

Opening extract from
**Wildlife Murrum and
Bush: A Family
Adventure.**

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Chapter One.

TAKING THE STEAMER.

As the sun rose on the palm fringed Kenya coast we stood at the rail of S.S.Kenya Castle sensing our presence at the brink of a new adventure. We had a wonderful feeling that we had made the right decision. This was the first time in our lives as a young farming family that we had had the time to step back and look at ourselves objectively. We were confident and happy. My wife Jo looked radiantly beautiful in her summer dress and bronzed skin. Caroline age twelve, was a new person, she had become an intelligent socialiser, and the boys, ages ten and seven, had learned to swim and collect coins off the bottom of the ship's pool. After three weeks at sea we had learned to look upon the sun, not so much as a holiday deviation but more as a malignant force to be reckoned with. We had learned to roster our exertions in direct ratio to the elevation of the sun, and take salt tablets. We were now tropicalised.

It all began with that fateful decision to do something more worthwhile than managing a farm for a wealthy Norfolk land owner. Departing from the King George V docks at Tilbury on that cold April afternoon of 1962 in the era before jet passenger flight, and 'goodbyes' were seriously meant. Our relations had come down with us on the GWR steam train, feeling that they might never see us again. For them Africa was still the Dark Continent.

We all gathered round a table on board ship for high tea amidst a hubbub of excitement. The ship's Palm Court style orchestra crept into our consciousness with its balmy tranquillising music. Jo and I checked our cabin for the safe arrival of our suit cases and were quite dismayed to find a farewell display of gorgeous flowers from well-wishers. There was one cheerful and practical gift from our brother in law, jovial George, a black rolled umbrella with a gold band. There was a note

which read "This is to help you cope with primitive tribes." I had told George that we would be passing Mt Kilimanjaro where explorer Krapf, in 1848, had encountered a hostile tribe of "primitive savages bent upon robbing me." He had resolved that problem by suddenly opening his umbrella towards them "with a flourish, frightening them out of their wits".

Armed with this assertive symbol of British dignity and a contract to serve Tanganyika Government as a Land Planning Officer on a £1200 per year salary, I leaned over the ship's rail and resolutely waved my broolly to our relations below, hoping to raise a smile on their grief stricken faces. The ship's siren blasted its final elephantine call, then over the PA system came the order, 'All ashore that are going ashore' and our umbilical chords were cut.

We headed down the Thames estuary, towards the sun. The ship was designed for the comfort of passengers travelling to the Outposts of Empire, when time was not a pressing feature of travel. Jo remarked that it was like 'travelling backwards in time, to the future.' For the two boys it was a new adventure, freed from their daily morning responsibility of feeding hungry bleating calves before school and for young Philip it was looking after Cinders the donkey. Cinders yawned for a carrot every time he emerged from the barn on his three wheeler. In the evenings it was Philip's job to check that the silky new born baby pigs were all safely snug under the infra-red heaters. For our daughter Caroline, it was more like Alice in Wonderland. But they were all explorers now and the ship's crew would soon get to know of it.

This was the 1960's; society's all-change decade and for us the termination of our happy but impoverished lives as family farmers in favour of taking our chances in newly independent Tanganyika.

Jo and I took refuge from the cold on our cabin beds to ruminate awhile. Would the children miss their happy lives on the farm and their animals? It had been a difficult decision, especially for Jo, who felt her responsibility for keeping our family mentally and physically fit in what

she knew would be adverse conditions in Africa. As for myself, I knew that I couldn't go far wrong with my supportive, resourceful and caring wife.

During the next few days we realised that we were different from the other passengers, we were the only complete family, and the only farmers, the rest consisted of newly-weds, singles, missionaries, many colonial civil servants, and military. They were openly sceptical about our status as contractual 'guests' of Tanganyika Government rather than colonial 'ruling elite' and they all freely predicted collapse and chaos in that country. In retrospect, they have been proved wrong. Had they foretold rising poverty they would have been closer to the truth, but there has never been any tribal conflict in what is now Tanzania.

We lapped up the luxury of servants for the three weeks on board ship, and the good fortune of being paid by the British Government to live like aristocracy. The weightiest decisions we had to face were the daily choices of leisure pursuit. We were of a generation that only gained a privilege by toil and sweat. We talked to the missionaries a lot about human motivation in the rural areas of Africa. They invited us to their Kiswahili classes.

On Good Friday we attended the C of E service. 80 people attended. It was perhaps symptomatic of the nature of the passengers that The Plate collected £6.00 as compared to 75p the night before from Bingo.

Our three children were amused by the more stalwart elements of tweed clad Englishmen that daily strode the decks in the face of inclement elements. Caroline said that perhaps sharks that trailed our ship had developed a taste for tweed over the colonial years? The boys did not respond favourably to a nurse running their bath every evening, or to playing the aimless games that had been laid on for their amusement. They instead wormed their way onto the bridge, into the kitchens and the crew's quarters. Caroline told us that the nurse earned £40 per month all found and that there were more crew on the

ship than passengers, that we were travelling at 12 knots, and that there was 15,000 feet of water beneath us.

As it grew warmer all port holes were opened so that the lovely sound of ocean accompanied our resting and our dining, along with the ubiquitous mewling of the ship's orchestra. In evening dress at midnight Jo and I strolled amongst the twinkling lights on deck and rededicated our love for each other after fourteen years of marriage. This was to be our unassailable strength in the face of uncertainty.

Gibraltar rock loomed on the horizon and Caroline found out that there were 34 cars to be off loaded by crane into lighters to be ferried into the harbour. One or two Bentley owners were 'sweating blood' and fivers in desperation as their cars hung suspended over the ocean. We took the tender ashore and headed for a taxi to take us up to the free roaming Barbary Apes. We learnt that Barbary was the ancient name of their North African place of origin, so the apes were our first taste of Africa, and they were ready for us. Exploitation was the name of their game. They had benefited from benevolent British rule and like so many colonial 'subjects', had developed the knack of extracting free food, trinkets, sun glasses, cameras, windscreen wiper blades, ball pens and sympathy from all and sundry white skinned people. Despite a flourish with my rolled umbrella the apes managed to snatch Jo's sun glasses and my Coronet camera.

We were assailed by a loud American from Miami who shot the hackneyed line that we had film star potential, if only he could take a ciné picture of us, a 'so typical British family' etc., 'to show the folks back home.' The children were utterly puzzled. As old wartime Allies I hailed America with my rolled umbrella raised in salute.

Our next port of call, Genoa, was our first contact with the non-British world. We set off enthusiastically to explore what turned out to be a dingy old city of narrow streets, the sky strewn with washing lines and broken shutters, and instead of the town being steeped in maritime history as we had read, it was steeped in garbage. The only excitement

was our taxi which drove round every corner on two wheels. The jabbering driver steered with one hand, his other being fully engaged pressing his hooter as vigorously as the throttle. The noise in the city was horrendous and the coffee 'like tractor sump oil' according to Richard, it certainly would have 'turned a Turks stomach'. The star-struck revolver toting policemen in their pluming topes got so excited over trifles, not to mention numerous high heeled tarts toting for business, that the whole scene was more in the nature of a floor show than a maritime business centre. In desperation we tried their British sounding toasted sandwiches. 'Yuk.' Was the response to the bacon slices between bread soaked in olive oil. We escaped on the funicular for 100 lira each to the mountain top. It was a joy to feel grass under our feet again, only to find that we had to pay again to get down! We later discovered that the correct fare was 40 lira return. Our opinion of Italy further degenerated.

We were famished by the time we returned to the ship for Richard's 10th birthday tea. It was the twenty sixth of April 1962. He was astonished and overjoyed to get a birthday cake from the Captain. There were cards too and many gifts from the folks back home. Richard still has vivid memories of the unexpected kindness shown to him in that strange place.

The second day in port found us heading for a fishing village called Camogli, 16 miles down the rocky coast by autobus - again on two wheels. There were no cottages as per Cornwall but the ubiquitous blocks of flats, painted in insipid fading colours and festooned with washing lines and fishing nets. The school girls uniformly wore a smock with a neck ribbon and often a showy bonnet with a bob and a tassel. We got on very well with the fishermen, and one took us for a row round the bay for an hour. His language added colour and charm to our image of Camogli.

We gladly left Genoa, as did Columbus, never to return. Sailing south that evening with Stromboli coughing sparks on our left, like a

Roman candle, I fell asleep on deck and had a vivid dream about being in charge of a platoon of black corpses who obeyed my orders implicitly. I began screaming in some strange lingo, Jo later declared it to be corrupted half learned Swahili. I recalled panicking when the corpses refused to obey my order to 'lie down' and awoke to find myself surrounded by alarmed passengers who said that I was rolling about squealing like a rat, 'lie down' 'lie down'. Was this the portent of things to come in Darkest Africa?

It took immense grit to attend Kiswahili lessons in the Med. The sun drew the irresistible me and the delightful Jo to the pool side in as little as possible for as long as possible. Navel rating took on a whole new perspective now that the bikini era had taken hold of the 'girls', and 'the boys'. I felt that I had been missing out engrossed in byres and fields seven days a week. Wow! To hell with deck games. When those white bodies needed a Brylcream massage to protect them from the sun, no trouble getting them to 'lie down'.

Even before we tied up at Port 'Sayid' the ship was surrounded by traders in colourful rowing boats far below us, laden with goods made from camel skins and brass. They screamed up at us in broken English, 'Hey you! Magregor! Catch my line. Best prices here.' In no time the deck was humming with business, and small Arab boys were diving to the sea bed for coins, oblivious of the oil discharge from the ship.

The crew were full of stories about Arabs kidnapping children and passengers being knifed despite there being soldiers everywhere. Egypt was under the wing of Kruschev, President Nasser's friend. The children stayed behind to enjoy the Gulli Gulli Man who was now on board from here to Suez. For gullible passengers, a master of trickery and illusion, inherited they say from his parentage back to 1915 from whence he had learned to keep saluting. Live day old chicks appeared from every part of the children's anatomy amidst great hilarity. He presented the adults with silver looking coins which provoked the opening of purses from which half crowns seem to vanish in disbelief.

Port 'Sayid' turned out to be a traffic free zone though they were contributing to global warming with ankle deep nauseous camel and horse dung. We discussed whether to release the pitifully bleating sheep tied to a tree awaiting its ceremonial Muslim throat cutting, but decided that the soldiery might not appreciate the concept of animal rights. An old man stood near crushing large pupae in a jar for a high protein lunch, another offered us wilted vegetables, and child beggars dressed in tatty pyjamas, with an eye or a hand missing, followed us in droves. One made us a heart rending offer of a rose, for a shilling.

We ventured to enter a Community Hall bedecked with portrait posters of Nasser, and the Soviet Red Flag. Inside was an exhibition of the good life in Russia with the ubiquitous Allah replaced by Kruschev. We joined the hundreds of expectant children seated on wooden benches for the film. They had hoped for Cowboys and Indebums but were soon bored by the Bolshoi Ballet.

We emerged to find ourselves amidst a funeral procession of some 80 turbaned moaning mourners, and decided to beat a hasty retreat to 'British soil'.

During our absence Richard and Philip had shown their farmer's-boy initiative and done deals, *a la* Norwich Market, with the Arabs, swapping bowls of ship's fruit for bone broaches, a pair of leather sandals, a camel skin wallet, and a Sudanese *pouffé*.

'Did you get any good deals in town Dad?' enquired Richard, forestalling any queries as to their honesty. What could I say!

The next day in the Suez Canal was a case of "Mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun". I called for my black umbrella and joined a couple of Arab gentlemen standing in thick cotton robes and head dress. We chatted coolly by the pool whilst European men around us shed their shirts, cotton fibre versus moral fibre, you might say.

We were now living a life that was changing us. Jo, instead of washing eggs each evening was learning to play golf each evening, with

cigarette ends laid on the deck matting. Her tutor was a handsome young Scottish horticulturalist named David. I was relieved to later discover that he was posted to Dar es Salaam, two days drive from Arusha, our posting. Jo challenged him to put a golf ball down the ship's funnel from the afterdeck, thus perpetuating the liaison.

Evening strolls were now accompanied by 'barking' canal frogs, hugely fat on gorged grass hoppers that struck the ship's lights and fell, barbecued in their own fat.

We woke at dawn to find ourselves in a sea of blue ink, backed by blood red hills. Shoals of little silver flying fish raced ahead of us. Probably they enjoyed escaping the hot sea water, which Caroline advised us, was 86°F. Despite the heat we were still being served four course breakfasts, six course lunches, eight course dinners, not to mention afternoon tea! We felt that we should pluck up the courage to miss a meal. Our dislike for a new table companion named Edna encouraged us to do so.

After lamenting the 'appalling lack of classes on this ship' Edna continued, 'I've lived in Dar es Salaam for nine years by the way, hope you're not going there, awful place, lizard droppings on the furniture, nothing for teenagers to do, and the humidity! God it's terrible, your clothes rot in the wardrobes and you need a cold shower three times a day. The air smells morbid too; I think it's the bats that fly up and down the passageways in my house. And the lettuces, don't eat the lettuces my dears, there's amoebic dysentery in the lettuces. Livingstone died of amoebic dysentery you know, there's still no cure.'

'Did Doctor Livingstone eat lettuces?' asked seven year old Philip, by accident or design I wasn't sure.

'Well no I suppose not,' stumbled Edna.

'I'd say it was most unlikely,' ventured Caroline in her best la-di-da voice, 'lettuces are a temperate climate crop.'

Edna, thankfully, withdrew gracefully.

That evening in the Red Sea we danced under the stars after a cabaret, and David put a golf ball down the ship's chimney. Kenya Castle didn't even cough.

After 400 miles in 24 hours we anchored off Steamer Point, Aden. The sea and air temperature had now reached a sweltering 93°F. We opted for sleeping on deck instead of under the cabin punka louvers.

After a family conflagration we decided to mount our own expedition into town with hats and umbrella. Aden harbour was invitingly green, unlike Port 'Sayid', fringed with coconut palms and backed by countless duty free shops owned by Indians. We took the launch and browsed the shops. All the technological wonders of the western world were on offer, at rock bottom prices. The tax-free world was a strange unrecognisably comfortable place!

We were befriended by a cute Bedouin girl aged about 10 years, dressed in long cotton patterned clothes and head dress, and abundant beads, bangles and ear rings. She guided us to the statue of Queen Victoria, sitting there regally with her sceptre and with a crow sitting upon her orb, she imperiously gazed seawards towards her 'beloved India'. Over the harbour gateway were still the words,

FOR KING AND EMPIRE.

Our Bedouin girl took us to Crater Town, where the crumbling streets smelled of incense, spice, coffee, wood smoke, and the Arab/Indian kitchen smells of garlic and curry. Further down the slope vacant plots attracted sewage.

Many women were in purdah and obviously poor but friendly as were the children. A raggedly dressed group sat round a blackboard diligently scrawling Arabic words from the Koran. Other children were chalking patterns on the horns of their goats, whilst bony cows wandered everywhere amongst the houses, helping themselves to anything they could reach in doorways or amongst cooking pots. We felt sad for the animals.

An old man sat in a doorway chewing betel nuts and spitting red juice through a gap in his front teeth, right across the pavement in front of us. Caroline grimaced, 'That man's mouth is bleeding. How horrid.'

Into the Indian Ocean, with 12,000 feet of ocean beneath us, we crossed the Equator. King Neptune himself reared his fearful, seaweed entangled crown and was hauled aboard to hold court on the afterdeck. We all gathered round the pool to witness the maritime drama. It was a highly colourful ceremony. Leading members of the ship's company were called to answer charges of misconduct with certain passengers. The sentence was to have certain vital organs removed by carving knife; the resultant sea of blood was then assuaged by a ducking in the pool. As in the Middle Ages, a good time was had by all.

After those grim proceedings, the evening found us all hanging over the rail gazing down at the heaving black bottomless depths, thinking how easy it would be for a person to disappear forever, especially at night. Our great ship full of light was suddenly a star in a black universe of death that seemed to claw up at the ship's sides, grasping for any errant child, 'or suicidal wife'.

We all shuddered and headed off for the dining room. The tranquillity of the ship's orchestra still meowing the same old tunes after 5,000 miles seemed almost fun.

One day out from Aden Jo went down with heat stroke and it took a saline drip to get her back on her feet. Richard too had skin blisters and Philip dizzy spells and rashes.

Jo gathered together a group of passengers and they agreed that the crew had been special in the way that they had looked after the children and entertained the passengers. She suggested that with the excellent wardrobe on the ship they could put on a large part of South Pacific before they reached Mombasa. Jo is a charismatic and lovable person and loves nothing more than being herself, with an audience. Her enthusiasm proved infectious and a full cast of passengers soon materialised.

Bloody Mary was played fantastically by a man who had hardly spoken to a soul on board. Putting on a black wig had turned him into another person. The show was a great success with Jo as the producer. The captain said that such an event had never occurred before in the history of s.s.Kenya Castle.

Suddenly it was the 12th of May and ship talk was only of Kenya. We gathered at the ship's rail and gazed at the approaching ancient and mysterious coastline wondering was The Interior really a Dark Continent?