

Also by
MICHAELA DENIS

★
LEOPARD IN MY LAP

RIDE A RHINO

MICHAELA DENIS

THE COMPANION BOOK CLUB
LONDON

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"A blessed companion is a book"—JERROLD

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RIDE A RHINO

MICHAELA DENIS

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THE COMPANION BOOK CLUB

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CHAPTER ONE

HOME AT LAST

"MICHAELA," said Angèle, my sister-in-law, "perhaps, when your travels are over, you and Armand will come and settle in the Ardennes. You could find a lovely house in the forest."

She gazed speculatively at us both, and I hated having to answer her as I did. I loved Belgium, but—

"Dear Angèle," I said, "it is no use pretending. My heart is in Africa."

I glanced at Armand, expecting him to confirm what I had said, but he only gave a shrug. "By the time we stop our wanderings," he said, "Africa will probably have changed. The place of your dreams is never as you imagine it."

Yes, I knew there was some truth in what he said, and yet I found it almost impossible to imagine that we might end our days in any other part of the world.

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One day I went to the kitchen as usual to prepare lunch and was mildly surprised to find that Kirmani was absent. However, I presumed that he must have decided to take the day off, and did not give the matter a further thought. Lunch was served, I did the washing up, and then changed into my film clothes for some sequences we were shooting that afternoon.

But in the evening there was still no sign of Kirmani and I began to feel a little worried, for I had visions of him having been spirited away in the night. After dinner, I mentioned his absence to Armand.

"Oh, he's probably gone off with some friends," Armand replied.

"But he should have told me," I said.

"Kirmani is old enough and big enough to look after himself."

However, I could not rest until I knew whether or not he had returned to the servants' quarters, so I went across to see for myself. The door was locked, the building was in darkness, and there was no reply to my knocking. I was alarmed and quickly returned to the house.

"Armand," I called, "he's not there."

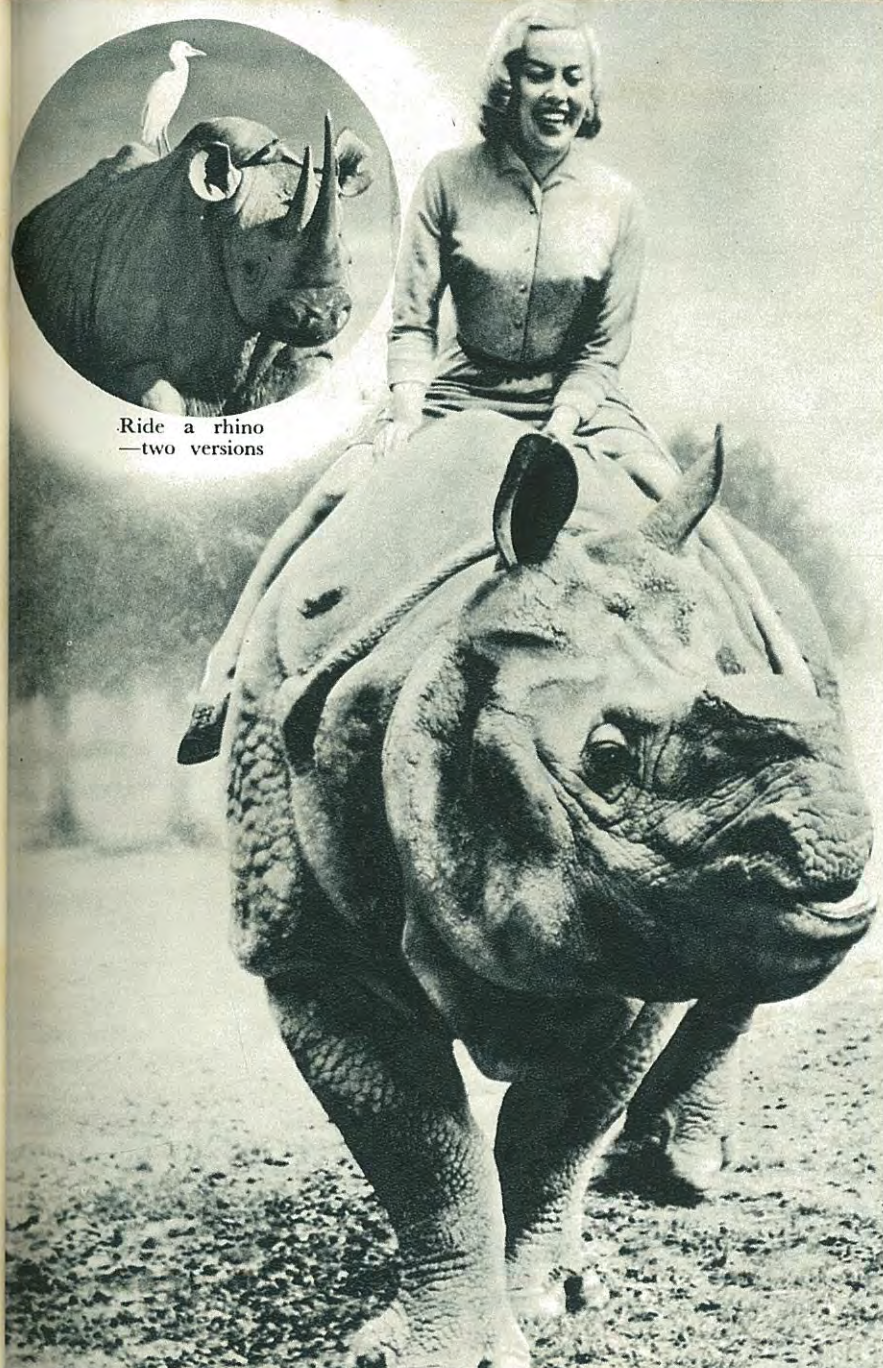
"Who?"

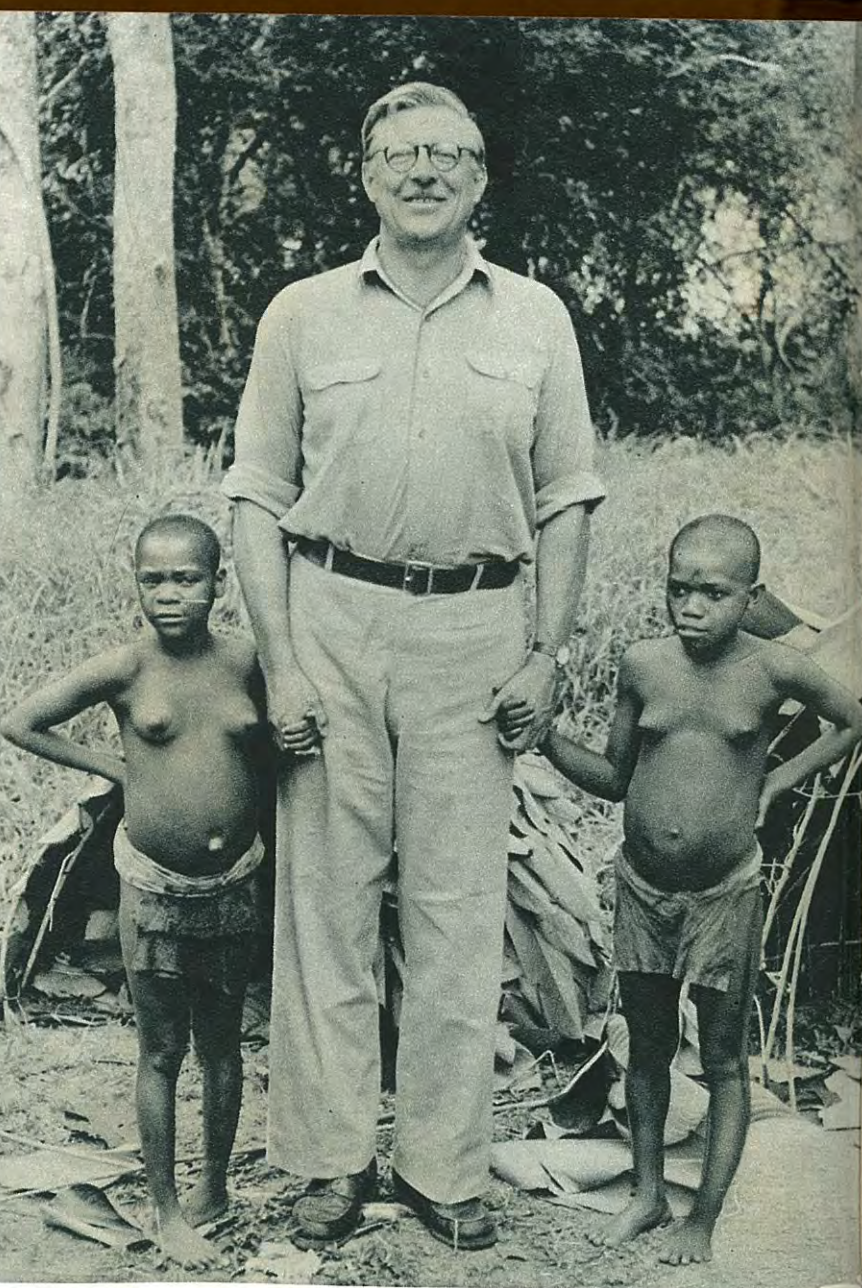
"Kirmani."

"All right," said Armand, "we'll enquire at the

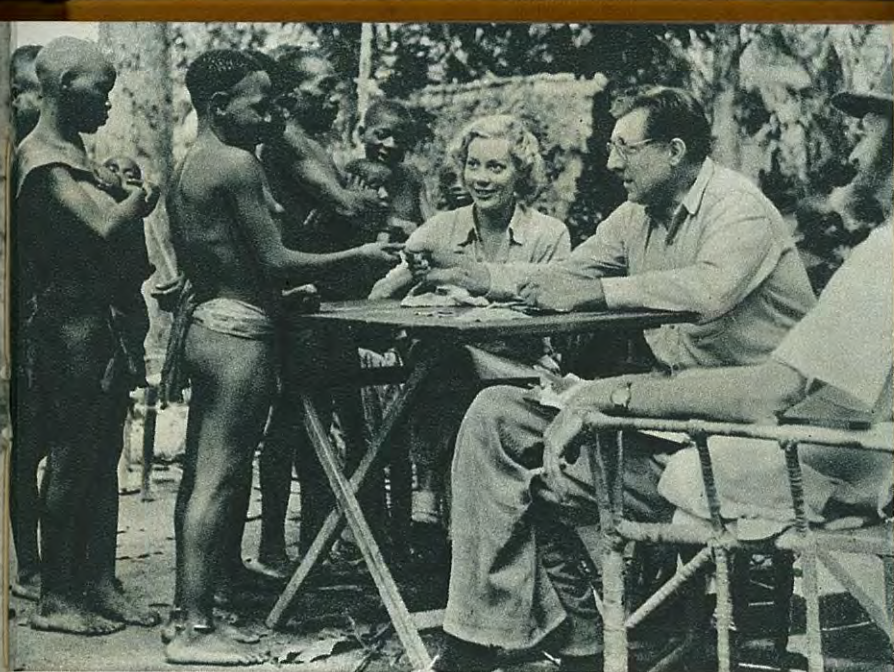


Ride a rhino
—two versions





These are not children with Armand but full-grown pigmy matrons



Pay as you earn, pigmy style

Amboselli's famous rhino Gertie emerges from the undergrowth



Michaela Denis RIDE A RHINO

travel & adventure

In **Ride a Rhino**, Michaela Denis writes about the life she loves. It is a life closely associated with Africa, and the book opens with her return to the new house in Kenya which her husband Armand designed and built. At any time there might be nearly 100 animals around the house, and the many anecdotes prove that animals, no less than humans, have their own individuality.

To countless people across the world who have read **Leopard in my Lap**, and the many who continue to follow the Armand and Michaela Denis television programmes, Michaela has once again cast her own special spell.

Ride a Rhino is a varied and attractive book which will delight all lovers of animals, travel, and adventure.



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Ride a Rhino Denis

MICHAELA DENIS



RIDE A RHINO

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MICHAELA DENIS



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CHAPTER ONE

HOME AT LAST

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Of course there would be that drive from the airport when you arrived, which made you wonder if you were mad ever to have wished to return. Why, oh why, should travellers have to enter exciting cities through the back door, as happens at Nairobi – and many other

places as well? But the slums and factories would be forgotten when you glanced upwards, far above the tumult of the jostling crowds in the streets, and saw a flight of crested cranes, with necks outstretched, winging their way across the vivid blue vastness of the sky. Then there would be the unmistakable smell of the red dust, which was so nauseating to some, yet a heady perfume to others such as me. And how could you describe the warm thrill of being recognized by your African friends, who remembered you as one of their own, albeit an adopted one, and greeted you in their resonant, musical voices? And what mere words could convey the majesty of the mountains or the glory of the National Parks, where big game roamed in greater profusion that anywhere else in the world?

* * *

The plane circled and dropped as lightly as a feather on to the runway of Nairobi's new airport. The old familiar feeling of excitement surged up again – the feeling that I was dropping into welcoming arms. We were back in Africa!

The customs officer greeted us like old friends. He asked us if we had enjoyed our trip and enquired if we had brought any members of our family with us, by which he meant Minnie the mongoose or Bertram the bushbaby. We told him no, but said we had acquired a pair of meercats called Donald and Hogan instead. These two were already firm favourites with the public. We produced their credentials.

A young woman, who turned out to be a new officer of the Veterinary Department, to our dismay, took charge of Donald and Hogan.

"You can't bring them in without the usual six months' quarantine," she announced.

"But surely you are mistaken," protested Armand. "These aren't cats, you know."

"They are closely related to the mongoose," I added.

The young woman looked unimpressed.

"They will have to spend the night here," she said, making some notes in a little black book.

"In any case," I added hopefully, "cats and dogs, even if these were cats or dogs, which they are not, are surely allowed to enter Kenya from England without quarantine?"

It was no use. Calling over her shoulder that there was nothing that could be done, the young woman took poor Donald and Hogan away, and we heard the unfortunate animals scratching impatiently in their travelling box as they were borne to some remote room in the customs building.

"I'm so sorry," said our friendly customs official, sympathetically. But I assured him that we would telephone the Veterinary Department on the following day and certainly be able to secure Donald's and Hogan's release.

As the African porters at the airport were carrying our baggage to the car park they urged us to tell them what we had been doing in England. "Did you enjoy it?" "Was it hot?" "Was it cold?" "Was there much food?" But before we could answer any of their questions we were greeted by an old friend, Mike Richmond, who had come to meet the plane and drive us to the New Stanley Hotel.

We had known Mike for many years and had often flown in his private plane. It was always difficult to imagine that this slim, rather boyish-looking man had lent both his single-engined aircraft and his personal services to the Police Reserve at the outbreak of the

Mau Mau troubles and for three long years had constantly undertaken the most hazardous reconnaissance missions. There had been three other young men under his command, but two of them had lost their lives in operational sorties. Mike himself was a born flyer, with just the right amount of caution to balance his innate daring, and it was this quality that had made him a first-rate test pilot for the Fleet Air Arm during the last war.

In a few sentences he told us all the latest news – especially in so far as it concerned our house, which we had lent during our absence to a couple called Winkel-meyer, who were local car agents. It seemed that they were shortly to be transferred to Uganda, which meant that our property would soon become vacant once more.

“Well,” said Armand, “that means we’ll have to find a caretaker.”

Tentatively, I voiced a suggestion. “Don’t you think it would be nice,” I said, “if we could live in our own house for the first time even if it’s only for a couple of weeks?”

We had owned the land on which the house was built for five years, and for four years the house itself had stood there, yet we had still never spent a night under our own roof.

Armand laughed. “I’m afraid you’re getting the nesting instinct,” he said.

This was true enough. How many times during the past few years had I fallen in love with some place where we were camping and said, “Let’s stay here for ever.” It might have been in the depths of New Guinea or in the heart of Africa – but it always had plenty of trees and birds and animals – and scarcely any people. It was not that I disliked human beings, but cities and

populated areas always give me a feeling akin to claustrophobia.

At the New Stanley Hotel we were welcomed warmly by both the European and African staff, all of whom had known us for many years.

“We have only managed to book you in for two days,” said a beautiful Danish receptionist, when we enquired after our accommodation. “We did try to fit you in for longer somehow, but there’s a convention on at the moment.” Her eyes registered sympathy. “I’ll do my very best,” she said. “Let’s hope there will be a cancellation.”

“We ought to have let them know earlier, Armand,” I said reproachfully. But before the words were out of my mouth I realized how unjust I was. We never knew with certainty when we would be on the move, and during most of our married life we had been unable to tell from one moment to another where we would be the following week. It was always difficult to arrange any sort of social life, and even the ordinary business of booking hotel accommodation was invariably a speculative operation: fortunately we were both fairly adaptable and it did not worry us overmuch.

“We had better not unpack everything,” said Armand, when we had moved into our suite. “They may want us to move into other rooms in a day or two. Or we may even have to change hotels.”

“Armand.”

He looked up. He knew from my tone of voice that I was going to suggest something I wanted very much and was already afraid that he might refuse.

“Well, what is it?” he asked. “I know what you’re going to say, and the answer is –”

“You can’t really know what I’m going to say.”

“The answer is ‘yes’.”

"You really mean it? We're going to move into our own house?"

I ran across and kissed him. This was too wonderful for words! I felt ready to start moving there and then.

* * *

I hope my readers will not think me guilty of exaggeration when I say that our house at Langata, a few miles from Nairobi, is one of the loveliest I have ever seen.

We built it on the edge of a quarry that slopes down to the Mbagathi river. On the far side of the river is the Masai Reserve and in the distance we can see the Ngong Hills and the matchless splendour of the giant Kilimanjaro.

Around the house, the cropped lawn ensures that snakes do not trouble us overmuch, and a border of gorgeous lilies – my favourite flower – adds a magnificent touch of colour. In the grounds, the trees are chiefly natives of Africa: fig trees, flowers of the forest and thorn of various sorts, with frangipani to remind us of Asian temples and jasmines to waft a heady perfume over the house.

If I close my eyes, I can always hear the gentle ripple of the river and smell the sweet scents from the woods, however far I am away from home.

Armand designed the house, which is a white Moorish-style building with terra-cotta roof tiles. Inside, the central feature is a large wrought-iron staircase of a delicate, leafy design, made to my own drawing by an Indian craftsman in Nairobi.

But the house is unusual in another way. With such a view, we decided to reverse the conventional way of building and have our living room on the first floor and bedrooms and bathrooms at ground level. At the

top of the house is our writing room – a disadvantage, as I have since discovered, for who can concentrate on words when the majesty of nature distracts at every season?

This was our house, without furniture or servants, the place I was eager to turn into a home.

The terrorists were still active, and our first need was a nightwatchman. Fortunately the Winkelmeyers had not yet dismissed their own nightwatchman, and we were glad to keep him on. His name was Kirmani. He was a tall, elderly man with one of the most beautiful African faces I had ever seen. His eyes were slanting, his cheek-bones high, his nose was straight and thin, and his expression like a carving from antiquity. It could have been the face of a saint, an ascetic or an Egyptian king. He was considerably taller than I, and when he looked down at me, it was in the manner of a man whose womenfolk have no franchise. We engaged him on the spot.

Armand and I went to the storeroom and unpacked our safari cooking-box, which contained plates, cutlery, and kitchen utensils. Our army-style ware looked appallingly incongruous in the grandeur of the house but it would have to do. While Armand and Des Bartlett, his assistant, who had just arrived, did the unpacking, I went to the nearest provision shop, which was two miles away, and bought food.

When I got back I settled myself in the kitchen at the top of the house and started peeling potatoes: but a moment later I practically jumped out of my seat. Out of the corner of my eye I had seen a motionless figure standing just inside the doorway.

It was Kirmani.

Without a word he came forward, took the knife from my hand, and started peeling the potatoes. I had

not asked him to help me in the house at all, and I was consequently very touched by his action. Having thanked him, I left him to the potatoes and busied myself with making a special sauce for the fish I had bought. I was determined that our first meal at home should be an especially good one.

* * *

I could scarcely believe that we were really in the house at last. Although it contained practically nothing beyond our camp equipment, in my mind's eye I could already see it furnished.

Armand had said, "I built the house. Now you buy the furniture."

I was only too happy to do so, for it put on me the responsibility of making a real home. My pleasure was a trifle dampened, however, when I discovered just how much our dream house was going to cost to furnish. To make the most of the breath-taking views all around us, Armand had designed a house with many windows. But it was not until the upper floor had been measured for curtains that I realized, to my horror, that I would have to buy no less than a hundred and fifty yards of curtain material. In fact, I bought sixty yards to start with, but then had to wait a further six months for the remaining lengths to arrive from France.

Buying the furniture and carpets was fun until I worked out how much they were costing me. Every day I totted up the bills and groaned, but each new piece I acquired injected extra life and personality into the house. It had suddenly become the same to me as a beloved person. I wanted to give things to it – to dress it up and make it beautiful. Even Armand, who had originally shuddered at the sight of the building's bleak interior and referred to it as Grand Central

Station, viewed my efforts with increasing approval. At first, everything had seemed to go wrong, but the arrival of my blue-grey curtains which would not fade in the tropical sun cheered me considerably. Finally, after I had haunted auction sales in Nairobi, the furnishing and decoration were completed, and Armand announced that he was satisfied with the result. Visitors always admired our home, but it was naturally Armand whom I really wanted to please and I was delighted to have succeeded in doing so.

There were of course problems still to be overcome. In a downstairs cupboard I discovered a beautifully coloured nocturnal mouse which I fed and cherished. With nine cats in the house, its survival was always in doubt, but by making sure that no one opened the cupboard except me, I managed to preserve the mouse. But one morning, as I was sweeping a precious prayer rug, I noticed a triangular piece had been nibbled away from one corner – obviously the work of my nocturnal pet.

I thought of my other carpets: the Aubusson tapestry in the living-room, the Bokhara purdah on the floor of the writing-room and other Persian carpets in the house. Sadly I went downstairs to the cupboard caught the mouse, and liberated it well away from the house.

During those early days when we were settling in we lived a camp-like existence. Almost every day I was to be seen driving a vehicle which looked almost like a furniture van, with oddly shaped parcels, bundles, packages, lamps, and the legs of chairs and tables jutting out of the back seat.

In the house Kirmani helped by preparing the vegetables and washing up, but otherwise I did all the housework myself as well as my writing and filming. I

congratulated myself on Kirmani's extraordinary conscientiousness, for he had the knack of anticipating whatever needed to be done without being told. Very often I went into the kitchen and found him hard at work all on his own, and at night he sometimes used to prowl around the grounds on the lookout for Mau Mau. He seemed to be that rarest of commodities – the perfect servant – and I considered myself extremely lucky. "He's a treasure," I often exclaimed to Armand.

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"Oh, he's probably gone off with some friends," Armand replied.

"But he should have told me," I said.

"Kirmani is old enough and big enough to look after himself."

However, I could not rest until I knew whether or not he had returned to the servants' quarters, so I went across to see for myself. The door was locked, the building was in darkness, and there was no reply to my knocking. I was alarmed and quickly returned to the house.

"Armand," I called, "he's not there."

"Who?"

"Kirmani."

"All right," said Armand, "we'll enquire at the

police station tomorrow. Perhaps he's had an accident. Or maybe he really has been beaten up by terrorists."

Next morning Armand walked across to the servants' quarters to see if there was any sign of Kirmani. A few moments later he returned to the house.

"Your devoted servant," he announced, "is lying dead drunk on his bed."

I was bitterly disappointed, for I had always defended Kirmani's character. He could not be roused until the afternoon, whereupon he sheepishly apologized and promised that it would never happen again. In stern tones, Armand forgave him, and I presented him with a couple of aspirins for his hangover. He assured us that he would turn over a new leaf – but two days later he again strayed from the path of virtue.

"Perhaps he's lonely," I suggested. "Or maybe it's a social habit. You often find Europeans who drink through loneliness. I think we should employ some other servants, Armand. He needs company – and I could do with some more help."

"I don't want any servants at this time; we can't tell who is Mau Mau and who isn't," replied Armand.

However, I pleaded that I needed more time for my writing, and I finally succeeded in having my way. That afternoon I visited the nearest Labour Exchange. A cook and a house-servant were quickly found, and on the following day they reported for duty at the house. The houseman seemed to be quite a cheerful little fellow, but the cook looked lugubrious beyond words.

"I wonder if he ever smiles," said Armand, when we were alone. "Or will our soup be drowned in tears?"

Nevertheless, the household thenceforth ran more smoothly, allowed Armand and me a chance to give all our attention to our respective jobs. Kirmani, however, continued to have his occasional lapses, and it was per-

fectly obvious that his avowed intention of turning over a new leaf stood little hope of ever being fulfilled. After a while I got to know all about his drinking habits. There was, for instance, one infallible sign: he would always try to acquire or ask me for an onion. The first time this happened I was combing my hair in front of a full-length mirror in a small dressing-room on the ground floor. It was dusk, but I had not bothered to switch on the lights, for I could just see what I was doing. Suddenly, as I gazed at my own reflection I became aware of a dark, motionless figure peering into the mirror over my shoulder. There had been no sound of approaching footsteps, and I swung round sharply.

It was Kirmani.

"What do you want, Kirmani?" I demanded, in a rather severe tone, for my nerves were on edge. Armand had gone into Nairobi for the day, and Kirmani and I were alone in the house, and thoughts of the Mau Mau were never completely out of one's mind at that time.

"Would you give me one onion, please, memsahib?" he said, in a thick voice. At that time, of course, I did not realize that this was a sure symptom of his alcoholic thirst, so we went to the kitchen together and I gave him an onion.

After that, it happened quite regularly.

One evening, when Dr. Louis Leakey and his wife Mary were having cocktails with us, we caught sight of Kirmani creeping up our large central staircase. We can see from one end of our house to the other through a succession of archways: but Kirmani was quite oblivious of the fact that he was being watched. He crept up with elaborate caution, and then we heard faint sounds of exploration from the kitchen. Mary and Louis raised their eyebrows.

"I'd better go and investigate," I said, feeling rather annoyed. It was all right, I considered, for Kirmani to creep in and ask me for an onion when I was alone, but to do so in front of guests seemed to be going too far.

I found him rummaging about in the vegetable basket.

"What are you looking for?" I said, although I knew perfectly well.

"One onion."

Kirmani was reeling, and his hand described a wavering arc as he took the onion which I found for him. I left the kitchen and returned to my guests and to my surprise, instead of using the back stairs, he followed me. However, I considered it prudent not to object at that moment, for I felt I might get rid of him much more quietly by just letting him creep down the main stairway and out of the front door.

I entered the drawing-room, and to my intense annoyance Kirmani followed closely behind me. He walked into the centre of the floor, where he stood swaying like a blade of grass in the wind, and gazed fixedly at my guests. Then he raised his arms and waved, extravagantly, in an all-embracing gesture.

"It is a beautiful house," he announced, employing the sort of tone you might expect from an exalted personage conducting a party of week-end guests around his ancestral manor.

"Very good furniture," he continued, crossing to a window and fingering the curtains. "Very good material."

He then wandered into my writing-room, but he was soon back again. We pointedly ignored him.

"Yes, it is a beautiful house," he repeated, his eyes sweeping the room from floor to ceiling. And with those words he shuffled off down the staircase, munching his

onion and steering an unsteady course for the front entrance.

When he had gone I apologized for the unorthodox behaviour of our watchman and we all laughed. There was very little you could do about Kirmani.

One evening Armand and I were going out to dinner in Nairobi. Des had also been invited, but had decided to stay at home instead to write some letters. As we were getting into our car we saw a Nairobi taxi pulling into our drive, so we waited a minute. The cab stopped at the house and out of it stepped two young African ladies. There was something familiar about their mincing walk. Where had I seen it before? Piccadilly? Shepherd Market? Bond Street? Yes, it was familiar.

"I suppose they've come to look at our animals," I said. "Or perhaps they are the servants' sisters?"

"They don't look like anybody's sisters to me," replied Armand, who had obviously also recognized their gait.

Since Des was in the house and could protect our belongings, it seemed unkind to order them off the premises if they had merely come to see the animals, so we drove off to our dinner-party.

It was about midnight when we returned. The first thing we saw was the bobbing of a torch outside the house. We could feel at once a strange tension in the atmosphere which seemed to suggest that something peculiar was happening or had just happened. The bobbing torch approached us rapidly, and we soon recognised the figure of Des dressed only in a pair of shorts.

"The police are here," he called.

"Mau Mau!" I spontaneously exclaimed.

"No," he replied. "Girls."

We asked for details, and he told us that there had

evidently been a terrific fight in the servants' quarters. The police had been sent for, and our entire household staff, with the exception of Kirmani, had been carted off to gaol. We were to take Kirmani down to the police station on the following morning for interrogation.

As far as Des could gather, the fight had been caused by an argument as to which members of the staff were to be privileged to enjoy the favours of the two girls, both of whom had fully intended to spend the whole night in the servants' quarters. In his role of *askari*, or nightwatchman, Kirmani had thereupon gone to the police-post on his own initiative and brought two policemen back with him. Des knew nothing more except that the cook, the house-servant, the gardener, and both the girls had then been taken to the police station.

Kirmani, it appeared, had convincingly vindicated himself – a most timely action, because he had lately been indulging too frequently in drunken bouts and I had been seriously considering giving him notice.

The next morning, soon after breakfast, I drove Kirmani down to the police station and the interrogation began, each man being questioned separately.

It is always most entertaining to watch Africans being interrogated. Their natural dramatic talent is given full rein and they enact their roles, whether truthfully or not, with such vivid actions and descriptions that the whole scene comes clearly to life. In this instance all the men, who had been kept in separate cells during the night, told more or less the same story. The girls had been lavish with their favours to all three of them, but Kirmani had been ignored because he was a Wakamba. For some reason neither of the girls could tolerate the Wakamba tribe, and Kirmani's passionate advances had accordingly been rebuffed. A lively fight

among the men had ensued, and all four of them had suffered considerable and visible damage. Kirmani had then, in a fit of jealous pique, gone straight to the police station and reported the incident.

I was astonished at his duplicity. There was nothing for it but to dismiss both him and the cook, who had been responsible for bringing in the girls. The cook had not been in our employ long enough for us really to miss him. He was a good cook, but I knew I could easily hire another. We did soon find another, a light-fingered gentleman who lasted in our service no longer than his predecessor. Finally I almost came to the old conclusion that the best cook for our kitchen was myself.

The sacking of Kirmani was a different matter. I felt really unhappy to see him go. He may have been a rogue, but he was extremely pleasant. Drunk or sober he always amused me, and I do not think I ever employed a servant with so much character. Wherever he is now, I wish him well.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LIMPING LION CUB

It seemed – and was – ages since we had been on safari and we were delighted to be on the move again. Since our return from England, we had been busy with all the many things which have to be attended to whenever we come back to Africa.

When we planned our new safari we took with us two African men who came more for old times' sake than through need of a job. Kamando and Njogu were men of some substance who each owned a sizeable *shamba*, or plantation.

Kamando had worked for us many years previously. Prudently he had saved money and had been able to retire: but he liked us and regarded us as friends, almost relatives, rather than employers. He loved safari and was quite happy to work as cook-houseman, while Njogu was content to lend him a hand in camp and to drive one of the jeeps. Usually African drivers do not care to do any other job as well, but since Njogu had often seen me peeling potatoes or helping to change a tyre, and Armand doing many odd chores which were not his normal responsibility, he showed his readiness to help in every way he could.

We set off in two vehicles – Armand and I in a truck and the two men following in a jeep. A week later Nairobi was far behind us and we felt ourselves in another world. We pitched our camp beneath the spreading branches of a large flat-topped tree, a species known in the old days as the “fever-tree” because the early South African pioneers imagined that it was the

We drove off to where the birds were congregating in the dark blue sky. This was one of the problems we have never solved and never cease to marvel at. How can the African sky at one moment be an enormous blue void, and at the next be speckled with a converging multitude of scavengers?

Slowly circling overhead, the vultures formed a great column which gradually, speculatively descended to the earth. Often in the past, through following the descent of vultures, we had located lions with a recent kill. And so it was now.

As we drew close we could see three lionesses, three cubs of almost adult stature, and four smaller ones, all gathered around the kill.

"That must be *our* pride," I cried excitedly.

From what I could see none of the smaller cubs was limping, but there was no doubt at all in my mind that these were our lions. This was their territory; their size and numbers were exactly right; but the final and most convincing proof came when the group was joined by two males; one had a golden mane, the other a black one. Lions were so scarce in this part of Africa at that time that we knew beyond a shadow of doubt that this was what we had come to call "our" pride of lions. The mother of the small cub must have tended its paw so diligently, nursing it and constantly cleaning it, that nature combined with maternal devotion had cured it completely. The little cub did not limp now, nor was he in any way physically inferior to his brothers and sisters.

As we drove away I glanced over my shoulder to catch a last glimpse of the lions. I saw a friendly family party gathered around their dinner. And my heart rejoiced at the knowledge that no member of the household was missing.

CHAPTER THREE

TO THE FRONTIER

One of the most interesting and unspoiled areas of Africa lies to the north and east of Kenya: the land of the Somalis and the Boran, of the camels and the great brooding deserts.

Here, too, lions are found. As I have said, lions do not become man-eaters unless they are old or injured, but when that happens, they turn to human beings as the easiest of all kills. Without a weapon, a man cannot fight even an old or wounded lion; he has no hooves or claws or sharp teeth to protect him and he cannot run away. When a lion turns man-eater whole districts can be terrorized and hunters have to be brought in to kill the rampaging animal. One regrets the necessity, but it is the only way with a lion who has declared war on the human race.

On an expedition to the northern frontier we joined forces for a night or two with a white hunter who had been called in to track down a man-eating lion. The lion had become so bold and his partiality for human flesh so great that he would raid a thornbush enclosure to get at the goats and then, ignoring them, would seize the herdsman sleeping among them and carry him off.

The chief at the village through which we passed brought out a girl who told an extraordinary story. She was about fifteen years old, good-looking and well-made, but her dusky features were marred by several long claw marks which ran down one side of her face. She told us that she had been tending a flock of goats

on the outskirts of the village early one morning when the man-eater had sprung out on her.

"It knocked me over before I realized I was in danger," she said proudly. "For some reason it did not bury its teeth in me at once, but stood clawing at me as I lay on the ground – perhaps to make sure I was dead. As I rolled over with the lion panting over me, I groped for the stick I'd been holding – then suddenly I had it and threw it as hard as I could against the lion's jaw. It was so surprised that it backed away – and just then some men from the village came running up and drove the lion off with their spears. I was lucky that time, memsahib."

Not only lucky, but brave. Word had gone round that the white hunter with us was to kill the lion and all day warriors had been arriving at our camp. They had magnificent bodies and their fine features and high cheek-bones gave them the look of strong, fearless men.

An enclosure of thorn was built at night round the camp fire for protection, and after the men had eaten meat which they grilled on sticks, they began a lion dance, foretelling the death of the enemy. The grunting and shouts of the dancers drowned the night cries of the hyenas, and as I watched the rippling muscles of the warriors gleaming in the firelight and listened to their blood-curdling threats of what they would do to the lion, I wondered why it had been necessary to send for a white hunter. The warriors seemed confident of finishing the job themselves.

The dancing and eating went on all night, and as dawn broke, the hunter and the warriors made ready to track the lion. With the white man at their head the warriors set out. Armand and his assistant had decided to go with the expedition in the hope of getting pic-

tures, but I stayed in camp. Even if the lion was a man-eater, I could not bear the thought of him being hunted and killed in cold blood.

The chanting of the warriors died away as they disappeared in the distance. The sun rose, and as I had plenty to do, time passed quickly.

Occasionally I gave a thought to the lion and once it crossed my mind that he might escape the hunters and decide to pay a visit to the undefended camp. But I soon dismissed the thought. Late in the afternoon I saw the warriors coming over the hill in single file with the hunter and Armand at their head. Their return was strangely dejected, compared with the excited and bloodthirsty sally of the morning.

"Did you kill the lion?" I asked when the leaders reached the camp. Armand gave a derisive hoot and left the hunter to tell me what had happened.

"You heard what the warriors were going to do to the lion this morning?" he said. "Well, when we got into the country where we know the lion is, their bravery evaporated. They wouldn't fan out and beat so as to give me a chance of a shot when the lion broke cover. Instead, they insisted on walking behind me in single file because I had the gun, and we've been walking in single file ever since we left camp!"

I was reminded of this episode – by no means typical of African behaviour, I hasten to say – as we now travelled towards the frontier.

We had left Mount Kenya, with its barbed-wire barricades, its road-block, and its African Home Guard, far behind us. Armand and Des Bartlett were travelling in the Queen Mary, our three and a half tonner, while Malawa, our boy, and I followed in the Power Wagon. Presently we arrived at Isiolo, gateway to the Northern Frontier District, beyond which one

cannot pass without permission, for the passage of irresponsible people who might get lost or cause trouble is discouraged.

At Isiolo, we stopped to call on the Provincial Commissioner, Noel Kennaway. I have always been immensely impressed by the outstanding qualities of Provincial Commissioners in Africa. They seem invariably to be remarkable men, and I imagine they are selected for the qualities which include, not only a thorough knowledge of indigenous language and customs, but also humanity, humour, sensitivity, and the ability to cope with any situation.

Such a man, we found, was Noel Kennaway, who greeted us at the door of his bungalow and invited us to tea. His home was cool and spacious, with pale green polished floors overlaid with good Persian carpets, tastefully furnished and charmingly decorated. It was a gracious home, and although Mrs. Kennaway was on holiday in Europe I felt instinctively that I would have liked her on sight, for the stamp of her personality was to be seen wherever one looked. Noel himself had very blue eyes, dark hair, and a beautiful voice. We all took an instant liking to each other.

It was after we had been chatting gaily for a while at the tea-table that I heard a peculiar squeaking noise from the region of Noel's stomach.

"Poor man," I thought. "He must be suffering from indigestion."

Armand, who had obviously heard the noise, too, did his nonchalant best to ignore it. We continued talking and laughing – but still the squeaks continued. Then, suddenly, a small head popped out of Noel's shirt.

I started laughing – for it was the face of an extremely familiar animal.

Noel glanced downwards. "Ah," he said, "the Kennaways pet mongoose!"

Presently Noel's son, Tony, a boy of thirteen, joined us with two of his friends, Robin and Christopher Tyler, who were fifteen and twelve respectively. The mongoose scuttled delightedly towards Tony and tried – extraordinary though it may sound – to climb into his mouth. This, apparently, was a favourite game of which he never tired.

The three boys, Noel told us, were the greatest of friends, and it seemed from their manner as though they had not a care in the world. But those were trying times for parents, for terrorists had been active in the country and some white children had already been murdered.

"I have a trusted old Somali who keeps an eye on the boys," said Noel. "He would give his life for them – and he is always armed."

When later I talked to the boys themselves I realized that they were fully aware of the danger around them, but they possessed the true courage and adaptability of youth and the threat of terrorists did not seem to worry them at all.

After tea we went to the guest house, a mud and wattle building thatched with large leaves, which was some distance away from Noel's bungalow. Around us, as far as we could see, there stretched the dusty golden landscape. It was a blustery afternoon, and every now and then we saw a dust-devil whipped up by the wind, rising like a spinning top as it whirled upwards into space.

We settled ourselves in the guest house, and later visited the shopping district at the far end of Isiolo, patronizing the first *duka*, or store, which was owned by Hadji Abdulla Farah. To all outward appearances,

the *duka* was like many others, stocked with all sorts of general merchandize. Boxes of chocolates jostled with oil-lamps: rolls of vividly coloured cottons, of which the Somali women are especially fond, were stacked alongside piles of canned foods and sacks of coffee and rice; cardigans and reels of cotton stood next to trays of medicines, lipsticks, hair oil, and notebooks. Everything likely to be needed for a journey or for day-to-day living was available, and in addition there were enticing strings of beads which the Turkhana would use for embroidery on their costumes. As we entered, two Turkhana girls were haggling over the price of some ultramarine beads, and a fine-looking old man with the light skin of the Somali and a long henna-dyed beard to indicate that he was one of the Faithful who had been to Mecca, gazed at us with idle curiosity.

Hadji Abdulla Farah, the owner of the *duka*, came forward to greet us. He was a tall man – as tall as, if not taller than, Armand, who is very tall – and he carried himself with dignity and modest self-assurance. His English was flawless.

We ordered generous supplies for our journey, for we knew that our route would lead us through semi-desert where people have barely enough food for themselves. On such journeys as we were about to undertake we never attempted to buy provisions from the locals, for we knew that they might be tempted to go short of food which they would exchange for cash or goods.

The purchases completed, I ventured to compliment Hadji Abdulla on his command of English.

"Were you at school in England?" I asked.

He smiled slowly. "English is no problem for me," he explained. "My father was Irish. Perhaps you knew my brother who died recently?"

He mentioned his brother's name, and I had indeed known him. I now realized who Hadji Abdulla was. His father, a titled man, had married a very beautiful Somali girl, who gave birth to the Hadji; but after a few years he had divorced her and married again, this time a European, by whom he had another son. After his death, Hadji Abdulla had never claimed his birth-right, and his younger half-brother had inherited the title.

I said that I considered Hadji Abdulla's action in waiving his rights to the title both noble and generous.

He shrugged and again smiled his slow, gentle smile. "The title meant nothing to me," he said, "but to my brother it meant a great deal. I am quite happy living with the people of my mother."

I then asked the Hadji if he could do us a favour. We had been unable to take Mucharia, our old cook, with us. We had not been able to trace him, but before setting out I had met a former servant of ours (who had set himself up in his own business since leaving our service and had become a man of considerable wealth), and learnt from him the sad news that Mucharia was being held prisoner as a Mau Mau in McKinnon Road Camp. It grieved me to think of our former cook as a Mau Mau, but many strange things happened during those days.

Newly arrived troops who did not speak Swahili had made a number of understandable mistakes, and any typical Kikuyu was in danger of being picked up. Mucharia, because of his filed teeth, had been unmistakably Kikuyu and I thought he might easily have been arrested by mistake: but what made the thing more sinister was the fact that his entire family had also been imprisoned in McKinnon Road Camp between Nairobi and Mombasa. It was difficult to imagine that an entire

family innocent of terrorist activities could have been imprisoned. But then, I had been thinking along the same lines as practically every other European in the country – it was inconceivable that your own servants whom you regarded as part of your family, had been treacherously inveigled into taking oaths to maim you, steal your possessions, or even kill you.

We knew that had happened, though, of course, there had been many exceptions. Our brave Malawa, I knew, had defied the Mau Mau, and I had insisted on continuing to employ him although it meant filling in innumerable forms and whenever we entered a town, constant vigilance to see that he was not picked up by the police or military because he was a Meru – the Meru, Embu, and Kikuyu tribes being the chief Mau Mau supporters.

So I asked Hadji Abdulla if he could find a cook for us and perhaps a house servant. He thought for a moment. "I know of a very pleasant young man who is anxious to go on safari, but I don't know if he can cook," he said. "All I can say is that he's a very willing worker. Perhaps you would like to try him?"

I thought it would be a good idea, whether the man could cook or not, for I enjoy cooking and have taught many men. I consider cooking to be one of the arts and, like most arts, it is better when one's pupil has no preconceived ideas.

About two hours later a tall, slim, and handsome young Somali, named Mohammed, was introduced to me. He wore a turban, a spotless white shirt, and an elegantly draped *kikoye*, a long piece of cloth bound round the waist, which fell to his ankles. We spoke in Swahili which I had learned at the rate of five new words a day until I had a good vocabulary – when I first went to Africa. He admitted at once that he knew

nothing about cooking, but I said I would teach him.

That evening Mohammed came back to the guest house with us; and later, in the kitchen, which was contained in a separate building, I gave him his first cooking lesson. The kitchen was small, with a stove of ancient design in one corner, and was lighted only by a single oil-lamp and the red glow of the fire. Malawa helped me to prepare and cook the meal, while Mohammed, I hoped, was taking in all that he saw us do.

When we had put on several pots to simmer and there was nothing more to be done but to wait, I thought I would ask Malawa about his experiences at the hands of the Mau Mau. I was not at all sure that he would be prepared to talk on this subject, especially since Mohammed was new to us; but I was glad that he agreed without hesitation, and in the red glow of the firelight the menace of Mau Mau became suddenly and frighteningly real. Malawa told his story simply in a beautiful, modulated voice, and the whole terrible picture was brought vividly to our eyes. Mohammed, who was casually peeling potatoes, would stop whenever the story became very dramatic, and gape with knife poised in mid-air and his horror-filled eyes unblinking and incredulous.

"It was late one night," said Malawa. "There were just four of us in our hut when there came a knock on the door. I opened it and saw a man, whom I knew, standing there with some other men behind him. They pushed past me and closed the door behind them – as though to shut out other eyes. My wife picked our child from the floor, and my mother moved out of a dim corner of the hut so as to be nearer the fire.

" 'You are one of us,' said a man whom I did not know. 'You are Meru.' He was a Kikuyu, and when he

spoke even the man I knew kept silent. 'Tonight you will take the first oath,' he said.

"I did not ask him which first oath. I knew only too well that these men were Mau Mau and that they had forced their way into my home. I thought of the massacres for which they had been responsible, and even as I saw my own small child huddling to its mother's breast I could not help thinking of those other children who had lain beneath the dead bodies of their parents. An overpowering shame came over me.

"No," I said, 'I will never join you. If you go away now, quietly, I will not betray you. But I cannot become one of you. I am a man of peace.'

"As I spoke, their faces were filled with hatred. One of them seized my old mother. While three others held me back, he grabbed her old thin arm and dragged her towards the door. Then they extinguished the light so that only the embers of the fire lit up the scene. The door was thrown open. I heard a ghastly thud – the sound of steel tearing through old flesh and hacking through brittle bone – followed by one agonized, piercing scream. Then again there came the terrible chopping sound, a whimper that became a low moan. Then nothing but the sound of chopping. I cried out with horror in a voice that was not my own.

"The murderer came in, and the dark red glint of blood on his glistening skin was caught in the ember glow. One of the men seized my child from his mother, leaving a deep crimson smudge across the white blanket covering him. I managed to struggle out of the grasp of the men who were holding me and seized the child in my arms.

"Do what you like to me," I cried. 'Cut off my arms and legs!'

"One of the men snatched a glowing timber from

the fire and jabbed it against my leg. But I was so wild with horror and sorrow that I was unaware of pain until I smelt the singed flesh. It was then that they demanded for a second time that I should take the oath. I nodded my head. I scarcely knew what I was saying or doing. My lips made their responses and my body went through the unspeakable things that were demanded of it. Like a brainless corpse, I had taken the first oath. The door closed, and I suddenly found myself alone again with my wife and child.

"At daybreak I went out of the hut. My mother's body had been dragged away, and a pile of newly turned earth showed where she lay. My soul was filled with hatred. My mother, who had given me milk, had sacrificed her life for my child, my wife, and myself. She who had been so patient, who had toiled all her days, whose forehead had borne the mark of the strap which had supported a million burdens on her back, had ended her life at the hands of these butchers. I loathed them, these men of madness, more even than I feared the death and torture of myself and my loved ones."

Malawa paused, his forehead glistening with sweat at the memory of that terrible night. "I forgot to mention," he said at length, "that they had cut down all my corn and maize and had ripped our clothes to ribbons and stolen all our money."

He told us the worst things first, as though to purge his soul of them.

"The past is past," I told him, touching him very softly on the arm to bring him back to reality. "Your mother is not dead. She lives in you and in your work against the Mau Mau, and her spirit watches us." What I had said I indeed felt to be true, for in the dim light of the kitchen there was no doubt that the spirit

of the old woman was so close as almost to be tangible. Her son continued; "That very morning I went straight to the police. They took me to see the District Commissioner. I told him what had happened – that I had been forced against my will to take the first oath – and that I was prepared to fight this terrible thing in every possible way. After that, whenever the Mau Mau strangers came to hold meetings or visit their friends in our village, I was always accepted as one of them, and my wife and I used to go and listen to what was discussed and decided. And on the following morning the District Commissioner and the police were always informed what had happened. Often, when the police raided our district and made some arrests, no one would be prepared to give evidence against these men, although many people had seen them plot and execute their terrible deeds. But my wife and I used to give evidence – in a secret court."

I was forcibly reminded of the last sentence in my book "Leopard in my Lap"; *Courage is life, fear and be slain*. I did my best to translate these words into Swahili, very badly I am afraid, but Malawa and I were so much *en rapport* with our mutual sense of horror that he seemed to understand exactly what I meant.

Our dinner was very late on the table that evening.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOCUSTS AND GHOSTS

We drove towards the semi-desert which lies in the heart of the Northern Frontier District, passing through a belt of scrub and stunted trees. No European had travelled along the road for two and a half years and as bandits were active in the area, we were provided with an armed guard.

There was beauty shimmering in the sunlight. It was not the opulent beauty of lush vegetation but a pinky gold vastness that stretched as far as the eye could see. There was beauty too in the jagged outlines of extinct volcanoes which jutted like black, irregular teeth on the skyline. Here nature is implacable and God does not help those who do not help themselves. Water is life and the peoples of the region have been skilled at well-building for many centuries.

We stopped to watch men at work drawing water from a well which went down deeply into the bowels of the earth. Standing on narrow ledges cut at regular intervals in the well-shaft, men swung the leather bucket upwards with a precision it was a delight to watch.

The man in charge of the team was old but he was still strong and upright in spite of his grizzled appearance. He stood at the top of the well and led his team in an old rhythmic chant. The words were taken up all the way down the shaft and the sound made by the singers was strangely haunting. Time and time again, without fumbling, the bucket was passed from hand to