Africa, even the memory will remain strong.

When, much later than Nungwe or Tripoli or Zanzibar, or any of the remote and sometimes outlandish places I have flown to, I crossed the North Atlantic, east to west, there were headlines and fanfare, and, for me, many sleepless nights. A generous American press found that flight spectacular, and what is spectacular is news.

But to leave Nairobi and arrive at Nungwe is not spectacular. It is not news. It is only a little hop from here to there, and to one who does not know the plains of Africa, its swamps, its night sounds

and its night silences, such a flight is not only unspectacular, but perhaps tedious as well. Only not me, for Africa was the breath and life of my childhood.

It is still the host of all my darkest fears, the cradle of mysteries always intriguing, but never wholly solved. It is the remembrance of sunlight and green hills, cool water and the yellow warmth of bright mornings. It is as ruthless as any sea, more uncompromising than its own deserts. It is without temperance in its harshness or in its favours. It yields nothing, offering much to men of all races.

But the soul of Africa, its integrity, the slow inexorable pulse of its life, is its own and of such a singular rhythm that no outsider, unless steeped from childhood in its endless, even beat, can even hope to experience it, except only as a bystander might experience a Masai war dance knowing nothing of its music nor the meaning of its steps.

So I am off to Nungwe — a silly word, a silly place. A place of small hopes and small successes buried like the inconsequential treasure of an imaginative miser, out of bounds and out of most men's wanting — below the Mau Escarpment, below the Speke Gulf, below the unsurveyed stretches of the Western Province.

Oxygen to a sick miner. But this flight is not heroic. It is not even romantic. It is a job of work, a job to be done at an uncomfortable hour with sleep in my eyes and half a grumble on my lips.

Arab Ruta calls contact and swings the propeller.

Arab Ruta is a Nandi, anthropologically a member of a Nilotic tribe, humanly a member of a smaller tribe, a more elect tribe, the tribe composed of those too few, precisely sensitive, but altogether indomitable individuals contributed sparingly by each race, exclusively by none.

He is of the tribe that observes with equal respect the soft voice and the hardened hand, the fullness of a flower, the quick finality of death. His is the laughter of a free man happy at his work, a strong man with lust for living. He is not black. His skin holds the sheen and warmth of used copper. His eyes are dark and wide-spaced, his nose full-boned and capable of arrogance.

He is arrogant now, swinging the propeller, laying his lean hands on the curved wood, feeling an exultant kinship in the coiled resistance to his thrust.

He swings hard. A splutter, a strangled cough from the engine like the premature stirring of a sleep-slugged labourer. In the cockpit I push gently on the throttle, easing it forward, rousing the motor, feeding it, soothing it.

Arab Ruta moves the wooden chocks from the wheels and steps backward away from the wing. Fitful splashes of crimson light from crude-oil torches set round the field stain the dark cloth of the African night and play upon his alert, high-boned face. He raises his hand and I nod as the propeller whirring itself into invisibility, pulls the plane forward, past him.

I leave him no instructions, no orders. When I return he will be there. It is an understanding

many years — a wordless understanding from the days when Arab Ruta first came into my father's service on the farm at Njoro. He will be there, as a servant, as a friend — waiting.

I peer ahead along the narrow muram runway. I gather speed meeting the wind, using the wind.

A high wire fence surrounds the aerodrome — a wire fence and then a deep ditch. Where is the other aerodrome fenced against wild animals? Zebra, wildebeest, giraffe, eland — at night they lurk about the tall barrier staring with curious wild eyes into the flat field, feeling cheated.

They are well out of it, for themselves and for me. It would be a hard fate to go down in the memory of one's friends as having been tripped up by a wandering zebra. 'Tried to take off and hit a zebra!' It lacks even the dignity of crashing into an anthill.

Watch the fence. Watch the flares. I watch both and take off into the night.

Ahead of me lies a land that is unknown to the rest of the world and only vaguely known to the African — a strange mixture of grasslands, scrub, desert sand like long waves of the southern ocean, Forest, still water, and age-old mountains, stark and grim like mountains of the moon. Salt lakes, and rivers that have no water. Swamps. Badlands. Land without life. Land teeming with life — all of the dusty past, all of the future.

The air takes me into its realm. Night envelops me entirely, leaving me out of touch with the earth, leaving me within this small moving world of my own, living in space with the stars.

My plane is a light one, a two-seater with her registration letters, VP-KAN, painted boldly on her turquoise-blue fuselage in silver.

In the daytime she is a small gay complement to the airy blue of the sky, like a bright fish under the surface of a clear sea. In darkness such as this she is no more than a passing murmur, a soft incongruous murmur above the earth.

With such registration letters as hers, it requires of my friends no great imagination or humour to speak of her always as just 'the Kan' — and the Kan she is, even to me. But this is not libel, for such nicknames are born out of love.

To me she is alive and to me she speaks. I feel through the soles of my feet on the rudder-bar the willing strain and flex of her muscles. The resonant, guttural voice of her exhausts has a timbre more articulate than wood and steel, more vibrant than wires and sparks and pounding pistons.

She speaks to me now, saying the wind is right, the night is fair, the effort asked of her well within her powers.

I fly swiftly. I fly high — south-southwest, over the Ngong Hills. I am relaxed. My right hand rests upon the stick in easy communication with the will and the way of the plane. I sit in the rear, the front cockpit filled with the heavy tank of oxygen strapped upright in the seat, its round stiff dome foolishly reminding me of the poised rigidity of a passenger on first flight.

The wind in the wires is like the tearing of soft silk under the blended drone of engine and propeller. Time and distance together slip smoothly past the tips of my wings without sound, without

return, as I peer downward over the night-shadowed hollows of the Rift Valley and wonder if Woody, the lost pilot, could be there, a small human pinpoint of hope and of hopelessness listening to the low, unconcerned song of the Avian — flying elsewhere.

Men with Blackwater Die

THERE IS A FEELING of absolute finality about the end of a flight through darkness. The whole scheme of things with which you have lived acutely, during hours of roaring sound in an element altogether detached from the world, ceases abruptly. The plane noses groundward, the wings strain to the firm cushion of earthbound air, wheels touch, and the engine sighs into silence. The dream of flight is suddenly gone before the mundane realities of growing grass and swirling dust, the slow plodding of men and the enduring patience of rooted trees. Freedom escapes you again, and wings that were a moment ago no less than an eagle's, and swifter, are metal and wood once more, inert and heavy.

The clearing at Nungwe blinked into my horizon about half an hour before dawn. At a thousand feet the wavering crude-oil torches outlined no more than a narrow runway — a thin scar on the vast sprawled body of the wilderness.

I circled once, watching the flares yield to the rising wind, gauging the direction of its flow. Shadows that were made by moving men criss-crossed the clearing, shifted, changed design, and finally became immobile.

A gentle pull on the throttle eased the motor to an effortless hum. I held the nose of the Avian over the beacons until the earth sped under her, and the wheels, reaching for solid ground, swept her onto the runway in a maelstrom of dust and flickering orange light. I cut the engine, relaxed in the seat, and adjusted my ears to the emptiness of silence.

The air was heavy, with life gone out of it. Men's voices came from across the runway, sounding, after the deep drone of the plane, like the thin bleating of reed pipes or like the fluted whispers of a bamboo forest.

I climbed out of the cockpit and watched a band of dim figures approach before the dancing oil flares. By the manner of their walk and by their clothes, I could see that most of them were black — Kavirondo, bulky-thighed in their half-nakedness, following two white men who moved with quicker, more eager steps over the clearing.

Somewhere an ancient automobile engine roared into life, its worn pistons and bearings hammering like drumbeats. Hot night wind stalked through the thorn trees and leleshwa that surrounded the clearing. It bore the odour of swampland, the smell of Lake Victoria, the breath of the weeds and sultry plains and tangled bush. It whipped at the oil flares and snatched at the surfaces of the Avian. But there was loneliness in it and aimlessness, as if its passing were only a sterile dust, lacking even the beneficent promise of rain.

Leaning against the fuselage, I watched the face of a short, chunky man loom gradually large

until it was framed before me in the uncertain light. It was a flabby face under a patch of greying hair and it held two brown eyes that seemed trapped in a spider web of weary lines.

Its owner smiled and held out his hand and I took it.

‘I am the doctor,’ he said; ‘I sent the message.’ He jerked his head toward the other white man at his elbow. ‘This is Ebert. Ask him for anything you need — tea, food, whatever you want. It won’t be good, but you’re welcome to it.’

Before I could answer, he turned away, mumbling as he went about sickness, and the time of the night, and the slowness of the box-body Ford now lurching across the runway to pick up the oxygen. His wake followed half a dozen Kavirondo, any one of them big enough to lift the little doctor off the ground and carry him, like a small goat, under one arm. Instead they slouched dutifully behind at a distance I thought must have been kept so precisely unaltered out of simple fear and honest respect blended to perfection.

‘You’re early,’ Ebert said; ‘you made good time.’

He was tall and angular in a grey, work-stained shirt and loose corduroy trousers patched many times. He spoke apologetically as if, as a visitor from the remote and glamorous civilization of Nairobi, I might find my reception somehow less than I had the right to expect.

‘We fixed the runway,’ he said, ‘as well as we could.’

I nodded, looking into a lean-boned, sun-beaten face.

‘It’s a good job,’ I assured him — ‘better than I had hoped for.’

‘And we rigged up a windsock.’ He swung his arm in the direction of a slender pole whose base was surrounded by half a dozen flares. At the top of the pole hung a limp cylinder of cheap, white ‘Americani’ cloth looking a bit like an amputated pajama leg.

In such a breeze the cylinder ought to have been fully extended, but instead, and in defiance of the simplest laws of physics, it only dangled in shameless indifference to both the strength of the wind and its direction.

Moving closer, I saw the lower end had been sewn as tightly shut as needle and thread could make it, so that, as an instrument intended to indicate wind tendency, it was rather less efficient than a pair of whole pajamas might have been.

I explained this technical error of design to Ebert and, in the half-light of the oil torches, had the satisfaction of seeing his face relax into what I suspected was his first smile in a long, long time.

‘It was the word “sock,” ’ he said, ‘that confused us. We couldn’t imagine a proper sock with a hole in its toe — not even a windsock!’

With the help of the little doctor who had lapsed into preoccupied silence, we unstrapped the oxygen tank, lifted it from the front cockpit, and set it on the ground. It was not terribly heavy, but the Kavirondo who gaily picked it up and walked with it toward the Ford, bore the thick metal cylinder as if it had been no more than a light bedroll.

It is this combination of physical strength and willingness to work that has made the Kavirondo the most tractable and dependable source of labour in East Africa.

From the loose confines of their native territory, which originally stretched south from Mount Elgon along the eastern shores of Victoria Nyanza for two hundred miles or so, they have wandered in all directions, mingling and working and laughing until what was once an obscure and timid tribe is now so ubiquitous as to cause the unobservant traveller in East Africa to suspect all natives are Kavirondo. This misconception is harmless enough in itself, but is best left unrevealed in the presence of such fire-eaters as the Nandi, the Somali, or the Masai, the racial vanity of any one of whom is hardly less than that of the proudest proud Englishman.

The Kavirondo, though not racially conscious, is at least conscious of being alive and finds endless pleasure in that cheerful realization alone. He is the porter of Africa, the man-of-all-work, the happy-go-lucky buffoon. To the charge of other and sterner tribes that he is not only uncircumcised but that he eats dead meat without much concern about the manner of its killing, he is blandly indifferent. His resistance to White infiltration is, at best, passive, but, consisting as it does of the simple stratagem of eating heartily and breeding profusely, it may one day be found formidable enough.

My cargo of oxygen having been unloaded, I watched a group of these massive and powerful men gather round my plane, eyeing her trim lines with flattering curiosity. One of the largest of the lot, having stared at her with gaping mouth for a full minute, suddenly leaned back on his heels and roared with laughter that must have put the nearest hyena to shame if not to flight.

When I asked him, in Swahili, to explain the joke, he looked profoundly hurt. There wasn't any joke, he said. It was just that the plane was so smooth and her wings so strong that it made him want to laugh!

I couldn't help wondering what Africa would have been like if such physique as these Kavirondos had were coupled with equal intelligence — or perhaps I should say with cunning equal to that of the white brethren.

I suppose in that case the road to Nungwe would be wide and handsome and lined with filling stations, and the shores of Lake Victoria would be dotted with pleasure resorts linked to Nairobi and the coast by competitive railways probably advertising themselves as the Kavirondo or Kikuyu Line. The undeveloped and 'savage' country would be transformed from a wasteland to a paradise of suburban homes and quaint bathing cabanas and popular beaches, all redolent, on hot days, of the subtle aroma of European culture. But the essence of progress is time, and we can only wait.

According to my still apologetic host, Ebert, the little doctor would have to drive at least an hour before reaching the actual Nungwe mine site where his patient lay in a grass hut, too sick to be moved.

'The doc's tried everything,' Ebert said, as we listened to the splutter of the disappearing Ford — 'diet, medicine, even witchcraft, I think; now the oxygen. The sick chap's a gold miner. Lungs gone

Weak heart. He's still alive, but for God knows how long. They keep coming out here and they keep dying. There's gold all right, but it'll never be a boom town — except for undertakers.'

There seemed to be no answer to this gloomy prediction, but I noticed that at least Ebert had made it with something that resembled a sour smile. I thought of Woody again and wondered if there could be even a remote hope of finding him on the way back to Nairobi. Perhaps not, but I made up my mind to leave as soon as I could gracefully get away.

I saw to it that the Avian was safe on the runway, and then, with Ebert, walked toward the settlement past the rows of oil flares, pink and impotent now in the early dawn.

Grey blades of light sliced at the darkness and within a few moments I could see the mining camp in all its bleak and somehow courageous isolation — a handful of thatched huts, a tangle of wooden machinery, a storehouse of corrugated iron. Dogs, hollow-bellied and dispirited, sprawled in the dust and behind the twisted arms of the surrounding thorn trees the country lay like an abandoned theatrical backdrop, tarnished and yellow.

I saw no women, no children. Here under the equatorial sun of Africa was a spot without human warmth, a community without even laughter.

Ebert led me through the door of one of the largest huts and promised tea, remarking hopefully that I might not find it too bad, since, only eight months ago, his store had been replenished from the stock of a Hindu shop in Kisumu.

He disappeared through an exit at the rear of the room and I leaned back in a chair and looked around me.

A hurricane lamp with a cracked, soot-smearred chimney still spluttered in the centre of a long plank that served as a table and was supported by two up-ended barrels on an earthen floor. Behind the plank were shelves sprinkled with tins of bully beef, vegetables and soup, mostly of American concoction. Several old copies of *Punch* were stacked at one end of the plank and, on the seat of the chair opposite mine, was an issue of the *Illustrated London News* dated October, 1929.

There was a radio, but it must have been voiceless for many months — tubes, wires, condenser and dial, all bearing the marks of frequent and apparently futile renovation, lay in a hopeless mass on the top of a packing-crate marked: VIA MOMBASA.

I saw jars of black sand that must have contained gold, or hopes of it, and other jars labelled with cryptic figures that meant nothing to me, but were in any case empty. A blueprint clung to one of the walls and a spider, descending from the thatch overhead, contemplated the neatly drawn lines and figures and returned to its geometrically perfect web, unimpressed.

I stood up and walked to the window. It was no bigger than a small tea-tray and its lower half was battened with corrugated iron. In the path of the rising sun, scattered bush, and tufts of grass lay a network of shadows over the earth, and, where these were thickest, I saw a single jackal foraging expectantly in a mound of filth.

I returned to the chair feeling depressed and a little apprehensive. I began to think about Wood again — or at least to wonder, since there was really nothing to think about.

The sight of the jackal had brought to mind the scarcely comforting speculation that in Africa there is never any waste. Death particularly is never wasted. What the lion leaves, the hyena feasts upon and what scraps remain are morsels for the jackal, the vulture, or even the consuming sun.

I dug in the pockets of my flying overalls for a cigarette, lit it, and tried to shake off a wave of sleepiness. It was a futile effort, but a moment later Ebert returned carrying the tea-things on a tray and I was able to keep my eyes open, watching him move. I noticed that his face had become somber again and thoughtful as if, during the time he had been out of the room, an old worry, or perhaps a new one, had begun to brew in his mind.

He set the tray on the long plank and groped for a tin of biscuits on a shelf. Sunlight, full-bodied and strong, had begun to warm the drab colours of the hut and I reached over and blew out the flame of the hurricane lamp.

‘You’ve heard of blackwater,’ Ebert said suddenly.

I straightened in my chair and for want of an ashtray ground my cigarette out with my foot on the earthen floor. My memory shuttled backward to the days of my childhood on the farm at Njoro — days when the words malaria and blackwater had first become mingled in my consciousness with the Goanese or Indian doctors who arrived too late, rumours of plague on the lips of frightened Natives, death, and hushed burial before dawn in the cedar forest that bounded our posho mill and paddocks.

They were dark days heavy-scented with gloom. All the petty joys of early youth, the games, the friendships with the Nandi totos lost their lustre. Time became a weight that would not be moved until the bodies themselves had been moved and grass roots had found the new earth of the graves, and the women had cleaned the vacant huts of the dead and you could see the sun again.

‘One of our men,’ Ebert said, handing me a cup of tea, ‘is down with blackwater. The chap you brought the oxygen for has a bare chance, but this one hasn’t. Nothing the doc can do — and you can’t move a man with blackwater.’

‘No.’ I put the cup back on the long plank and remembered that people with blackwater always die if they are moved, and nearly always die if they are left alone.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ I said.

There must have been other things to say, but I couldn’t think of them. All I could think of was the time I *had* moved a blackwater patient from Masongaleni in the elephant country to the hospital in Nairobi.

I never knew afterward for how many hours of that journey I had flown with a corpse for company because, when I landed, the man was quite dead.

‘If there’s anything I can do ...?’ It seems impossible not to be trite on such occasions. The only useless phrases are the only dependable ones — ‘terribly sorry,’ and, ‘if there’s anything I can do ...?’

‘He’d like to talk to you,’ Ebert said. ‘He heard the plane come in. I told him I thought you might spend the day here and take off tomorrow morning. He may not last that long, but he wants to talk to someone from the outside and none of us in Nungwe has been to Nairobi in over a year.’

I stood up, forgetting my tea. ‘I’ll talk to him, of course. But I can’t stay. There’s a pilot down somewhere in the Serengeti ...’

‘Oh.’ Ebert looked disappointed, and I knew from his expression that he, as well as the sick man, was lonely for news of the ‘outside’ — news of Nairobi. And in Nairobi people only wanted news of London.

Wherever you are, it seems, you must have news of some other place, some bigger place, so that a man on his deathbed in the swamplands of Victoria Nyanza is more interested in what has lately happened in this life than in what may happen in the next. It is really this that makes death so hard — curiosity unsatisfied.

But if contempt for death is correctly interpreted as courage, then Ebert’s dying friend was a courageous man.

He lay on a camp bed under a thin, sticky blanket and he had no recognizable face. What the Egyptians had done with chemicals to dead bodies, malaria and the subsequent blackwater had done to him.

I have seen baskets of raw animal skin stretched over sticks and left to dry in the sun, and the baskets were no more empty or fleshless than the half corpse Ebert presented to me in the darkened hut.

It was a tiny hut with the usual single window blocked with corrugated iron, the usual thatched roof, old and dropping its leaves like a rotted tree, and the usual earthen floor paved with burnt matchsticks, paper, and shreds of tobacco.

There never seems to be any reason for filth, but there are occasions, like this one, where it would be hard to find a reason for cleanliness. ‘Poverty,’ an old proverb says, ‘is not a disgrace, but a greasy swinishness.’ Here was poverty — poverty of women to help, poverty of hope, and even of life. For a moment I knew there might have been handfuls of gold buried in that hut, but if there were, it was the poorest comfort of all.

The sick man’s name was Bergner — a Dutchman, perhaps, or a German. Not English, I thought, though whatever racial characteristics had once distinguished him were now lost in the almost Gothic contours of his shrunken head.

His eyes alone appeared to live. They were enormous, seeming to move in their sockets independently of the body they served. But they stared at me from the bed with something that was at least interest and might almost have been humour. They seemed to say, ‘This is a hell of a way to receive a young lady just in from Nairobi — but you see how things are!’

I smiled, a little wanly, I think, and then turned to Ebert — or at least to the spot where he had

been. With dexterity that might have done credit to the most accomplished Indian fakir, Ebert has vanished, leaving me alone with Bergner.

For a moment I stood in the centre of the room experiencing, in spite of myself, some of the trepidation one might feel hearing the door of a burial vault close on one's back.

The comparison seems exaggerated now, but the truth is that all my life I have had an abhorrence of disease amounting almost to a phobia.

There is no reason in this; it is not fear of infection, because Africa has accorded me my full share of malaria and other illnesses, from time to time, along with a kind of compensating philosophy with which to endure them. My phobia is an unaccountable physical repulsion from persons who are sick rather than from sickness itself.

Certain people are repelled even by the thought of snakes and I can only compare my feelings toward the aspect of unhealthiness to this — mambas, pythons, puff-adders, and some of the brethren have frequently popped into my life either on treks through the forests or during elephant hunts, or when, as a child, I wandered in the bush seeking small adventure. But while I have learned to avoid snakes and have even, I think, developed a sixth sense for the purpose, I feel I could, if necessary, still face a mamba with greater calm than I can face a human being swathed in the sickly, sweet atmosphere of disease and impending death.

Here in this hut, at the side of a strange, bedridden man, I had to fight back an impulse to throw open the door and bolt across the runway into the protecting cockpit of my plane. Coupled with this was the realization that each moment the sun rose higher, the day grew hotter, and if Woody were by some miracle still alive, an hour or so more of delay on my part could result in a tragedy that would not be less because of the comfort Bergner might find in my visit.

Somewhere, just beyond Nungwe, the little doctor must at that moment have been pouring oxygen into the lungs of another man, if that man were still alive.

Death, or at least the shadow that precedes him, seemed to have stalked far and wide that morning.

I pulled up a chair and sat in it near the head of Bergner's bed and tried to think of something to say, but he spoke first.

His voice was soft and controlled, and very tired.

'You don't mind being here, I hope,' he said. 'It's been four years since I left Nairobi, and there haven't been many letters.' He ran the tip of his tongue over his lips and attempted a smile. 'People forget,' he added. 'It's easy for a whole group of people to forget just one, but if you're very long in a place like this you remember everybody you ever met. You even worry about people you never liked; you get nostalgic about your enemies. It's all something to think about and it all helps.'

I nodded, watching little beads of sweat swell on his forehead. He was feverish, and I could hardly help wondering how long it would be before the inevitable delirium overtook him another time.

I don't know what the scientific term for blackwater is, but the name those who have lived in Africa call it by is apt enough.

A man can be riddled with malaria for years on end, with its chills and its fevers and its nightmares, but, if one day he sees that the water from his kidneys is black, he knows he will not leave that place again, wherever he is, or wherever he hoped to be. He knows that there will be days ahead, long, tedious days which have no real beginning or ending, but which run together into night and on of it without changing colour, or sound, or meaning. He will lie in his bed feeling the minutes and the hours pass through his body like an endless ribbon of pain because time becomes pain then. Light and darkness become pain; all his senses exist only to receive it, to transmit to his mind again and again with ceaseless repetition, the simple fact that now he is dying.

The man on the bed was dying like that. He wanted to talk because it is possible to forget yourself if you talk, but not if you only lie and think.

'Hastings,' he said. 'You must know Carl Hastings. He was a White Hunter for a while and then he settled down on a coffee plantation west of Ngong. I wonder if he ever married?' He used to say he never would, but nobody believed him.'

'He did, though,' I said. It was a name I had never heard, but it seemed a small enough gesture to lie about a nebulous Carl Hastings — even, if necessary, to give him a wife.

In the four years Bergner had been away, the town of Nairobi had swelled and burst like a ripe seedpod. It was no longer so comfortably small that every inhabitant was a neighbour, or every name that of a friend.

'I thought you knew him,' Bergner said; 'everybody knows Carl. And when you see him you can tell him he owes me five pounds. It's on a bet we made one Christmas in Mombasa. He bet he'd never get married — not in Africa, anyway. He said you could boast about living in a man's country, but you couldn't expect to find a marriageable woman in it!'

'I'll tell him about it,' I said; 'he can send it by way of Kisumu.'

'That's right, by way of Kisumu.'

Bergner closed his eyes and let a tremor of pain shake his body under the flimsy blanket. He was like a storm-trapped man who seeks shelter in the niche of a wall from a passing fury of wind and then hurries on until the next blast drives him to cover again.

'There's Phillips,' he said, 'and Tom Krausmeyer at the Stanley Hotel. You'll know them both — and Joe Morley. There are a number of people I want to ask you about, but there's lots of time. Ebe said you'd be staying over. When I heard your plane I almost prayed that you'd had a flat tire or whatever you have in planes — anything to see a new face and hear a new voice. It isn't considered but you get that way living in a hole like this — or dying in it.'

'You don't have to die in it. You'll get well and then I'll come back and fly you to Nairobi.'

'Or even to London.' Bergner smiled. 'After that we might try Paris, Berlin, Buenos Aires, and'

New York. My future looks brighter and brighter.'

'You forgot Hollywood.'

'No. I just thought it was too much to hope for all in one breath.'

I noticed that, in spite of his spirit and his courage, his voice had grown thin and less certain in its strength. He was holding himself together by sheer power of will and the effort made the atmosphere of the hut strained and tense.

'You *are* staying over, then?' He put the question with sudden urgency.

I didn't know how to explain that I had to leave. I had a feeling that he wouldn't have believed my reason; that with the quick suspicion of the insane and the very sick, he would have thought I was only trying to escape.

I mumbled something about how nice it would be to stay, and that I would, for a while, but that there were other things — a pilot down, the Avian to be refuelled ...

I don't suppose he heard any of it. He started to sweat again and his legs jerked under the blanket. A fleck of spittle formed on his lips and he began to talk in meaningless garbled words.

I couldn't understand all of what he said, but even in delirium he was neither sobbing nor complaining very much. He mumbled only about small things, people he had known, places in Africa and once he mentioned Carl Hastings and Nairobi together in an almost intelligible sentence. I had come closer to the bed and leaned down over it, feeling a wave of sickness in my own body. Trying to quiet him, I talked, but it was a wasted effort. He caught his hands in the loose folds of my flying clothes, tearing at the fabric pulling himself upward from the bed.

I wanted to call out for Ebert, for anyone. But I couldn't say anything and no one would have heard, so I stood there with my hands on Bergner's shoulders feeling the tremor of his muscles pass through my fingertips and hearing the rest of his life run out in a stream of little words carrying no meaning, bearing no secrets — or perhaps he had none.

I left him at last and tiptoed through the door of the hut, closing it quickly behind me.

Bergner may have lived for a while after that, and it may be that the other man for whom the little doctor ordered the oxygen is still mining gold at Nungwe. But I never went back there again and so I never knew.

Years later, I did meet a man named Carl Hastings at one of those cocktail parties where both the people and the conversation pass out of your life and memory by dinner-time.

'There was a man named Bergner,' I began, 'a friend of yours ...'

Mr. Hastings, who was tall and swart and tailored smoothly, raised his glass and frowned over the edge of it.

'You mean Barnard,' he said, 'Ralph Barnard.'

'No.' I shook my head. 'It's Bergner all right. You must remember — Christmas at Mombasa, some kind of bet about getting married? I saw him down at Nungwe and he told me about it.'

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