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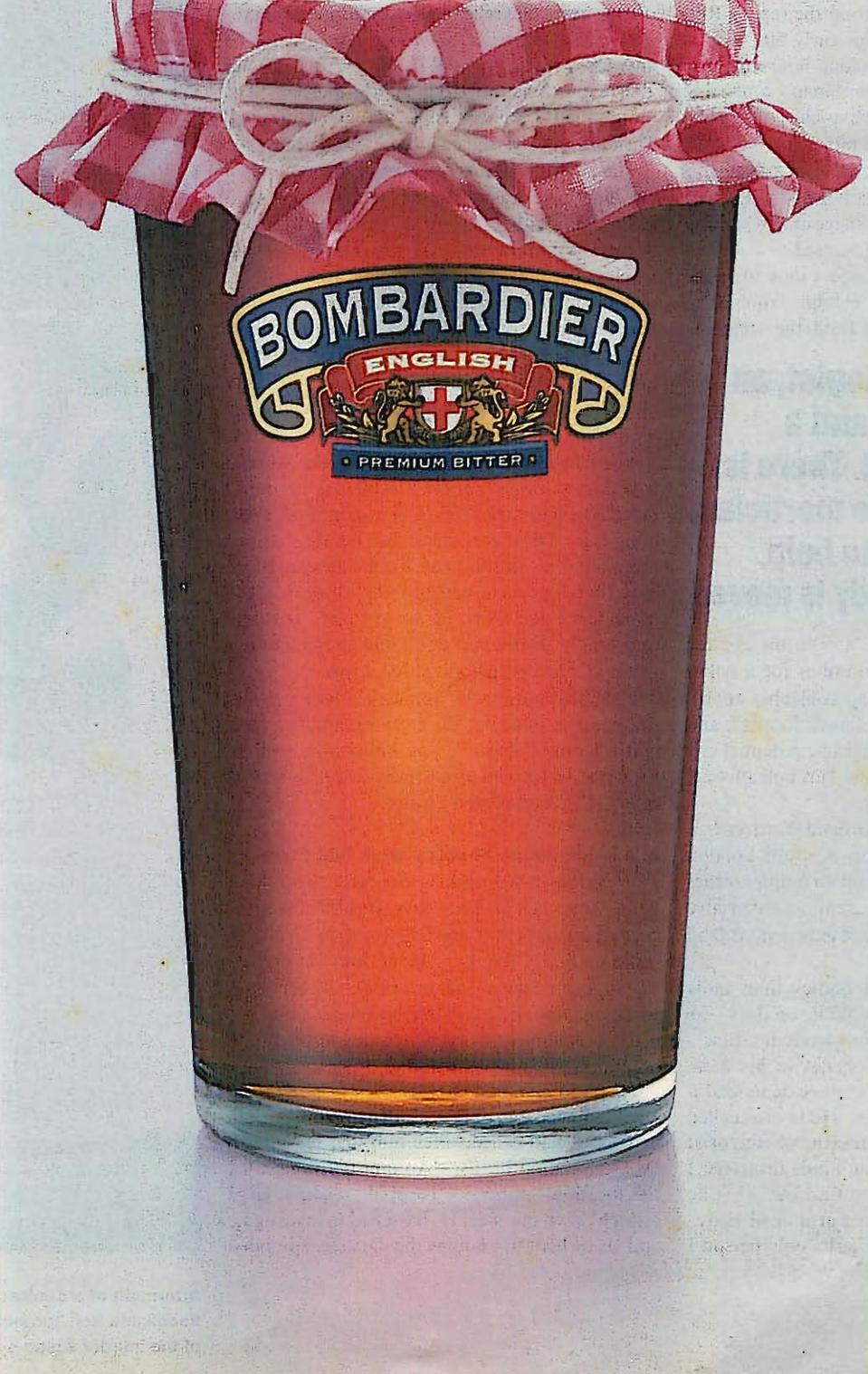
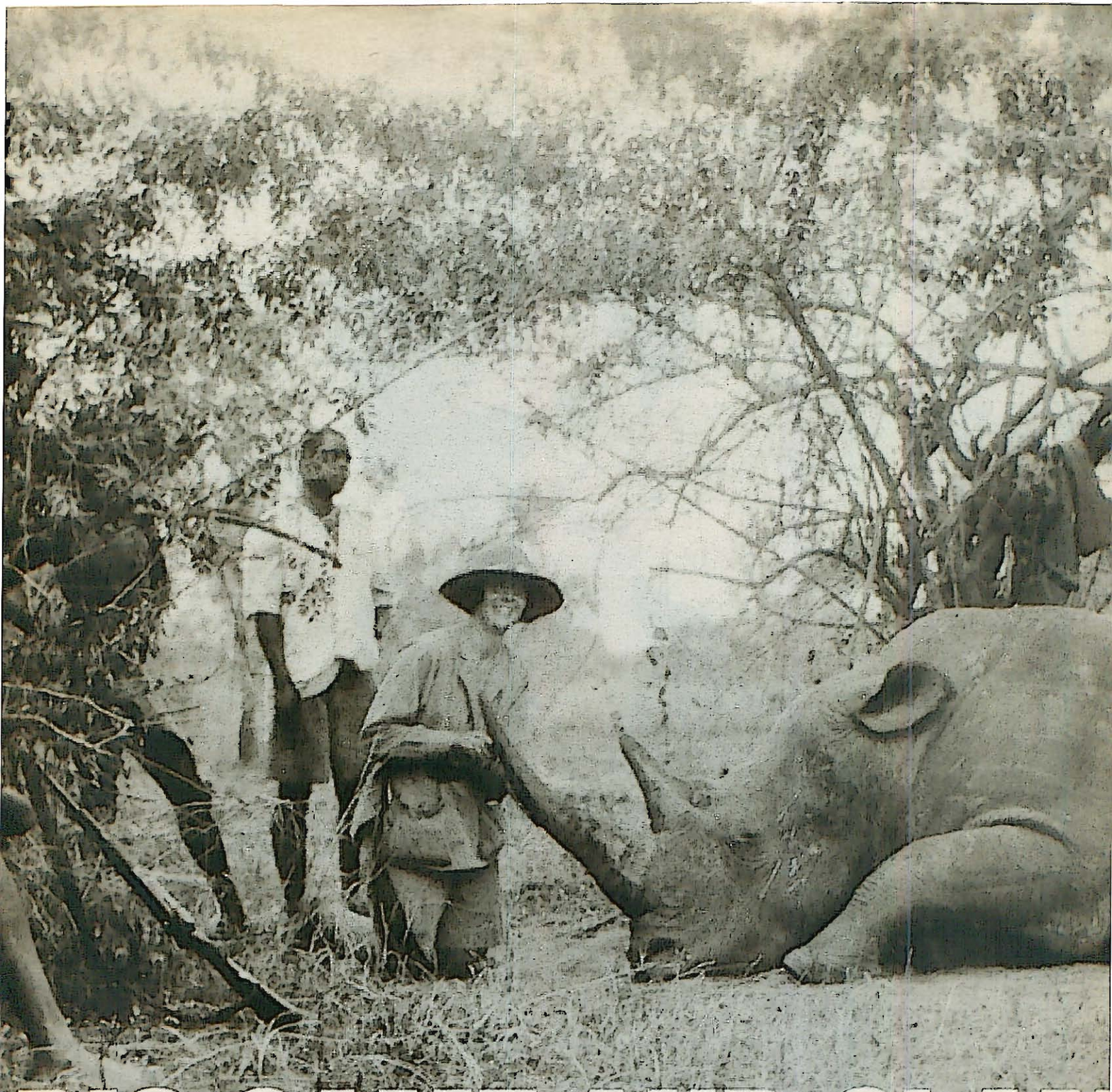


REALLY RATHER ENGLISH



BIG GAME AND GLAN

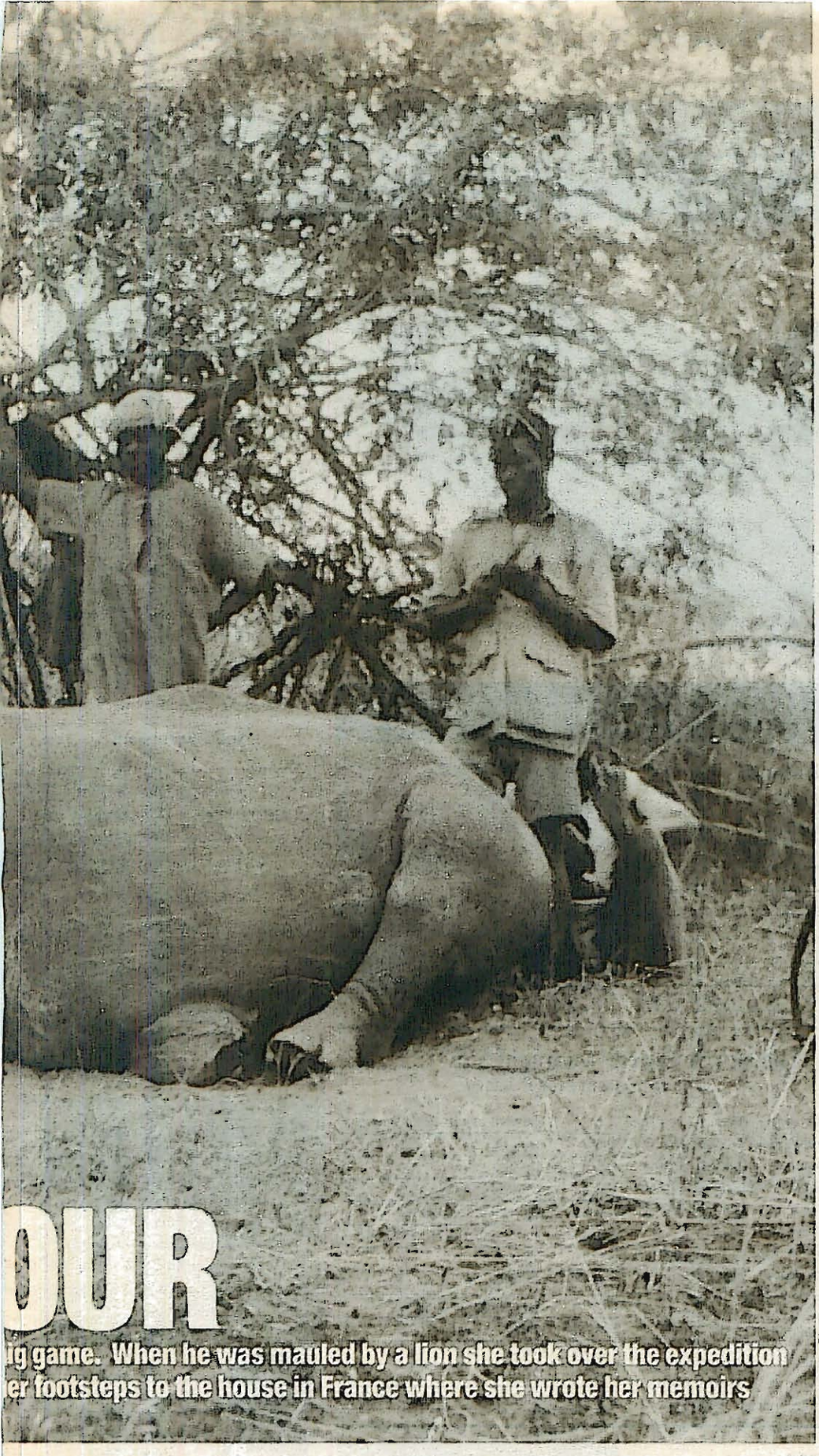
Defying the conventions of the age, Vivienne de Watteville travelled to Africa in 1923 with her father to hu and became an explorer herself. Seventy years on, Samantha Weinberg, her granddaughter-in-law, retrac

A small boat taxi chugged along the southern coast of France in 1929, bound for the fashionable resort island of Porquerolles. In it sat a young Englishwoman with grey eyes and wavy hair. As the boat rounded the headland, she spied a smaller island, more mountainous, and covered with trees. '*Là-bas, Mademoiselle?*' asked the captain, spitting tobacco over the side. '*C'est l'Ile de Port Cros. Elle est bien sauvage.*' He might as well have dangled a fly in front of a trout. If it was wild, she wanted to go there. The boat shifted direction, and they came in to land at the bay of Port Cros.

The young woman who jumped out was Vivienne de Watteville, African explorer, hunter and writer. She was 28 and homeless. Recently returned from a year-long African odyssey, she was already itching to escape the forced conviviality of inter-war European society. By nightfall, sitting in the only hostelry behind a steaming bowl of bouillabaisse, she had conceived a plan to make a home on this wild island. By the following week, she had persuaded the island's owners to let her a small white house, isolated on the other side of the island at Port Man, a four-mile walk from the village.

Vivienne de Watteville was my grandmother-in-law. I never met her – she died eight years before I was born – but a little piece of her lives with me every day, in my husband, our son and on the third finger of my left hand. I always think of the unusual diamond-and-sapphire ring as Vivienne's ring, and as much as I love it for its beauty and symbolic importance, the fact that she wore it every day for 27 years gives it a character unsurpassed by any number of glistening baubles.

When I became the proud possessor of Vivienne's ring, five years ago, I knew little about her, other than that she had shot and skinned a rhino single-handed, that Edith Wharton was one



OUR

ig game. When he was mauled by a lion she took over the expedition er footsteps to the house in France where she wrote her memoirs

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF TANA FLETCHER

***Left*, Vivienne holding the horn of the white rhinoceros she shot in Uganda, 1924. *Above* Vivienne and her father, Bernard Cornwall, in 1909, the year her mother died. *Below*, nine-year-old Vivienne in the same year**

of her best friends, that she had dined with the Prince of Wales at Karen Blixen's farm, and that she named her daughter, Tana, after the African river along whose banks she had marched for months at the head of a troupe of native skinners and bearers. She sounded brave, glamorous, exotic. It became my mission to get to know her. I started to collect anecdotes about her, studied old photographs, looked her name up in the indexes of books written by her friends and contemporaries.

Vivienne's mother, Florence Beddoes, died when her daughter was eight. She was raised mainly by her father, Bernard, aided by a clutch of her mother's relatives in England. Bernard de Watteville was handsome and charming, a Franco-Swiss artist and adventurer with a Peter Pan complex – when she was young, Vivienne called him Dadboy, which later changed to Brovie (as in brother), and indeed people frequently mistook them for brother and sister.

He was fiercely posessive of her as a young woman. 'The voyage out to Africa tried him sorely, and how much more the outposts of Empire, where men hungered for a face fresh from home. Brovie tortured in the flames, then turned life into hell for us both.' They had sailed to Africa in 1923 when Vivienne was 22, armed with their savings and a commission from the Berne Museum to provide examples of Africa's fauna for its new natural history collection. On their shopping list were lions, elephants, rhino, buffalo and any number of species of antelope.

It was not, as Vivienne wryly admitted, a luxury expedition, 'with cars and a white hunter and stores from Fortnum & Mason'. Instead they marched on foot, with the minimum of bearers, and 'hunted and trekked through the rains and dry seasons alike, ran out of food, lost our way in the desert, and worked to exhaustion.' Brovie

shot the animals – often putting himself in extreme danger to do so – while Vivienne watched the wildlife, took photographs and managed the camp. They walked the length of Kenya, along the Tana and Uaso Nyiro rivers, through Uganda and the Mountains of the Moon, into the Congo. She was the first white woman to visit many of these remote places, and despite her aching feet and frequent fever, Vivienne fell passionately in love – this time unopposed by Brovie – with the rich, desolate, incomparable African landscape. Here, she felt, she had found fulfilment, in a nature that was so much more powerful than anything the so-called civilised world could devise.

Eighteen months into the trip, when they were in Uganda, Vivienne was struck down with spirillum fever. They had camped on the Ruindi River, and Brovie went out to hunt. Several hours later, she saw him staggering into camp, his clothes in shreds and arms and legs lacerated, flesh and muscle scored to the bone. A lion had charged and pulled him down before running off. Brovie fired and missed, 'and the lion, furious, came for him again and before he had time to reload had pulled him down and begun tearing at him with his claws'. He eventually managed to kill the lion, and so as not to worry Vivienne by sending for her, walked two hours back to camp under the scorching noonday sun.

Still feverish, she sent for a doctor – several days' walk away – and did everything she could to clean and dress the wounds, but the next evening, Brovie died. 'I cannot tell you how unbelievably heroic he was,' she wrote to her aunt. 'If it had to be, it is the death he would have chosen, brave and clean, and if it had to be, I thank God with all my soul that it happened out there in the wilds. If it had been in civilisation I do not know quite what would have happened to me, but in the wilds – ah! I cannot tell you what strength one draws from those great solitudes.'

She was 23 years old, but still determined to continue the expedition. She knew that if Government House in Entebbe found out that Bernard was dead, they would send her home on the first ship. She swore her posse of 50 bearers to secrecy, and took control of the rifle, forcing herself to shoot waterbuck, bushbuck, buffalo and a white rhinoceros to complete the collection. Back in Europe, she wrote a book about the experience, *Out in the Blue*. The book is poetic and heart wrenching, unwittingly portraying its author as brave, thoughtful, yet paradoxically unworldly. The minute it was finished, three years later, she was on the boat back to Africa and her beloved wilderness, this time, as she put it, 'to make friends with the animals'.

She camped for five months on the Kenya-Tanganyika border, taking photographs and early film of a neighbouring herd of elephants. Then, after a brief sojourn in Nairobi, headed off to a tiny hut above the snowline on Mount Kenya, where she lived for two months with only her portable gramophone for company. At one point, she was racked with terrible toothache, eventually pulling out the offending molar with a pair of carpenter's pliers; on another occasion, she fought a brush fire which threatened to swallow her hut, managing to protect a small patch of grass, to which all the animals later flocked, as if to Doctor Dolittle's side. 'This, at last, was the dream come true,' she wrote. 'Not only to be surrounded by all these birds and beasts, but to know that they looked to me for sustenance.'

When she returned to Europe a year later, it was ostensibly to write the book of this trip that she sought the solitude of Port Cros. She thought she had found paradise in her small white house, a place where she could write in peace. She would escape the attentions of her suitors (she was not at all sure she wanted to marry) make a holiday home for visiting friends, and recover from the traumas of the past six years.

***Top left*, Bernard de Watteville with an impala ram in northern Kenya, 1923. *Top right*, Vivienne with her dog Ãúsiki in Kenya, 1924. *Left*, Vivienne in London, aged 21**

Port Cros is indeed a writer's heaven. This spring, seven decades after Vivienne made it her home, we arrived on the island; her grandson, great-grandson and granddaughter-in-law. We stepped off the ferry into the tiny village – just a clutch of restaurants and pink, plastered fishermen's cottages. Over the next weeks, we explored every tiny sandy path – through the oak and pine forests, around the wild and craggy coast. The island is only six kilometres long and three wide, yet we were constantly surprised by its natural bounty – we came across an outcrop of wild arum lilies growing halfway down a cliff; a twisted cork oak; a tiny cemetery overrun with flowers.

We could not wait to see the green-shuttered house that was Vivienne's home. It was an hour-and-a-half's walk over the broken spine of Port Cros, reachable only by foot (Vivienne had a donkey, Modestine). It was an incredible place, but so utterly isolated: we could almost have been marooned on a forgotten island.

It wasn't only physical barriers that she faced. Port Cros was owned by an unconventional, altruistic yet money-hungry couple: an allegedly crooked lawyer, Marcel Henry, and his violinist wife, Marcelline. He lived in one house, she lived down the road with a gentle ailing poet called Claude Balyne, and insisted on being addressed as Madame Balyne. They ran the only hotel, the Hostellerie, and thought of the island as a Utopian experiment, thoroughly vetting allcomers, particularly those who, like Vivienne, wanted to become a more permanent part of the community.

Even before Vivienne moved in, Madame Balyne was making life difficult. She clearly resented her new tenant's extravagance, when she was trying to run the entire island on a shoestring. Not long after Vivienne's arrival the ferry was rounding the bay daily, piled with Vivienne's purchases – everything from sprung mattresses to a garrulous macaw, whose considerable expense she managed to justify: 'The golden-yellow of his breast, I could not help noticing, was the exact yellow of my teacups [while] the blue-green blended the drawing-room

M. FLETCHER, 2001

The farm at Port Man, Ile de Port Cros, where Vivienne lived while she was writing 'Out in the Blue' about her experiences in Africa

curtains with the Mediterranean. There was no getting away from it, that bird was the keynote of my carefully planned decor.' In later years, Vivienne's shopping expeditions were marked by extravagant and often unsuitable buys. Once, when 'very tired', she bought a bear. 'I quite saw afterwards that a bear was not a suitable pet when there were already two small children in the house,' she recalled. 'He was cancelled, and on the bill figured in due course, among ignoble stockings, rice and a pram-cover: "Retd. 1 Honey-Bear".'

Vivienne's book about her Port Cros experiences, *Seeds That the Wind May Bring*, is wonderfully amusing and evocative. Virtually nothing has changed since 1929: there has been no new building as, with remarkable Utopian foresight, the Henrys gave protection rights of Port Cros to the French state during the war, which eventually culminated in it becoming the country's second national park in 1963. We walked along the same 'enchanting paths' as Vivienne had; bathed in the same bays; ate at the same restaurant; and by night, inhaled the same 'delicious quiet, made still more beautiful by the constant singing of nightingales'.

Shortly after a lonely Christmas, Vivienne escaped to Europe for a visit. At the Albert Hall, after a Brahms concert, a stranger dropped his gloves by Vivienne's chair. His name was Bunt Goschen. They walked together to Knightsbridge Tube station, and talked of music and islands.

Vivienne arrived back in Port Cros to a letter from Bunt. 'Had it not been for his letters our relationship might have faded in to the mist,' she wrote, 'but though I tried to discourage him from writing, I found myself less and less able to stifle my pleasure when his letters came. They were an entrancing allegro to my own de profundis at Port Man.'

In March Bunt wrote to say he was just across the water in Hyères, with records of Brahms's Double Concerto. (He had promised to send them, but when Vivienne discouraged him on account of Customs duty, he decided 'with that peculiar flair for economy which I found afterwards was quite natural to him', to save the duty and bring out the records himself.) She went to meet him. 'I beheld on the deserted ferry a tall, slight figure, slung round with cameras and field-glasses, standing like a shepherd among a flock of curiously assorted luggage.' They walked around the island, played Brahms in the ruined fort at Port Man, and practised roaring like a lion.

It was on his second visit that she set him the ultimate test, that of showing him 'the Paradise', a hidden glade through the arches of an old aqueduct. She later recalled, 'Bunt understood animals: he had matriculated in sunsets with distinction: would he know that the Paradise must be entered on tiptoe, that its silence mustn't be desecrated by the human voice?'

He would, and when some mornings later, he looked up from the letter he was writing and said, 'We ought to fix the date of our wedding, or we shan't know when to book our tickets for Bayreuth,' Vivienne did not protest. 'Our paths had left us worlds apart: his in sunshine where fountains played, while mine had gone too deep,' she wrote. 'Only Bunt's bubbling joy of life could reach me and draw me up again.'

Two months later, Bunt came back to Port Cros with a sapphire and diamond ring. When we returned, 71 years later, to walk through the rooms of Vivienne's house once more, and scramble underneath the arch to discover the Paradise, I was wearing her ring. T