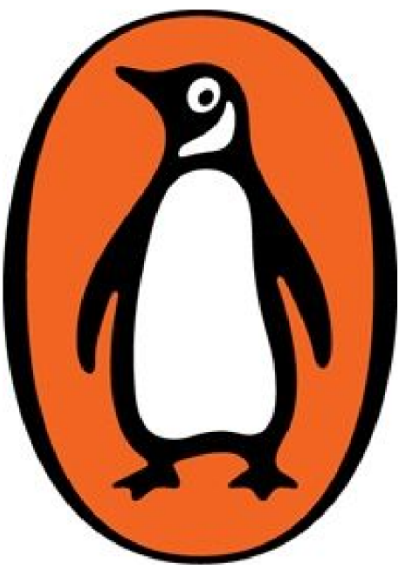

Contents

Farewell

Follow Penguin

PENGUIN BOOKS

OUT OF AFRICA

Isak Dinesen was the pen-name of Karen Blixen, who was born in Rungsted, Denmark, in 1885. After studying art at Copenhagen, Paris and Rome, she married her cousin, Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke, in 1914. Together they went to Kenya to manage a coffee plantation. After their divorce in 1921, she continued to run the plantation until a collapse in the coffee market forced her back to Denmark in 1931.

Although she had written occasional contributions to Danish periodicals since 1905 (under the *nom de plume* of Osceola), her real début took place in 1934 with the publication of *Seven Gothic Tales*, written in English under her pen-name. *Out of Africa* (1937) is an autobiographical account of the years she spent in Kenya. Most of her subsequent books were published in English and Danish simultaneously, including *Winter's Tales* (1942) and *The Angelic Avengers* (1946), under the name of Pierre Andrézel. Among her other collections of stories are *Last Tales* (1957), *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), *Shadows on the Grass* (1960) and *Ehrengard* (1963). A number of these books are published by Penguin.

Baroness Blixen died in Rungsted in 1962.

'Equitare, arcum tendere,
veritatem dicere'

1

KAMANTE AND LULU

'From the forests and highlands
We come, we come.'

The Ngong Farm

I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills. The Equator runs across these highlands, a hundred miles to the north, and the farm lay at an altitude of over six thousand feet. In the day-time you felt that you had got high up, near to the sun, but the early mornings and evenings were limpid and restful, and the nights were cold.

The geographical position and the height of the land combined to create a landscape that had not its like in all the world. There was no fat on it and no luxuriance anywhere; it was Africa distilled up through six thousand feet, like the strong and refined essence of a continent. The colours were dry and burnt, like the colours in pottery. The trees had a light delicate foliage, the structure of which was different from that of the trees in Europe; it did not grow in bows or cupolas, but in horizontal layers, and the formation gave to the tall solitary trees a likeness to the palms, or a heroic and romantic air like full-rigged ships with their sails furled, and to the edge of a wood a strange appearance as if the whole wood were faintly vibrating. Upon the grass of the great plains the crooked bare old thorn-trees were scattered, and the grass was spiced like thyme and bog-myrtles; in some places the scent was so strong that it smarted in the nostrils. All the flowers that you found on the plains, or upon the creepers and liana in the native forest, were diminutive like flowers of the downs – only just in the beginning of the long rains a number of big, massive heavy-

scented lilies sprang out on the plains. The views were immensely wide. Everything that you saw made for greatness and freedom, and unequalled nobility.

The chief feature of the landscape, and of your life in it, was the air. Looking back on a sojourn in the African highlands, you are struck by your feeling of having lived for a time up in the air. The sky was rarely more than pale blue or violet, with a profusion of mighty, weightless, ever-changing clouds towering up and sailing on it, but it has a blue vigour in it, and at a short distance it painted the ranges of hills and the woods a fresh deep blue. In the middle of the day the air was alive over the land, like a flame burning; it scintillated, waved and shone like running water, mirrored and doubled all objects, and created great Fata Morgana. Up in this high air you breathed easily, drawing in a vital assurance and lightness of heart. In the highlands you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be.

The Mountain of Ngong stretches in a long ridge from north to south, and is crowned with four noble peaks like immovable darker blue waves against the sky. It rises eight thousand feet above the sea, and to the east two thousand feet above the surrounding country; but to the west the drop is deeper and more precipitous – the hills fall vertically down towards the Great Rift Valley.

The wind in the highlands blows steadily from the north-north-east. It is the same wind that, down at the coasts of Africa and Arabia, they name the Monsoon, the East Wind, which was King Solomon's favourite horse. Up here it is felt as just the resistance of the air, as the earth throws herself forward into space. The wind runs straight against the Ngong Hills, and the slopes of the hills would be the ideal place for setting up a glider, that would be lifted

upwards by the currents, over the mountain top. The clouds, which were travelling with the wind, struck the side of the hill and hung round it, or were caught on the summit and broke into rain. But those that took a higher course and sailed clear of the reef, dissolved to the west of it, over the burning desert of the Rift Valley. Many times I have from my house followed these mighty processions advancing, and have wondered to see their proud floating masses, as soon as they had got over the hills, vanish in the blue air and be gone.

The hills from the farm changed their character many times in the course of the day, and sometimes looked quite close, and at other times very far away. In the evening, when it was getting dark, it would first look, as you gazed at them, as if in the sky a thin silver line was drawn all along the silhouette of the dark mountain; then, as night fell, the four peaks seemed to be flattened and smoothened out, as if the mountain was stretching and spreading itself.

From the Ngong Hills you have a unique view, you see to the south the vast plains of the great game-country that stretches all the way to Kilimanjaro; to the east and north the park-like country of the foot-hills with the forest behind them, and the undulating land of the Kikuyu Reserve, which extends to Mount Kenya a hundred miles away – a mosaic of little square maize-fields, banana-groves and grassland, with here and there the blue smoke from a native village, a small cluster of peaked mole-casts. But towards the west, deep down, lies the dry, moon-like landscape of the African low country. The brown desert is irregularly dotted with the little marks of the thornbushes, the winding river-beds are drawn up with crooked dark-green trails; those are the woods of the mighty, wide-branching mimosa trees, with thorns like

spikes; the cactus grows here, and here is the home of the giraffe and the rhino.

The hill-country itself, when you get into it, is tremendously big, picturesque and mysterious; varied with long valleys, thickets, green slopes, and rocky crags. High up, under one of the peaks, there is even a bamboo-grove. There are springs and wells in the hills; I have camped up here by them.

In my day, the buffalo, the eland and the rhino lived in the Ngong Hills; the very old Natives remembered a time when there were elephants there, and I was sorry that the whole Ngong Mountain was not enclosed in the Game Reserve. Only a small part of it was Game Reserve, and the beacon on the southern peak marked the boundary of it. When the colony prospers and Nairobi, the capital, grows into a big city, the Ngong Hills might have made a matchless game park for it. But during my last years in Africa many young Nairobi shop-people ran out into the hills on Sundays, on their motor-cycles, and shot at anything they saw, and I believe that the big game will have wandered away from the hills, through the thorn-thickets and the stony ground farther south.

Up on the very ridge of the hills and on the four peaks themselves it was easy to walk; the grass was short as on a lawn, with the grey stone in places breaking through the sward. Along the ridge, up and down the peaks, like a gentle switchback, there ran a narrow game-path. One morning, at the time that I was camped in the hills, I came up here and walked along the path, and I found on it fresh tracks and dung of a herd of eland. The big peaceful animals must have been up on the ridge at sunrise, walking in a long row, and you cannot imagine that they had come for any other reason than just to look, deep down on both sides, at the land below.

We grew coffee on my farm. The land was in itself a little too high for coffee, and it was hard work to keep it going; we were never rich on the farm. But a coffee-plantation is a thing that gets hold of you and does not let you go, and there is always something to do on it: you are generally just a little behind with your work.

In the wildness and irregularity of the country, a piece of land laid out and planted according to rule looked very well. Later on, when I flew in Africa, and became familiar with the appearance of my farm from the air, I was filled with admiration for my coffee-plantation, that lay quite bright green in the grey-green land, and I realized how keenly the human mind yearns for geometrical figures. All the country round Nairobi, particularly to the north of the town, is laid out in a similar way, and here live a people who are constantly thinking and talking of planting, pruning, or picking coffee, and who lie at night and meditate upon improvements to their coffee-factories.

Coffee-growing is a long job. It does not all come out as you imagine, when, yourself young and hopeful, in the streaming rain, you carry the boxes of your shining young coffee-plants from the nurseries, and, with the whole number of farm-hands in the field, watch the plants set in the regular rows of holes in the wet ground where they are to grow, and then have them thickly shaded against the sun, with branches broken from the bush, since obscurity is the privilege of young things. It is four or five years till the trees come into bearing, and in the meantime you will get drought on the land, or diseases, and the bold native weeds will grow up thick in the fields – the black-jack, which has long scabrous seed-vessels that hang on to your clothes and stockings. Some of the trees have been badly planted with their tap-roots bent; they will die just as they begin to flower. You plant a little over six hundred trees to the acre, and I had six hundred acres of

land with coffee; my oxen dragged the cultivators up and down the fields, between the rows of trees, many thousand miles, patiently, awaiting coming bounties.

There are times of great beauty on a coffee-farm. When the plantation flowered in the beginning of the rains, it was a radiant sight, like a cloud of chalk, in the mist and the drizzling rain, over six hundred acres of land. The coffee-blossom has a delicate slightly bitter scent, like the blackthorn blossom. When the field reddened with the ripe berries, all the women and the children, whom they call the Totos, were called out to pick the coffee off the trees, together with the men; then the wagons and carts brought it down to the factory near the river. Our machinery was never quite what it should have been, but we had planned and built the factory ourselves and thought highly of it. Once the whole factory burned down and had to be built up again. The big coffee-dryer turned and turned, rumbling the coffee in its iron belly with a sound like pebbles that are washed about on the sea-shore. Sometimes the coffee would be dry, and ready to take out of the dryer, in the middle of the night. That was a picturesque moment, with many hurricane lamps in the huge dark room of the factory, that was hung everywhere with cobwebs and coffee-husks, and with eager glowing dark faces, in the light of the lamps, round the dryer; the factory, you felt, hung in the great African night like a bright jewel in an Ethiop's ear. Later on the coffee was hulled, graded, and sorted by hand, and packed in sacks sewn up with a saddler's needle.

Then, in the end, in the early morning, while it was still dark and I was lying in bed, I heard the wagons, loaded high up with coffee-sacks, twelve to a ton, with sixteen oxen to each wagon, starting on their way into Nairobi railway station up the long factory hill, with much shouting and rattling, the drivers running

beside the wagons. I was pleased to think that this was the only hill up, on their way, for the farm was a thousand feet higher than the town of Nairobi. In the evening I walked out to meet the procession that came back, the tired oxen hanging their heads in front of the empty wagons, with a tired little Toto leading them, and the weary drivers trailing their whips in the dust of the road. Now we had done what we could do. The coffee would be on the sea in a day or two, and we could only hope for good luck at the big auction-sales in London.

I had six thousand acres of land, and had thus got much spare land besides the coffee-plantation. Part of the farm was native forest, and about one thousand acres were squatters' land, what they called their *shambas*. The squatters are Natives, who with their families hold a few acres on a white man's farm, and in return have to work for him a certain number of days in the year. My squatters, I think, saw the relationship in a different light, for many of them were born on the farm, and their fathers before them, and they very likely regarded me as a sort of superior squatter on their estates. The squatters' land was more intensely alive than the rest of the farm, and was changing with the seasons the year round. The maize grew up higher than your head as you walked on the narrow hard-trampled footpaths in between the tall green rustling regiments, and then again it was harvested. The beans ripened in the fields, were gathered and thrashed by the women, and the stalks and pods were collected and burned, so that in certain seasons thin columns of smoke rose here and there all over the farm. The Kikuyu also grew the sweet potatoes, that have a vine-like leaf and spread over the ground like a dense entangled mat, and many varieties of big yellow and green speckled pumpkins.

Whenever you walk amidst the Kikuyu shambas, the first thing that will catch your eye is the hind part of a little old woman raking in her soil, like a picture of an ostrich which buries her head in the sand. Each Kikuyu family had a number of small round peaked huts and store-huts; the space between the huts was a lively place, the earth hard as concrete; here the maize was ground and the goats milked, and children and chickens were running. I used to shoot spurfowl in the sweet-potato fields round the squatters' houses in the blue late afternoons, and the stock-pigeons cooed out a loud song in the high-stemmed, fringy trees, which were left over, here and there in the shambas, from the forest that had once covered all the farm.

I had moreover a couple of thousand acres of grassland on the farm. Here the long grass ran and fled like sea-waves before the strong wind, and the little Kikuyu herdboys herded their fathers' cows. In the cold season they carried live coals in small wicker baskets with them from the huts, and sometimes caused big grass-fires, which were disastrous to the grazing on the farm. In the years of drought the zebra and the eland came down to the farm's grass-plains.

Nairobi was our town, twelve miles away, down on a flat bit of land amongst hills. Here was the Government House and the big central offices; from here the country was ruled.

It is impossible that a town will not play a part in your life; it does not even make much difference whether you have more good or bad things to say of it, it draws your mind to it, by a mental law of gravitation. The luminous haze on the sky above the town at night, which I could see from some places on my farm, set my thoughts going, and recalled the big cities of Europe.

When I first came to Africa, there were no cars in the country, and we rode in to Nairobi, or drove in a cart with six mules to it, and stabled our animals in the stables of *The Highland Transport*. During all my time, Nairobi was a medley place, with some fine new stone buildings, and whole quarters of old corrugated iron shops, offices, and bungalows, laid out with long rows of eucalyptus trees along the bare dusty streets. The offices of the High Court, The Native Affairs Department, and the Veterinary Department were lousily housed, and I had a great respect for those government officials who could get any work at all done in the little burning hot, inky rooms in which they were set.

All the same Nairobi was a town; here you could buy things, hear news, lunch or dine at the hotels and dance at the Club. And it was a live place, in movement like running water, and in growth like a young thing, it changed from year to year, and while you were away on a shooting safari. The new Government House was built, a stately cool house with a fine ballroom and a pretty garden, big hotels grew up, great impressive agricultural shows and fine flower shows were held, our Quasi Smart Set of the Colony from time to time enlivened the town with rows of quick melodrama. Nairobi said to you: 'Make the most of me and of time. Wir kommen nie wieder so *jung* – so undisciplined and rapacious – *zusammen*,' Generally I and Nairobi were in very good understanding, and at one time I drove through the town and thought: There is no world without Nairobi's streets.

The quarters of the Natives and of the coloured immigrants were very extensive compared to the European town.

The Swaheli town, on the road to the Muthaiga Club, had not a good name in any way, but was a lively, dirty and gaudy place, with, at any hour, a number of things going on in it. It was built mostly out of old paraffin tins hammered flat, in various states of

rust, like the coral rock, the fossilized structure, from which the spirit of the advancing civilization was steadily fleeing.

The Somali town was farther away from Nairobi, on account, I think, of the Somalis' system of seclusion of their women. There were in my day a few beautiful young Somali women, of whom all the town knew the names, who went and lived in the Bazaar and led the Nairobi police a great dance; they were intelligent and bewitching people. But the honest Somali women were not seen in the town. The Somali town lay exposed to all winds and was shadeless and dusty, it must have recalled to the Somali their native deserts. Europeans, who live for a long time, even for several generations, in the same place, cannot reconcile themselves to the complete indifference to the surroundings of their homes, of the nomadic races. The Somalis' houses were irregularly strewn on the bare ground, and looked as if they had been nailed together with a bushel of four-inch nails, to last for a week. It was a surprising thing, when you entered one of them, to find it inside so neat and fresh, scented with Arab incenses, with fine carpets and hangings, vessels of brass and silver, and swords with ivory hilts and noble blades. The Somali women themselves had dignified, gentle ways, and were hospitable and gay, with a laughter like silver bells. I was much at home in the Somali village through my Somali servant Farah Aden, who was with me all the time that I was in Africa, and I went to many of their feasts. A big Somali wedding is a magnificent, traditional festivity. As a guest of honour I was taken into the bridal chamber, where the walls and the bridal bed were hung with old, gently glowing weavings and embroideries, and the dark-eyed young bride herself was stiff, like a marshal's baton, with heavy silks, gold, and amber.

The Somali were cattle-dealers and traders all over the country. For the transport of their goods they kept a number of little grey

donkeys in the village, and I have seen camels there as well: haughty, hardened products of the desert, beyond all earthly sufferings, like cactus, and like the Somali.

The Somali bring much trouble upon themselves by their terrible tribal quarrels. In this matter they feel and reason differently from other people. Farah belonged to the tribe of Habr Yunis, so that personally in a quarrel I sided with them. At one time there was a great real fight in the Somali town, between the two tribes of Dulba Hantis and Habr Chaolo, with rifle-shooting and fires, and ten or twelve people killed, until the Government interfered. Farah then had a young friend of his own tribe, by name of Sayid, who used to come out to see him at the farm, and who was a graceful boy, so that I was sorry when I was told by my houseboys that Sayid had gone round to visit a Habr Chaolo family in their house, when an angry member of the Dulba Hantis tribe had passed and fired two shots at haphazard through the wall of the house and broken Sayid's leg. I condoled with Farah on his friend's misfortune – 'What? Sayid?' Farah cried out with vehemence. 'That was good enough for Sayid. Why must he go and drink tea in the house of a Habr Chaolo?'

The Indians of Nairobi dominated the big native business quarter of the Bazaar, and the great Indian merchants had their little Villas just outside the town: Jevanjee, Suleiman Virjee, Allidina Visram. They all had a taste for stonework stairs, balusters, and vases, rather badly cut out of the soft stone of the country – like the structures which children build of pink ornamental bricks. They gave tea-parties in their gardens, with Indian pastry in the style of the Villas, and were clever, travelled, highly polite people. But the Indians in Africa are such grasping tradesmen that with them you would never know if you were face to face with a human individual or with the head of a firm. I had

been to Suleiman Virjee's house, and when one day I saw the flag at half mast above his big compound of warehouse, I asked Farah: 'Is Suleiman Virjee dead?' 'Half dead,' said Farah. 'Do they put the flag at half mast when he is half dead?' I asked. 'Suleiman is dead,' said Farah. 'Virjee is alive.'

Before I took over the management of the farm, I had been keen on shooting and had been out on many safaris. But when I became a farmer I put away my rifles.

The Masai, the nomadic, cattle-owning nation, were neighbours of the farm and lived on the other side of the river; from time to time some of them would come to my house to complain about a lion that was taking their cows, and to ask me to go out and shoot it for them, and I did so if I could. Sometimes, on Saturday, I also walked out on the Orungi plains to shoot a zebra or two as meat for my farm labourers, with a long tail of optimistic young Kikuyu after me. I shot birds on the farm, spurfowl and guineafowl, that are very good to eat. But for many years I was not out on any shooting expedition.

Still, we often talked on the farm of the safaris that we had been on. Camping places fix themselves in your mind as if you had spent long periods of your life in them. You will remember a curve of your wagon track in the grass of the plain, like the features of a friend.

Out on the safaris, I had seen a herd of buffalo, one hundred and twenty-nine of them, come out of the morning mist under a copper sky, one by one, as if the dark and massive, iron-like animals with the mighty horizontally swung horns were not approaching, but were being created before my eyes and sent out as they were finished. I had seen a herd of elephant travelling through the dense native forest, where the sunlight is strewn

down between the thick creepers in small spots and patches, pacing along as if they had an appointment at the end of the world. It was, in giant size, the border of a very old, infinitely precious Persian carpet, in the dyes of green, yellow, and black-brown. I had time after time watched the progression across the plain of the giraffe, in their queer, inimitable, vegetative gracefulness, as if it were not a herd of animals but a family of rare, long-stemmed, speckled gigantic flowers slowly advancing. I had followed two rhinos on their morning promenade, when they were sniffing and snorting in the air of the dawn – which is so cold that it hurts in the nose – and looked like two very big angular stones rollicking in the long valley and enjoying life together. I had seen the royal lion, before sunrise, below a waning moon, crossing the grey plain on his way home from the kill, drawing a dark wake in the silvery grass, his face still red up to the ears, or during the midday siesta, when he reposed contentedly in the midst of his family on the short grass and in the delicate, spring-like shade of the broad acacia trees of his park of Africa.

All these things were pleasant to think of when times were dull on the farm. And the big game was out there still, in their own country; I could go and look them up once more if I liked. Their nearness gave a shine and play to the atmosphere of the farm. Farah – although with time he came to take a vivid interest in farm affairs – and my old native safari-servants, lived in hope of other safaris.

Out in the wilds I had learned to beware of abrupt movements. The creatures with which you are dealing there are shy and watchful, they have a talent for evading you when you least expect it. No domestic animal can be as still as a wild animal. The civilized people have lost the aptitude of stillness, and must take lessons in silence from the wild before they are accepted by it. The art of

moving gently, without suddenness, is the first to be studied by the hunter, and more so by the hunter with the camera. Hunters cannot have their own way, they must fall in with the wind, and the colours and smells of the landscape, and they must make the tempo of the ensemble their own. Sometimes it repeats a movement over and over again, and they must follow up with it.

When you have caught the rhythm of Africa, you find that it is the same in all her music. What I learned from the game of the country was useful to me in my dealings with the native people.

The love of woman and womanliness is a masculine characteristic, and the love of man and manliness a feminine characteristic, and there is a susceptibility to the southern countries and races that is a Nordic quality. The Normans must have fallen in love with the foreign countries, first with France and then with England. Those old milords who figure in the history and fiction of the eighteenth century, as constantly travelling in Italy, Greece, and Spain, had not a single southern trait in their nature, but were drawn and held by the fascination of things wholly different from themselves. The old German and Scandinavian painters, philosophers, and poets, when they first came to Florence and Rome, went down on their knees to adore the South.

A queer illogical patience towards an alien world came out in these impatient people. As it is almost impossible for a woman to irritate a real man, and as to the women, a man is never quite contemptible, never altogether rejectable, as long as he remains a man, so were the hasty red-haired northern people infinitely long-suffering with the tropical countries and races. They would stand no nonsense from their own country or their own relations, but they took the drought of the African highlands, and a case of sun-stroke, the rinderpest on their cattle, and the incompetency of

their native servants, with humility and resignation. Their sense of individuality itself was lost in the sense of the possibilities that lie in interaction between those who can be made one by reason of their incongruity. The people of southern Europe and the people of mixed blood have not got this quality; they blame it, or scorn it. So the men's men scorn the sighing lover, and the rational women who have no patience with their men, are in the same way indignant with Griselda.

As for me, from my first weeks in Africa, I had felt a great affection for the Natives. It was a strong feeling that embraced all ages and both sexes. The discovery of the dark races was to me a magnificent enlargement of all my world. If a person with an inborn sympathy for animals had grown up in a milieu where there were no animals, and had come into contact with animals late in life; or if a person with an instinctive taste for woods and forest had entered a forest for the first time at the age of twenty; or if someone with an ear for music had happened to hear music for the first time when he was already grown up; their cases might have been similar to mine. After I had met with the Natives, I set out the routine of my daily life to the orchestra.

My father was an officer in the Danish and French army, and as a very young lieutenant at Düppel he wrote home: 'Back in Düppel I was officer to a long column. It was hard work, but it was splendid. The love of war is a passion like another, you love soldiers as you love young womenfolk – to madness, and the one love does not exclude the other, as the girls know. But the love of women can include only one at a time, and the love for your soldiers comprehends the whole regiment, which you would like enlarged if it were possible.' It was the same thing with the Natives and me.

It was not easy to get to know the Natives. They were quick of hearing, and evanescent; if you frightened them they could withdraw into a world of their own, in a second, like the wild animals which at an abrupt movement from you are gone – simply are not there. Until you knew a Native well, it was almost impossible to get a straight answer from him. To a direct question as to how many cows he had, he had an eluding reply – 'As many as I told you yesterday.' It goes against the feelings of Europeans to be answered in such a manner, it very likely goes against the feelings of the Natives to be questioned in this way. If we pressed or pursued them, to get an explanation of their behaviour out of them, they receded as long as they possibly could, and then they used a grotesque humorous fantasy to lead us on the wrong track. Even small children in this situation had all the quality of old poker-players, who do not mind if you overvalue or undervalue their hand, so long as you do not know its real nature. When we really did break into the Natives' existence, they behaved like ants, when you poke a stick into their ant-hill; they wiped out the damage with unwearied energy, swiftly and silently–as if obliterating an unseemly action.

We could not know, and could not imagine, what the dangers were that they feared from our hands. I myself think that they were afraid of us more in the manner in which you are afraid of a sudden terrific noise, than as you are afraid of suffering and death. And yet it was difficult to tell, for the Natives were great at the art of mimicry. In the shambas you would sometimes in the early morning come upon a spurfowl which would run in front of your horse as if her wing was broken, and she was terrified of being caught by the dogs. But her wing was not broken, and she was not afraid of the dogs – she could whir up before them the moment she chose – only she had got her brood of young chickens somewhere

near by, and she was drawing our attention away from them. Like the spurfowl, the Natives might be mimicking a fear of us because of some other deeper dread the nature of which we could not guess. Or in the end their behaviour to us might be some sort of strange joke, and the shy people were not afraid of us at all. The Natives have, far less than the white people, the sense of risks in life. Sometimes on a safari, or on the farm, in a moment of extreme tension, I have met the eyes of my Native companions, and have felt that we were at a great distance from one another, and that they were wondering at my apprehension of our risk. It made me reflect that perhaps they were, in life itself, within their own element, such as we can never be, like fishes in deep water which for the life of them cannot understand our fear of drowning. This assurance, this art of swimming, they had, I thought, because they had preserved a knowledge that was lost to us by our first parents; Africa, amongst the continents, will teach it to you: that God and the Devil are one, the majesty coeternal, not two uncreated but one uncreated, and the Natives neither confounded the persons nor divided the substance.

On our safaris, and on the farm, my acquaintance with the Natives developed into a settled and personal relationship. We were good friends. I reconciled myself to the fact that while I should never quite know or understand them, they knew me through and through, and were conscious of the decisions that I was going to take, before I was certain about them myself. For some time I had a small farm up at Gil-Gil, where I lived in a tent, and I travelled by the railway to and fro between Gil-Gil and Ngong. At Gil-Gil, I might make up my mind very suddenly, when it began to rain, to go back to my house. But when I came to Kikuyu, which was our station on the railway line, and from where it was ten miles to the farm, one of my people would be there with a mule

for me to ride home on. When I asked them how they had known that I was coming down, they looked away, and seemed uneasy, as if frightened or bored, such as we should be if a deaf person insisted on getting an explanation of a symphony from us.

When the Natives felt safe with us from abrupt movements and sudden noises, they would speak to us a great deal more openly than one European speaks to another. They were never reliable, but in a grand manner sincere. A good name – what is called prestige – meant much in the Native world. They seemed to have made up, at some time, a joint appraisement of you, against which no one would afterwards ever go.

At times, life on the farm was very lonely, and in the stillness of the evenings when the minutes dripped from the clock, life seemed to be dripping out of you with them, just for want of white people to talk to. But all the time I felt the silent overshadowed existence of the Natives running parallel with my own, on a different plane. Echoes went from the one to the other.

The Natives were Africa in flesh and blood. The tall extinct volcano of Longonot that rises above the Rift Valley, the broad mimosa trees along the rivers, the elephant and the giraffe, were not more truly Africa than the Natives were – small figures in an immense scenery. All were different expressions of one idea, variations upon the same theme. It was not a congenial upheaping of heterogeneous atoms, but a heterogeneous upheaping of congenial atoms, as in the case of the oak leaf and the acorn and the object made from oak. We ourselves, in boots, and in our constant great hurry, often jar with the landscape. The Natives are in accordance with it, and when the tall, slim, dark, and dark-eyed people travel – always one by one, so that even the great Native veins of traffic are narrow footpaths – or work the soil, or herd their cattle, or hold their big dances, or tell you a tale, it is Africa

wandering, dancing, and entertaining you. In the highlands you remember the poet's words:

> Noble found I
> ever the Native,
> and insipid the Immigrant.

The colony is changing and has already changed since I lived there. When I write down as accurately as possible my experiences on the farm, with the country and with some of the inhabitants of the plains and woods, it may have a sort of historical interest.

know the Natives, this quality in them was one of the things that I liked best. They had real courage: the unadulterated liking of danger – the true answer of creation to the announcement of their lot – the echo from the earth when heaven had spoken. I sometimes thought that what, at the bottom of their hearts, they feared from us was pedantry. In the hands of a pedant they die of grief.

My patients waited on a paved terrace outside my house. Here they squatted – the old skeletons of men with tearing coughs and running eyes, the young slim smooth brawlers with black eyes and bruised mouths, and the mothers with their feverish children, like little dry flowers, hanging upon their necks. I often had bad burns to treat, for the Kikuyu at night sleep round the fires in their huts, and the piles of burning wood or charcoal may collapse and slide down on them – when at times I had run out of my store of medicine, I found that honey was not a bad ointment for burns. The atmosphere of the terrace was animated, electric, like the atmosphere of the casinos in Europe. The low lively flow of talk would stop when I came out, but the silence was pregnant with possibilities, now the moment had come when anything might happen. They did, however, always wait for me myself to choose my first patient.

I knew very little of doctoring, just what you learn at a first-aid course. But my renown as a doctor had been spread by a few chance lucky cures, and had not been decreased by the catastrophic mistakes that I had made.

If now I had been able to guarantee my patients a recovery in each single case, who knows but that their circle might have thinned out? I should then have attained a professional prestige – here evidently was a highly efficient doctor from *Volaia* – but would they still have been sure that the Lord was with me? For of

the Lord they knew from the great years of drought, from the lions on the plains at night, and the leopards near the houses when the children were alone there, and from the swarms of grasshoppers that would come on to the land, nobody knew where from, and leave not a leaf of grass where they had passed. They knew him, too, from the unbelievable hours of happiness when the swarm passed over the maizefield and did not settle, or when in spring the rains would come early and plentiful, and make all the fields and plains flower and give rich crops. So that this highly capable doctor from Volaia might be after all a sort of outsider where the real great things in life were concerned.

Kamante to my surprise turned up at my house the morning after our first meeting. He stood there, a little away from the three or four other sick people present, erect, with his half-dead face, as if after all he had some feeling of attachment to life, and had now made up his mind to try this last chance of holding on to it.

He showed himself with time to be an excellent patient. He came when he was ordered to come, without fault, and he could keep account of time when he was told to come back every third or fourth day, which is an unusual thing with the Natives. He bore the hard treatment of his sores with a stoicism that I have not known the like of. In all these respects I might have held him up as a model to the others, but I did not do so, for at the same time he caused me much uneasiness of mind.

Rarely, rarely, have I met such a wild creature, a human being who was so utterly isolated from the world, and, by a sort of firm, deadly resignation, completely closed to all surrounding life. I could make him answer when I questioned him, but he never volunteered a word and never looked at me. He had no pity whatever in him, and kept a little scornful laughter of contempt,

tower on it; it was laid out on a broad courtyard, above terraces and stairs, in the midst of their coffee-plantation, which was the oldest in the colony and very skilfully run. On the two other sides of the court were the arcaded refectory and the convent buildings, with the school and the mill down by the river, and to get into the drive up to the church you had to ride over an arched bridge. It was all built in grey stone, and as you came riding down upon it, it looked neat and impressive in the landscape, and might have been lying in a southern canton of Switzerland, or in the north of Italy.

The friendly fathers lay in wait for me at the church door, when Mass was over, to invite me to *un petit verre de vin*, across the courtyard in the roomy and cool refectory; there it was wonderful to hear how they knew of everything that was going on in the colony, even to the remotest corners of it. They would also, under the disguise of a sweet and benevolent conversation, draw from you any sort of news that you might possibly have in you, like a small lively group of brown, furry bees – for they all grew long, thick beards – hanging on to a flower for its store of honey. But while they were so interested in the life of the colony, they were all the time in their own French way exiles, patient and cheerful obeisants to some higher orders of a mysterious nature. If it had not been for the unknown authority that kept them in the place, you felt they would not be there, neither would the church of grey stone with the tall bell-tower, nor the arcades, the school, or any other part of their neat plantation and mission station. For when the word of relief had been given, all of these would leave the affairs of the colony to themselves and take a beeline back to Paris.

Farah, who had been holding the two ponies while I had been to church, and to the refectory, on the way back to the farm would notice my cheerful spirits – he was himself a pious Mohammedan

then suddenly his arm went straight up like a pump-spear, but he did not do it more than once.

Kamante came back to my house on the morning of Easter Sunday, and handed me a letter from the hospital people who declared that he was much better and that they thought him cured for good. He must have known something of its contents, for he watched my face attentively while I was reading it, but he did not want to discuss it, he had greater things in his mind. Kamante always carried himself with much collected or restrained dignity, but this time he shone with repressed triumph as well.

All Natives have a strong sense for dramatic effects. Kamante had carefully tied old bandages round his legs all the way up to the knee, to arrange a surprise for me. It was clear that he saw the vital importance of the moment, not in his own good luck, but, unselfishly, in the pleasure that he was to give me. He probably remembered the times when he had seen me all upset by the continual failure of my cures with him, and he knew that the result of the hospital's treatment was an astounding thing. As slowly, slowly, he unwound the bandages from his knee to his heel there appeared, underneath them, a pair of whole smooth legs, only slightly marked by grey scars.

When Kamante had thoroughly, and in his calm grand manner, enjoyed my astonishment and pleasure, he again renewed the impression by stating that he was now a Christian. 'I am like you,' he said. He added that he thought that I might give him a rupee because Christ had risen on this same day.

He went away to call on his own people. His mother was a widow, and lived a long way away on the farm. From what I heard from her later I believe that he did upon this day make a digression from his habit and unloaded his heart to her of the

THE BEGINNING

Let the conversation begin ...

Follow the Penguin Twitter.com@penguinbooks

Keep up-to-date with all our stories YouTube.com/penguinbooks

Pin ‘Penguin Books’ to your Pinterest

Like ‘Penguin Books’ on Facebook.com/penguinbooks

Find out more about the author and
discover more stories like this at Penguin.co.uk

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 1937
Published in Penguin Books 1954

ISBN: 978-0-141-91387-2