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To my parents, Muriel and Jack Welshman, who were instrumental in helping me to forge the bonds with animals that I hold so dear.

Malcolm D. Welshman

Beasts in My Bedroom

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Prologue

The initial inspiration for my love of animals was a newt called Nigel.

To be followed by a childhood spent in Nigeria where the flames of my fascination with all creatures great and small were truly ignited. But Nigel was the initial spark.

I'd been up on the local golf course, wading round the edge of a pond, poking through the rough verges, seeking out lost golf balls when I discovered him. A common newt, *Triturus vulgaris*. I took an instant liking to him, hauled him out of the pond, wrapped him in a strand of wet grass and popped him in my pocket.

Back home, I eased him in a converted aquarium, decked out with logs and rocks. There he was to remain for the rest of the summer, being fed a diet of worms and beetles.

A book on British reptiles and amphibians borrowed from the library, told me all I needed to know about Nigel's lifestyle. How, in the spring, he headed for the nearest pond to court females, sporting an impressive crest that ran from his head to his tail, complementing his black-spotted body – his equivalent of our tattoos. If that wasn't enough, Nigel would entice females to him with wafts of glandular secretions – guaranteed to make any nubile newt swoon with

desire. Having done what was necessary to ensure the continuation of the species, Nigel would haul himself ashore to slump under a stone for the rest of the summer. Hopefully undisturbed. Unless the likes of me, a six-year-old, came along and winkled him out.

One late September day, I discovered Nigel's body lifeless under a rock. At that point, a matchbox came into play. It was a special matchbox. One from my collection. The lid depicted three red dice. Lucky dice. Though not so lucky for the proposed inmate inside. Nigel's corpse.

I laid his body out on a tiny wodge of cotton wool that I'd stuffed into the matchbox and carefully slid the box closed. It was then buried in the back garden and the spot marked with a stone. I even erected a little cross made of – yes, you've guessed – two matches. A week passed before it dawned on me that Nigel may not have died. Perhaps he had merely succumbed to the time of year when he was due to hibernate. Suddenly, I had this ghastly thought that I had buried him alive. I found myself digging up the matchbox and sliding it open to find out. I was saddened to look down on desiccated remains, dried up beyond recognition. Poor Nigel. He had well and truly gone to his maker.

The leap from a newt to a plethora of African animals was a big one and took place within a matter of months of Nigel's demise.

My father was a vet and had for some time been contemplating taking on a job as a District Veterinary Officer (DVO) in some far-flung part of the world, such were his dreams for a change of scene to an exotic location.

So, scarcely had 1955 ended, he, my mother, Muriel, and I found ourselves celebrating the New Year on a scorching

hot beach across the bay from Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, before the start of Father's two-year DVO contract up in Ibadan, a hundred miles to the north.

'Well, here's to the beginning of our new life,' he declared, raising a glass of warm beer while Mother took several heady sips of sherry she had bought as duty-free on the flight over.

I echoed his sentiment with a gulp of fizzy-less lemonade, blissfully unaware of just how exciting my time in Nigeria was going to be and all those exotic animals I was going to encounter.

1

A Cobra in the Bathroom

I was sitting on the loo when a six feet cobra slithered in. Agrrr … It was enough to scare the pants off anyone. Mine were already down round my ankles as I squatted on the edge of the seat and watched the grey-brown snake weave rapidly towards me across the bathroom floor.

We'd been living in Nigeria about three months by then. The bathroom in which I was now trapped by the snake, was linked to the rest of our bungalow by an open walkway. A walkway festooned with creepers and bowers of bright purple-flowering bougainvillea. Perfect for snakes to hide in. We often saw one zoom across the path or shoot through the bushes. But never in the bathroom. Until now. Until this angry-looking cobra suddenly made its appearance under the bathroom door and, at this moment, was gliding towards me, hissing loudly.

What was I to do?

Well, first I produced a very loud fart.

The effect of my fart on the cobra was amazing.

I've learnt since that snakes can't hear in the same way that we do. But, nevertheless, can detect very loud airborne sounds. I'm not sure what decibel level my fart achieved but as I let one rip, I felt I had achieved something at the higher end of the scale. It certainly seemed loud. And it certainly seemed to alarm the snake. Since, with a sudden whiplash action, it turned rapidly to disappear behind the laundry basket over in the far corner.

I stood and pulled my pants and shorts up. If I *was* going to be bitten by the snake, I might as well be fully clothed and look decent when I died from its venom.

Other than that, I remained stock-still. Fearful to move in case the snake reappeared and decided to strike out at me.

Help was required. So I emitted a feeble 'Help', my voice a mere squeak, my mouth dry, parched with fear.

No response. No one had heard me. This was not surprising, as it was such a weedy, pathetic Help. I took a deep breath and tried again. 'Help.' The word came out like the croak of a dying frog. A third 'Help' was even more strangulated. Absolutely hopeless.

Ah, but then there was the scrabble of paws at the door. A whine. It had to be Poucher, our African bush dog, which we had acquired soon after we'd arrived in Ibadan. *She'd* heard me. *She* knew something was wrong.

I looked across at the laundry basket. Nothing moved. No sign of the cobra. *Must be coiled up behind it,* I thought and shivered despite the heat. No way was I crossing the bathroom in case I disturbed it. Too risky.

‘Poucher,’ I whispered. The dog scratched at the door even more. ‘Good girl, good girl,’ I encouraged. Poucher’s whine turned to a furious bark, sufficient to alert my parents. I heard Father run down the walkway.

‘Don’t come in,’ I yelled. ‘Snake.’

There was a hurried discussion outside. I recognised the voices of the house-boys. The door opened a fraction, sufficient for one of them to peep round.

‘Where’s dat snake?’ Yusefu whispered, his eyes wide, the whites gleaming.

I pointed at the laundry basket. ‘Behind that.’

Yusefu edged in, a hand clamped tightly round a broom handle. He gingerly stretched out his arm and jabbed the basket. There was a rattling hiss and the cobra sprang into view. Yusefu sprang back and disappeared behind the door. I sprang back behind the shower curtain. The snake rapidly zigzagged across the floor and wriggled through the drainage hole in the wall that led to the soakaway outside. Time for me to scoot out as well. There I found Mother standing on the veranda, trembling, her knees pressed together.

‘I’m desperate for a pee,’ she said. ‘But that snake has to go before I do.’

‘Don’t blame you, Mum,’ I agreed. I could see she didn’t like the idea of sitting on the wooden thunder box, wondering when and where the cobra might strike next. Perhaps bite her bottom? Ouch.

Meanwhile, Poucher had slunk away and was sniffing the entrance to the soakaway, her nose twitching, and her ears pricked.

‘I bet the cobra’s gone down there,’ I said, pointing at the soakaway hole. A dark, black hole just a hand-width wide.

Father had now appeared and stood in front of the hole.

‘You’re probably right,’ he said, running a finger and thumb across his moustache. ‘We need some sort of plan to get that snake out. Then we can deal with it. Right?’

‘Right,’ I echoed, wondering what he was on about. Some sort of plan?

Father stopped stroking his moustache and raised a hand. ‘Ah, yes, got it. I know exactly what we’ll do. Everyone wait here a moment.’

That everyone was Mother, me, Yusefu and Tobi, the other house-boy. With that, Father hurried indoors, reappearing with a small metal canister, grey-green, stencilled in white. A smoke-bomb. ‘We’ll smoke the blighter out,’ he declared. ‘That should do the trick.’

In brisk, military fashion, he organised the two house-boys at the entrance to the soakaway.

‘You stand that side, Yusefu,’ he said. ‘And you, Tobi, the other side.’ He pushed them into place, lining them up, one each side of the soakaway. Yusefu held a wooden knobkerrie and Tobi a machete.

‘Poucher, out of the way,’ ordered Father, shooing the dog from the soakaway’s entrance. ‘Match, please.’ He snapped his fingers. ‘Quickly do it. No time to lose.’

Mother hurried over with a lighter.

Father lit the fuse on the smoke bomb and tossed it down the hole.

‘Stand back,’ he barked. ‘Stand back.’

But the command was unnecessary. Thick grey smoke billowed out of the hole, forcing us to retreat, coughing, eyes streaming, Father, Mother and I as black as the boys.

'Masa … Masa …' they chorused, doing a nervous war dance on the spot. They pointed to the hole. 'Look … Look …' The smoky entrance framed a large, whiskery snout. With a shrill squeak, out shot an enormous rat, equal in size to Sooty, our cat.

Poucher gave an excited yelp and sprang forward.

'Poucher … don't,' I yelled. 'You'll get bitten.'

But it was too late. There was a scuffle of whirling fur and legs. A shriek of pain from the rat. With a final vigorous shake, it was all over. One dead rat. With its body between her teeth, Poucher trotted over and proudly deposited her trophy at Mother's feet.

'Uggh …' she muttered, stepping back from the rodent, which laid there, convulsing slightly, eyes glazed, and blood oozing from its open mouth.

Then Mother screamed. Startled, I looked at her. She was gesticulating, a finger pointing at the entrance to the soakaway. 'Look, there. See?' she blabbered, her finger trembling as she spoke.

I turned. And did see. All too clearly. The cobra had appeared. Foot after foot of sinewy grey whipped out of the hole to weave swiftly across the path.

'Attack,' roared Father. 'Get in there. Kill it, quick.'

Yusefu and Tobi jolted out of their petrified stance and moved in. The snake reared up, inflated its hood and swung round on them. Tobi lost his nerve and leapt back as the cobra lashed out and struck his machete blade with a loud *ping*.

It was left to Yusefu to confront the creature. Gripping the handle of his knobkerrie tightly in his right hand, the head of it balanced in his left hand, he tiptoed forward. He weaved from side to side in time with the snake. Hissing loudly, the cobra raised itself up, stretching into a gigantic S shape, ready to strike with all the venom it could muster. With a tribal bellow to steel his nerves, Yusefu swung out his arm and threw the knobkerrie. It whistled through the air as the snake lunged forward. Its cranium was no match for the hard wood of the stick. There was a sickening crunch and the splat of mashed brain, as the two met. The cobra dropped to the ground, pole-axed. Dead.

'Well done, Yusefu,' roared Father. 'Splendid work.'

He strode over and picked the dead snake up. 'Let's get a picture, Malcolm.'

I ran indoors and got my camera.

A photograph was taken. Father with his spoils of war; rat by the tail in one hand, arm held high to dangle the six-foot snake in the other.

'Guess you might like this, eh, Poucher?' said Father and tossed the rat over to her.

With an excited woof, Poucher caught the rodent and spent a happy bone-splintering hour devouring it.

As for the cobra, well that was incinerated.

But it wasn't the last one I was to confront.

Oh, no. No way. A few months later, I was to meet up with a snake that nearly killed me.

2

Making Pals with Poucher

Poucher, the African bush dog, came into our lives through a postcard pinned to the noticeboard at the local social club in Ibadan, the town where we now lived. Every Sunday, we would go there for a swim and a curry lunch. The curries were hot, the pool cool. A great combination. Perfect.

On this particular Sunday, I'd spotted the card before jumping into the pool. It said, 'I know I'm a bitch but I don't flirt. Please give me a new home as my master is returning to the UK.' Below it was a name and Oyo, a nearby town, telephone number.

I really liked the idea of owning a dog. A canine who could be a loyal companion, to snuggle up with and take for walks along the jungle tracks adjacent to our bungalow – or *gidah* as the locals called them.

Father also wanted a dog. But for different reasons. He rather fancied himself as a big game hunter stalking the savannah, rifle slung in the crook of his arm, gun dog at heel. Can you imagine? I couldn't. Not that there was any big game to be bagged in those southern parts of Nigeria. But there were guinea fowl and the like out on the plains to the north. So, he felt a retriever of such birds would be a useful addition to the family. That went against the grain with me; but I was comforted by the fact that Father was a rotten shot, so the likelihood of any dog being put to such use was zilch.

I was just about to dive into the pool, my toes curled over the edge of the diving board, when Father broached the subject.

'Like to go and see her?' he called up.

'Oh yes please, Dad,' I yelled, tottering on the edge of the board.

Mother's voice groaned from the shadow of a sunshade by the pool's edge. 'Yet another mouth to feed.'

'Oh, come on, Mum. Don't be such a spoil-sport.' With that, I hurled myself off, tucked my knees up to my chest, and executed one of my better water bombs. Mother was thoroughly drenched. Absolutely soaked. Her enthusiasm for a dog dampened even more. But Father and I continued to badger her the rest of the day and finally she relented. Father phoned the Oyo number that evening and arranged to travel up the following Sunday.

'It will mean an early start,' warned Mother with a grimace.

'But at least it will be cool then,' I chipped in chirpily.

The sun, a molten fireball of orange, was rising rapidly above the rusty roofs of the shanty suburbs as we bumped and rattled out of Ibadan the next Sunday morning. From red and white embers of charcoal, thin pencils of smoke spiralled up into the milky sky. Dusty-limbed youngsters jumped and waved. Mammies gave us sidelong glances as they continued to stir blackened pots over open fires.

The road took us north through mile after mile of cacao plantations, the ripening oranges and brown coco pods like wrinkled rugby balls glued to the tree trunks. The plantations gradually gave way to scorched savannah rattling in the hot, dry wind blowing down from the Sahara. A wind that snaked and hissed through the open windows of our Land Rover. Grass stretched to the horizon, an undulating sea of yellow, the only relief, outcrops of granite – upturned cauldrons of glistening grey, stark against the cobalt sky.

We churned slowly through the town of Oyo, leaving a pall of laterite dust hanging in the air behind us. Our destination was a government veterinary field station two miles to the east. It was approached down a deeply rutted track, bone-dry and bum-bashing bumpy.

'Just hope this is all worthwhile,' moaned Mother, as her shoulder hit the inside of the car door for the fifth time. Father's knuckles gleamed as he wrenched at the steering wheel spinning out of control, the wheels of the Land Rover locking into the ruts of the dusty African road we were driving along. As we ploughed into another sandy fissure, Mother and I were once again tossed around like a couple of trout that had just been landed. Ouch.

Ahead, the track stretched in a straight, shimmering line, bordered by knobby-stemmed cassava, their leaves blotched

yellow, withered by the scorching sun. In the far distance, a blur of red-tiled, whitewashed buildings. Our destination. The field station.

'Almost there,' grunted Father, battling yet again to keep the Land Rover from plunging into the cassava fields.

'About time,' moaned Mother through gritted teeth.

The track swept us into a compound of patchy green-brown lawn, bathed in a rainbow mist of water squirting up from several sprinklers lined along the front of a whitewashed bungalow.

Father braked and switched off the ignition.

'Thank God for that,' said Mother as the shuddering whine of the engine faded blissfully from our ears.

Stiff-limbed, backsides battered, we climbed out, aware we were being watched by a dog sitting up in the shade of the veranda ahead of us. She looked part-Labrador. Black with a white blaze on her chest and three white paws.

'That could be her,' I whispered excitedly, as we approached.

The dog stood up, slipped from the deep shadow to pause on the top step of the veranda. She gave one dutiful bark, then started wagging her tail.

As we climbed the steps, a man emerged from inside. Tall, long-limbed, in khaki shorts and shirt. He introduced himself as Peter Stevenson, the Oyo district veterinary officer. 'And this, as you may have guessed, is who you've come to see.' Peter turned to the dog and patted her head. 'She's called Poucher. Now, girl, say "hello" to our visitors.'

The dog looked at us, her eyes deep pools of brown, then raised a white paw.

Peter chuckled. ‘It’s her party trick. Shake-a-paw.’ He looked at me. ‘Feel free to oblige.’ I reached down and shook her paw, instantly captivated.

Over cold lagers – lemonade for me – Peter explained the advert. ‘She doesn’t flirt because I’ve spayed her. So, no worries about her having puppies. Often a problem with all the bush dogs round these parts.’

Up to then, Mother had been fairly quiet. Her mood difficult to gauge. But now she suddenly perked up. ‘You mean she won’t come into heat?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Oh, in that case … maybe …’

As if on cue, Poucher sidled up to Mother, pushed her nose under her hand, clearly wanting a stroke. You’d have to have been very hard-hearted for it to have failed. It didn’t. Mother obliged. All three of us were now utterly beguiled, and Poucher became the newest member of our household.

She proved to have a sweet temperament. Adorable. Willing to make friends with everyone. Especially me. She followed me everywhere; and within a few days of arriving back at our *gidah*, she took to sleeping in my room. Father disapproved of such sleeping arrangements.

‘Can’t be having with that,’ he declared over breakfast one morning. ‘One of the reasons for getting Poucher was to help guard the *gidah*,’ he added as he sliced off the top of his boiled egg. ‘Not much good if she’s stuck in your bedroom all night. Much better if she has a kennel on the veranda. Then she could come and go as she pleases while giving the *gidah* some night-time protection.’

‘No, Dad. Please don’t,’ I said, while toying with my bowl of cornflakes. ‘She’d be really unhappy.’

‘Nonsense. She’d soon get used to the idea.’

Mother interjected. ‘I’m not so sure it is a good idea.’

I saw Father’s moustache bristle as he swiped at it with his napkin. His eyes glared. ‘And why’s that?’

Unruffled, Mother continued. ‘Remember what happened to Major Carr’s dog?’

‘Oh, yes, Dad. You remember, don’t you? It was awful,’ I added.

Major Carr, our immediate neighbour, had had intruders. Their dog, a thin, fox-like creature that could produce an astonishing deep-throated bark considering its size, used to roam freely round their compound. The intruders on this occasion, had been carrying machetes. They had shown no mercy to the dog, hacking it to death with their long, sharp knives. The major was left to discover the decapitated corpse lying in a pool of blood on his veranda.

‘We couldn’t risk that happening to Poucher, could we, Dad?’ I pleaded.

Mother reached across and gripped my hand. ‘What a fearful ending for our dear, sweet Poucher that would be,’ she said. She brought into play all the skills she had mastered from participating in amateur dramatic societies back in the UK. Her eyes rolled heavenward. Her head shook as she shuddered. ‘I can’t bear thinking about it.’ She released my hand and clutched her bosom.

Bravo, Mum, I thought. *What a class act.*

Father almost choked on his toast. But he had no choice other than capitulate. Poucher continued to sleep in my room.

An incident a few weeks later showed what a wise decision that had been.

My room was at the far end of the *gidah*, three rooms away from my parents' bedroom; and the most distant from the servants' quarters where Yusefu – my father's batman – lived with his family. As did the other houseboy, Tobi.

It was a dark African night. Not one of those full-mooned nights where everything is bathed in silvery-white. It was pitch black. You could hardly see a thing. A muted growl from Poucher, lying in her wooden crate next to my bed, woke me. I pulled up the edge of the mosquito net and leaned over. 'What's the matter?' I whispered, my arm stretching down to her. I could just make out her raised head, ears pricked. Another growl rumbled in her throat. 'Poucher, what is it?'

She was looking across at the open window – an iron mesh with a square hole cut in each lower corner through which you could pull in the outer shutters. The window framed the night sky – an inky panorama of blazing stars. I followed the dog's gaze. Suddenly, a shadow blocked those stars. The only thing visible the whites of two eyes staring in. With a savage bark, Poucher sprang out of her box and hurled herself at the window. At the same time, I let out a piercing scream. The shadow instantly melted away. Lights snapped on as my parents hurried from their room. Voices jabbered from the servants' quarters. Yusefu raced along the veranda, a kerosene lamp waving in his hand.

'There was someone there …' I blubbered, pointing at the window. The evidence was on view. A pole with a hook in the end of it, lay half-inserted through the lower corner of the window, ready to hook out anything worth stealing from inside. A pole dropped by the thief when Poucher started barking.

Father crossed over to Poucher. ‘That’s what I like to see, my girl. Well done.’ He gave her a pat as she settled down into her bed.

I settled down into mine as Mother gave me a similar reassuring pat and tucked in my mosquito net.

The rest of the household soon settled as well.

And the question of where Poucher should sleep was settled for good. With me.

From then on, during our time together, we had lots of adventures. Some of them very traumatic. Awful. There was the day Poucher saved Mother’s life. A day I will never forget. More on that later.

3

When a Parrot Flew Into My Life

The acquisition of Poucher was to be the first of many additions to our household, which in time became known as Malcolm's menagerie. A black cat called Sooty arrived shortly after Poucher. She strolled into our lives, demanding to be fed. We obliged. She stayed.

Then came an African grey parrot.

I first met her when she was a mere bundle of grey down which growled and flapped within the confines of a rusty cage.

It was a hot dusty morning in Ibadan's crowded market. The throng ebbed and flowed across the roads and around the stalls. A parade of blue, crimson and yellow robes. Trays piled high with oranges, grapefruits, and bananas. Battered

enamel pots. Calabashes full of maize flour. Cackling chickens in palm-woven cages. The stench of urine from tethered goats.

Bored, trailing behind Father, I was scuffling through the sand, grains of it grating through my sandals when a grizzled Hausa trader in a grubby white robe waddled out of the crowd. From his hand swayed a cage. From within it, an African grey parrot stared out. Her pale grey eyes were full of alarm, her beak open, hissing.

'Young master dum like dis bird?' said the trader as he dangled the cage in front of me and gave a wide smile, exposing a stump of red, betel-nut-stained teeth.

'Oh please, Dad, please,' I implored. 'Can we have her?'

'Dis is one fine bird,' coaxed the wily old man, darting between us as Father made a determined effort to march on despite the mass of people milling around us.

The trader clutched at my father's sleeve. 'Young master much like dis bird.'

Father stopped, turned, thrust a hand into his khaki shorts.

I tried again. 'Oh, go on, Dad. Please.'

Father harrumphed, fiddled with his moustache. Then said, 'Five pounds.'

The trader laughed, his forehead creasing in a bunch of black wrinkles. 'Na … Na … I no 'gree,' he replied with a shake of his head.

Father shrugged. 'Please yourself,' he said and turned away.

'Na … Na …' the trader repeated, this time more strident, tinged with alarm as he saw a potential sale slipping away. He hastily stretched out a dusty palm. 'I 'gree.' The

cage exchanged hands. The African grey parrot became ours.

Once back home, with the parrot cage perched on a table alongside the window overlooking the front lawn, it was time to decide on a name for her.

Mother stood in front of the cage and pondered. 'Sally? Miranda? Perhaps Josie?' she suggested.

I pulled a face. They didn't sound particularly special names. A bit boring in fact. 'An African name would surely be more appropriate,' I said.

'Such as?' queried Mother.

'Well, there's Apunda, Kirabo and Rufaro for starters.'

'They're certainly different,' said Mother, turning to Father. 'What do you think, dear?'

'I think we should call her Polly,' he replied swiftly, barely pausing to catch his breath.

'POLLY?' chorused Mother and me, looking at each other in amazement, our thoughts the same. Polly? How unoriginal. Absolutely pathetic.

Father's moustache bristled. His eyes glowered. 'What's wrong with Polly?' he growled, his voice low and menacing. All the signs that warned us not to challenge him.

I tiptoed over to the cage and peered through the bars to address the parrot. 'Welcome to your new home … uhm … er … Polly.'

For many months, Polly remained a frightened, nervous youngster. Soon, though, her pale grey eyes matured to a golden yellow. Her broken quills moulted one by one as strong new lighter grey flight feathers burst through on her wings; and her tail erupted into a sea of vermillion.

I spent weeks trying to coax her out of her cage.

‘Come on, Polly,’ I’d whisper, placing a piece of banana just outside her open cage door. ‘Don’t be frightened.’ But she was never tempted. She merely opened her beak and hissed.

I didn’t need convincing of the power of that beak, having seen her splinter a block of teak as if it were a matchbox. Crunch. Smashed in minutes. That power was normally directed at Father. Poor man. He was the one who fed, watered her and cleaned out her cage. Yet, whenever he went near, she’d lash out and several times managed to draw blood. He’d be walking round with bandaged fingers for days.

Her tongue was another tool but one used in a delicate, dextrous way. She’d grasp an unshelled peanut in one claw, crack it open to reveal the row of nuts inside. She’d then pick one out and start to roll the nut round with the tip of her tongue, allowing her beak to skin it before it was swallowed.

But it was her beak that I feared most. No way was I ever going to go near her in case she tried to bite me.

Until the day I smashed the glass front of my aquarium. I was carrying it through the lounge when I knocked it against a door handle. The glass splintered. Out poured the fish. Out poured the weed. Out poured the snails. So too did my tears. They poured down my face. I dropped the cracked aquarium on the settee and, howling with all the force a ten-year-old could muster, ran across to Polly’s cage. For a moment she looked startled, backing away. Then she waddled forward, putting her head down against the bars as if asking for a scratch. Still blubbering, I didn’t stop to think and poked my finger through the bars. Polly’s head whipped up. Her beak caught the tip of my finger. But no bite. Just the gentle feel

of her tongue over my skin as she kissed me. Then, she too burst out sobbing.

From that moment on we were firm friends. No further encouragement was needed for her to scramble out of her cage. Whenever I entered the room, she would fly over to me with a friendly squawk and land on my shoulder if she could.

'Hello, Polly,' I'd exclaim, giving her a head scratch.

Sometimes, I would arrive home from school to find a dusty parrot strutting down the drive to greet me.

'It's no good, Malcolm,' Father finally declared. 'I'll have to clip her wings, otherwise she'll be flying off. And that wouldn't do, would it?' There was twitch of his moustache. A raised eyebrow.

'No, Dad,' I murmured dutifully.

'Right. Let's get cracking. Get it done.'

A towel appeared. Polly was bundled into it with muffled screeches of alarm. Each wing in turn was extricated from the folds of the towel and the flight feathers trimmed back by a third. The avian equivalent of a military-style short-back-and-sides.

'That should do the trick,' declared Father as he snipped through the last few barbs. With an indignant squawk, Polly wriggled free from the confines of the towel and attempted to fly up to her cage. Instead, she belly-flopped onto the polished red floor and skidded across it like a drunken ballerina to disappear under the sideboard. From that dark recess in Father's angry tone, she uttered her first word – 'Drat.'

She did look a bit bedraggled with her flight feathers cut back thus revealing the softer, lighter grey down round her

tail. Not such a pretty Polly. But at least it allowed her freedom from her cage to sit on a specially-constructed wooden perch out on the veranda. There she'd spend most of the day, quite content to keep a beady yellow eye on all that was going on. Though one morning, it was almost the death of her. I was sitting on the veranda alongside her perch when there was the sudden whoosh of feathers. A blur of wings. A screech from Polly as she was knocked off her perch. A bird of prey, the size of a falcon, had decided the parrot might have made a tasty mid-morning snack. It had swooped down, under the veranda's roof, with claws stretched out ready to snatch up Polly. But missed, though only just. A few of Polly's feathers had been grasped and released to float to the floor while a shaken Polly clambered back up onto her perch. Phew. What a lucky escape for Polly that was!

It wasn't long before Polly's vocabulary blossomed. One of her catchphrases was, 'Wotcha, mate!' usually directed at me and usually in my tone of voice. She'd take great delight in waddling up my arm, her wings lowered, crooning, and then once on my shoulder whisper, 'Wotcha, mate' before stuffing regurgitated peanuts in my ear. Apparently, it's a sign of love in parrots.

Mother invited the District Commissioner's wife for tea one afternoon – a tall, willowy lady with a touch of royalty about her.

'She certainly thinks she's the queen bee round these parts,' Mother somewhat ungraciously once said of her.

In swirled the lady, dressed in a white and red polka dotted dress, flared and drawn in at the waist with a broad white belt. There was even a white bag, shoes, gloves and

hat to match. I saw Mother's lips twitch, her hands smooth down the sides of her shapeless polyester flower-patterned frock. The Commissioner's wife came to a halt in the middle of the lounge, spotted Polly's cage over in the corner and advanced towards it, stopping in another swirl of polka dots. Polly greeted our illustrious visitor with a chirpy, "Hello" in Mother's tone of voice.

'Oh, hello. What a charming bird you have here,' replied the Commissioner's wife, her voice brimming with plums. She turned to give Mother a dazzling smile. But the smile froze when from behind her came a very clear 'You've got droopy drawers' and a dirty cackle. The commissioner's wife's face turned as red as her polka dots. But worse was to follow.

Polly paused as if to take a breath and then in Father's deep bass tone, shouted, 'How about it, luv?' while bobbing her head up and down and wagging her tail suggestively. I was an innocent ten-year-old. How about what? I wondered. Though to judge from the tight lips on the Commissioner's wife's face, she knew what only too well.

We discovered Polly was a clever parrot and especially good at wheedling treats out of us.

I taught her the African word for food which is *chop*.

A portion of buttered toast was always on offer at breakfast time. Polly would waddle up and down her perch saying 'Chop … chop, sweetly in my tone of voice waiting for her titbit. One morning, I decided to tease her and not give her a bit. Naughty. Naughty. With my buttered toast, I sat down with my back to her cage and commenced eating. Polly had been saying 'Chop … chop,' over and over again. Realising it was to no avail, her tone of voice changed.

‘Chop … chop,’ she shouted in Father’s voice. Gruff. Demanding.

Still no joy. I kept on crunching, ignoring her. She paused. Silent for a moment. And then, still in Father’s voice, came a loud emphatic ‘What’s the ruddy matter with you?’

I collapsed with laughter, choking on my toast.

‘Serves you right,’ she squawked as I went puce.

Another incident occurred which demonstrated Polly’s intelligence and proved that African greys are the most intelligent parrots in the world.

One afternoon, Polly was out on her perch on the veranda as I returned from school. It was quiet. No one around. So I decided it was a good time to give Polly a bath. Well actually a shower. Just a dampening. Nothing too scary. I decided to use the sprinkler attached to the garden hose which lay coiled on the far side of the front lawn, one end attached to the outside tap. So, with that in mind, I walked across the lawn heading for the sprinkler, nodding at Polly, who was watching me intently from her perch. I was still yards from the sprinkler when suddenly Polly flapped down. She waddled rapidly across the veranda and flopped down the steps, feathers ruffled, wings flapping.

Then, in a very cross tone of voice screeched, ‘Stop it, Malcolm. Stop it,’ as she raced towards me, still ruffled up like a feather duster.

The inference was obvious. Polly had no desire to get sprayed, no matter how gentle that shower might have been. It appeared she had read my mind and worked out what I intended to do. And had declared very distinctly her utter disapproval. Wasn’t that astonishing?

Polly continued to astonish and delight us over the ensuing months. She picked up and used more and more words. Some of them rather rude.

But she was a fun pet to have and I loved her to bits.

So, you can imagine how worried I was when Polly fell ill. So ill she was at the point of dying. And nothing but an operation was going to save her. But even then, would she survive?

4

The Day Poucher Saved Mother's Life

At weekends, we often took a picnic to one of the local beauty spots.

A favourite was the River Ogan, a half-day's travel from Ibadan and deep into jungle territory. Here, the river meandered through a tortuous series of bends carved through a gorge, lined with towering groves of teak and mahogany. Each tree so massive you could hack a tunnel through one of its trunks and drive a double-decker bus through it. I still have a Brownie-camera picture of Mother posed, one arm stretched out against a trunk – a pixie at the foot of a giant. Broad dinner plates of leaves crowded in a dense canopy high above us. Blotting out the glare of the sky, creating a muted emerald twilight. Humid. Dark.

Foreboding. Occasionally, we were startled by a series of sharp, urgent squawks and glimpses of green and red as flocks of parrots screeched away down the gorge.

The rainy season transformed the river into a roaring torrent, spewing fountains of brown water between granite boulders. From a rusty, girdered bridge, wooden-planked and hundreds of feet above the river bed, we'd scramble down the gorge, to stand awestruck as the water pummelled past, sweeping with it rafts of dead grass, trunks of splintered trees. Occasionally there'd be an up-turned dead goat or dog, splay-legged, stomachs bloated like balloons.

On the return journey one weekend, we were driving along a section where the road and river ran alongside each other for several miles. We'd cut our picnic short as a heavy thunderstorm had erupted. Heavy rain was still pounding on the Land Rover roof, the wipers scarcely able to cope with the deluge. It was as if buckets of water were being thrown at the windscreen. Suddenly the rain stopped – like a tap turned off. The sun flashed into view. The road steamed. Myriads of rainbow drops plopped down through the trees. In the far distance, sheet lightning flashed against purple clouds. Gullies of water ran off the steep hillside above us, streaming across the road to cascade down into the ravine below.

'Cripes, this one looks a bit dodgy,' muttered Father, his hands clenching the steering wheel as he slowed down to negotiate a channel of water gouging a course across the tarmac, loosening chunks and pushing them over the edge.

Having just successfully manoeuvred through it, he was about to pick up speed when Mother declared, 'Oh, look up there. What beautiful flowers.'

She was craning her neck as she spoke, pointing with her finger as she looked out of the car window.

I wound down the back window and looked up the hillside. High above us, framed in a halo of white mist, was a bush weighed down with large trumpets of cream lilies. 'You don't think we could …'

'Stop and pick some?' Father finished her sentence.

'My dear, only if it's safe enough.' Mother's voice was all sweetness and light.

Father braked and steered the Land Rover onto the side of the road below the hill. I didn't think it looked safe at all. A narrow road. Steep hill one side. Sheer drop the other. Water spewing across. Madness to stop.

'A few of those flowers would be delightful,' said Mother turning to give me an encouraging smile. 'I'll stay in the car.'

Moments later, Father and I were scrambling up the hill, slipping and sliding in the steaming, wet undergrowth, while Poucher had raced up ahead of us.

The lilies certainly begged to be picked. Each trumpet was pale cream on its edge, deep buttery yellow in its throat. Each with a scarlet tongue. And each with scalloped borders lined with a delicate tracery of red that glittered with diamonds of dew. And the scent. Heavy. Cloying.

'What a perfume,' I said, sticking my nose into one trumpet I'd picked and breathing in deeply. Next, I was breathing in panic.

Poucher had suddenly started barking furiously and was zigzagging back down the hill.

'Hey, what's up?' I said, looking down over my shoulder.

‘Christ,’ swore Father, dropping his bunch of lilies. He scrabbled, slipped and slid down the wet tangle of grass. ‘Muriel … Muriel …’ he yelled, his voice ringing out across the gorge.

I too screamed, ‘Mum … Mum …’ and tumbled down the hill.

But Mother appeared not to have heard us. Her head was bent as she busily filed her nails.

The cause of our concern was now swerving down the road at great speed. A red and yellow local bus, crammed full of passengers. Ebony heads packed every window. Bodies bobbed at the back, clinging to the tailgate. On the roof were mountains of baskets, chickens and stacks of bananas, piled high. The heads of small children peered out between them. The bus continued to hurl down the road. Too fast. Not slowing down. There was probably room to pass our Land Rover. Just.

But to our horror, an identical bus, loaded with locals, was trundling up the hill from the opposite direction. The reputation of the local drivers was notorious. Never willing to give way to oncoming traffic. And with the single-gauge bridges, the outcome was often fatal. The evidence – the mangled wrecked lorries and buses strewn below many of those bridges.

A pile-up here was highly likely. No wonder Father and I were screaming as we hurtled down the hill, our arms flailing. Poucher reached the Land Rover while we were still halfway down. Barking furiously, she leapt up at the front passenger door. Mother looked up, startled. She saw us gesticulating and shouting. She saw the buses converging on her. She saw the pending disaster and opened the door and

flung herself out and sprawled in the mud as there was a blare of horns.

Neither bus slowed. In fact, both seemed to accelerate. Each determined to pass our Land Rover first. Neither did. There was the screech of brakes. The smell of burning rubber. Wheels locked. The buses slewed across the slippery road. One shot through the gap between our Land Rover and the ravine, its wheels spewing out mud and stones as it clung to the edge of the road. A basket of chickens, dislodged, burst open. In a flurry of feathers, the birds sailed over the ravine, squawking to their deaths. The lorry to the inside, swerved. It hit the bank. Bounced back onto the road. Glanced off the passing bus and went into a spin. With a deafening crunch of metal, it hammered into the back of our Land Rover and continuing its spin, pushed it across the road to the edge of the ravine. Our vehicle teetered, gave a slow bow and then plunged out of sight. The splintering of glass, the pounding of metal against rock reverberated across the gorge. The bus came to a halt inches from the edge. The other bus shuddered to a halt several yards up the road.

For a moment, there was an eerie silence. Then pandemonium erupted. Passengers, chickens and goats poured out of both buses. The two drivers, gabbling and gesticulating, leapt out and raced towards each other. Fists flew. Abuse rent the air.

Father pulled Mother up the bank and put his arms round her quivering shoulders. We sat, too shocked to move, as a sea of yellow, red and blue robes surged back and forth across the road. The jabber of insults, accusations – an angry cacophony of voices – floated up to us.

‘It’s all right, you’re safe,’ Father reassured Mother.

Poucher crept up to her, sat and looked up, cocking her head, then held out a paw. Mother burst into tears. So too, did I.

Only when the nightmare was over and we had managed to get back to the barracks by means of a local taxi did the full impact of what had happened sink in. By racing down the hill and warning Mother, Poucher had saved her life.

It made us realise what a truly remarkable dog she was.

So, the time we lost her – the time she nearly died – is even more indelibly etched in my mind. Never to be forgotten.

5

Operation Ostrich

Ibadan had a zoo. It wasn't much of a zoo. It was very small in fact. A rather motley collection of animals, caged or enclosed in dusty paddocks. A couple of lions that seemed to sleep all the time. Several servals constantly pacing up and down their cage. Three camels. An aviary full of finches and parrots. And a mix of ostriches and antelopes together in one pen. Running free were goats, guinea fowl and several pigs, usually with piglets swirling round their trotters. Nothing to write home about. Unless of course one of the lions were to escape and rip someone to shreds. That would be newsworthy. But even if they did get loose, those lions looked too dozy to contemplate doing anything as scary as that.

In sharp contrast to those lions, the owner of the zoo was a flamboyant character. Larger than life. And, until you got

to know him, a little bit scary even. That's because he was a huge man. Well over six feet tall, powerfully built, with huge hands like great dusky paws. He always wore a billowing white long-sleeved robe that flapped round his ankles, a white skull-cap and several carved ivory bracelets around his wrists. In that huge robe, with his arms outstretched in greeting, he'd bear down on you like a galleon in full sail.

His name was a bit of a mouthful to say. Chukwuemeka Abubakar.

'You call me Chuck,' he roared when I first met him. That was another scary thing about him. He did roar. Like one of his lions if they could ever be bothered to make the effort. His voice sounded like a cross between a bassoon and a regimental sergeant-major. Very loud. His huge hand shook mine in a vice-like grip and his face split into a half-melon smile, exposing a mouth crammed full of very large white teeth.

Father, being a vet, found himself being called out to the zoo by Chuck whenever there was a sick animal that needed seeing to. Providing I wasn't at school, I often went along as well. Especially if it promised to be an interesting case.

The time Father had to operate on one of the zoo's ostriches was a good example.

As we bumped along the road to the zoo, I sensed Father was rather agitated and not just because of all the potholes we were ploughing through.

'Have you ever operated on an ostrich before?' I asked.

Father shook his head. 'The nearest I've got is trimming a budgie's beak and claws,' he confessed. 'And carving the Christmas turkey.' He grimaced. 'Not a lot of help, is it?'

‘Well, you can only do your best, Dad,’ I said, trying to be reassuring.

The multitude of potholes made it an excruciating drive, no matter how carefully Father tried to avoid them.

‘What’s actually happened to the ostrich?’ I enquired as I was almost catapulted out of my seat when we hit yet another yawning hole.

‘Chuck tells me she’s been gored in the belly by one of the antelopes in her paddock. Pity, as she’d been sitting on some eggs. He was hoping they’d hatch soon.’

Father swerved to avoid a wobbling cyclist, buried beneath a mountain of green bananas. I looked back anxiously but he was lost from view in a cloud of red dust.

A loud blast on the horn announced our arrival in the local market. But it made no difference to the throng that ebbed and flowed in front of us. A dazzling parade of gaudy printed robes – blues, reds and yellows. Ebony faces turned to stare with defiant eyes as we attempted to nudge our way through them. Faces that broke into white toothy grins as we battled in vain. Back and forth they surged. Trays piled high with oranges and grapefruits. Battered enamel pots. Calabashes dusted with maize flour. Even the occasional green beer bottle balanced precariously on top of a frizzy head. Naked toddlers screamed with laughter as they chased us, their pale brown hands playing tag with the tailboard. Cackling chickens bounced across the bonnet in a welter of flying feathers. A startled sow, smeared with oil, shot from under us with a loud snort, followed by a line of squealing piglets.

Emerging from that living maelstrom, we eventually swung off the road through a large entrance smothered in a

heavy canopy of scarlet bougainvillea. A notice proclaiming ‘Ibadan Zoo’ in faded black letters lay partially buried in a profusion of tangled blooms.

We plunged into a tunnel of giant creepers that turned the scorching sun cool, emerald green. Abruptly, we burst out again into the searing heat. Ahead lay our final destination. A large, open paddock where several tan and white antelopes advanced and receded in a haze of shimmering white light.

We ground to a halt at the perimeter fence and a bevy of glistening black faces crowded in round the windows.

‘Welcome massa,’ they chorused.

As we clambered out of the Land Rover, Chuck came striding over to us, pounding his way across the dusty track. ‘How you dey?’ he boomed. He grasped Father’s hand and shook it powerfully before turning to do the same with my hand. Ouch. What a grip!

‘I’m fine,’ replied Father.

‘Der ostrich give me wahala,’ said Chuck, shaking his head. ‘Problem, big time.’

As he spoke, eager hands pushed and shoved to unload the medical equipment from the back of the Land Rover. Operating gowns and drapes made from local printed cottons. Instruments sealed in an old, olive-green ammunition box, steam-sterilised for emergencies such as this. A box of assorted drugs and dressings, needles and syringes; and the most important item of them all: the small glass vials of ketamine – the anaesthetic Father was going to use to knock out the ostrich if he had to.

‘If save ostrich, you don butta my bread,’ declared Chuck, standing by the gate to the paddock.

Amidst a babble of exuberant voices from the keepers, Father and I were rapidly escorted into the enclosure. The ostrich lay in the far corner, resting in the dappled shade of a magnificent flame tree. However bad her injury, it didn't prevent her from getting to her feet as we approached. She gazed balefully at us from under long, dark eyelashes. It was only then could I appreciate the enormity of the task that lay ahead for Father.

'She's quite a size,' I murmured softly.

As the ostrich stretched to her full height of about eight feet, I saw just how large she was – a good 300 pounds of solid flesh. Her long, supple neck carried her head into the lower branches of the tree, heavy with scarlet blooms; and from here she suspiciously peered out. Uncertain of us, her large, if functionless, brown wings were raised and partially outstretched.

But it was to her legs that my eye was drawn. Adapted for running, the thighs rippled with muscular power, blue-grey skin stretched tightly over them. I could see her tensing herself, ready to run or lash out if cornered. Her toes – there are two on an ostrich's foot – looked strong. Designed to bear all the strains of locomotion. Their strength was ably demonstrated by the way she effortlessly dug her claws into the ground.

I shivered, thinking how easily those claws could dig into us. And suddenly remembered what I had once read. One kick from an ostrich could easily disembowel you. The thought made my stomach lurch. Big time.

Father and I stopped in the middle of the enclosure, laying out the equipment on the hard-baked soil. This was to be the operating table.

The keepers glided swiftly forward. A large net stretched between three of them. As they converged, the ostrich took two gigantic strides in an attempt to break through the line. But the keepers were ready. With innate dexterity, they tossed the net up into the air. It ballooned over the ostrich, sailed down and enveloped her. The keepers pounced, grabbed her wings and pinned her legs. With a flurry of brown feathers, the ostrich spun to the ground in a whirlpool of dusty bodies.

'Well, Malcolm, now's the time.' Father pursed his lips as he held up a syringe he'd just loaded with the dose of ketamine he reckoned was required to anaesthetise the ostrich.

He approached the heaving bird, pinned to the ground by half a dozen keepers. One of them pulled back a wing to allow h im easier access to the ostrich's chest.

'Here, massa, it better now,' said the keeper.

Father parted the few remaining quills. They rattled like bamboo canes. Each the thickness of a pencil. Downy barbs dark and iridescent.

I saw him take a deep breath. I bet his heart was pumping as wildly as mine. 'Here we go then,' he said as, with an area of pimply skin exposed, he slipped the needle into the bird's chest muscles. There was a slight twitch. Seconds later, the ostrich gave a sigh and gently relaxed.

Just how much damage had the antelope done? I wondered. It was easy to spot where the antelope had gouged a hole. There was a gash on the left-hand side of the abdomen. Six inches or so in length. The skin folded over its edges. Father gently plucked away the feathers and

congealed blood. In doing so, the wound opened up to reveal a glistening layer of muscle. Muscle which had a rip in it.

'This doesn't look too good,' Father said to me. 'That antelope's horn has punctured the abdomen. Means I'll have to take a look inside. See if there's any internal damage.'

It meant working swiftly. The only sterility available was a bucket of water and soap. Father scrubbed up rapidly, dropped to his knees beside the bird and set to work, slicing through the muscle to open the wound up further so that he could insert his hand inside the bird's abdomen.

Gingerly, he slid his hand in, moving in deeper and deeper until up to his forearm.

'I can feel the liver,' he muttered. 'And the upper parts of the intestines.' He paused. 'Mmm … that's odd.'

'What is it, Dad?'

'Shit!' he exclaimed. 'There's something wrong here.' He eased a section of gut out through the incision. It flopped out onto the drape, glistening. It was severed. Its jagged end oozed green fluid.

'You know what that means,' he said grimly. 'Somewhere, still inside the ostrich, is the other end of that portion of gut. I'll have to go back in and see if I can find it. Then try to stitch the ends together.' He shook his head. 'Almost an impossible task.'

'But still worth a go, Dad,' I urged.

'Wetin dey happen?' boomed a voice behind me. Chuck had now joined us and was peering over my shoulder. Father explained what he'd found. 'You will find den,' said Chuck, encouragingly.

Perspiring freely, Father set to work, black faces crowded round him, eager not to miss this white man's magic.

He managed to locate the other end of intestine and pulled it out.

Only then was the full extent of the damage revealed. The two ends didn't match. A large section was missing.

Father swore and shook his head again. He looked up at me and Chuck. 'She's been disembowelled.'

'Na, so?' murmured Chuck.

The proof was suddenly slid across the ground to Father. A battered box containing several feet of pulverised bowel. Unknown to us, a keeper had found them earlier, trampled in the dust, and had put them in the box for safe keeping. No doubt they had slipped out when the ostrich had been gored. In her panic, she had trodden on them and gutted herself.

'Sorry, Chuck,' said Father, 'but I don't think there's anything I can do to save her.'

His words were prophetic. A few seconds later, the ostrich gave a rattling gasp and died.

'Ah, no worry, you dun well to try,' Chuck said; for once his voice a tone or two quieter. He patted Father's arm as he got up.

But the sense of failure affected us all. As we silently trailed back to the Land Rover, a little boy darted towards us through the herd of antelope.

'Massa … Massa …' he shrilled, racing up to Father.

The boy was hugging a sticky bundle of feathers close to his chest. The struggling mass gave a determined cheep. Small wings flapped and long legs kicked out resolutely. A beady eye peered at us, full of indignation.

Suddenly the mood changed. Spontaneous applause broke out and faces beamed once again.

Even Father's face creased into a broad grin.

As did mine.

Well, who could blame us? Since there was plenty to smile about. An egg had hatched. A chick had been born. The spitting image of mum.

6

Army Ants Attack

Living in the tropics, one was bound to encounter all sorts of creatures. Those of the wriggly, slithery variety such as millipedes, snails and toads could be fascinating to observe. Not so fascinating if they were liable to sting, bite or spray you with foul-smelling and often poisonous fluids.

The concrete walkway from the end of our *gidah* where my bedroom was situated to the bathroom was the perfect place for a whole mass of crawlies to congregate each evening. This was because it only had a wooden wall to one side, in the middle of which was an electric light. The other side was open and overlooked a patch of bare earth which disappeared into the bushes and trees which made up the back garden.

The light bulb was the attraction for flying ants, moths and other night-time insects. They, in turn, enticed geckos to crawl out of crevices in the wall and ceiling; their sticky foot pads allowing them to dart across to the bulb and have a tasty snack on the bugs buzzing around it. Any insects spiralling down onto the walkaway were at the mercy of a circle of frogs and toads that had hopped out from the adjacent bushes to join each other for dinner.

Accompanying them in this festive jamboree, tracking across the bare patch of garden, was the occasional millipede. It would skim over, its multitude of legs propelled it forward at high speed like a jet-propelled frankfurter.

At a more sedate pace, giant land-snails, the size of apples, would follow, leaving slimy trails as they glided over to the walkway. It was intriguing to watch them, their eyes at the tips of their horns, twisting this way and that as they picked out their route.

Not so intriguing were ants. They were found everywhere. The army ant was the worst. A large ant whose pincers could give you a vicious bite and in doing so, inject you with formic acid which would really sting. And if there was a swarm of these ants, all biting you at the same time, you could die. Certainly, they were known to have killed sheep and goats.

So, you can imagine how terrified I was when a column of army ants invaded my bedroom one night. The memory of that evening is still indelibly etched in my mind.

By now, a routine had been well established with Poucher. She slept in a comfortable little bed next to mine. She usually slept quietly with not a sound out of her. But not that night.

It was the rustling that woke me. The sound of myriads of scurrying feet. Frightened, I sat up. It was pitch black. Too dark to see anything. My imagination seethed with snakes, rats and millipedes crawling, pouring out of the jungle only yards from my open-mesh window. I felt desperately alone. My parents had gone to an official function at the social club. Yusefu, I knew, was at home with his family at the other end of the *gidah*. Yet, at that moment, those quarters could have been on the other side of the moon. The rustling got louder. Poucher stirred in her basket. I heard her turn restlessly. There was the chomp of jaws as she muzzled. Then a whimper.

'What is it Poucher?' I whispered, my head pressed against the mosquito net, trying to peer down at her without moving from the bed.

There was a sharp yelp.

'Poucher,' I repeated, my voice trembling.

From the corner of the room came the rattle of the food bin, a large metal container in which I kept a store of grain for my pet bantams and ducks.

I began to shiver. Rivulets of perspiration trickled down my arms.

The mosquito net twitched. On three sides, the net came alive. I could feel it twisting and quivering in the dark. Like thousands of jagged finger nails clawing at it. What was happening?

'Yusefu!' I screamed. But surely he wouldn't be able to hear me. He was too far away. Poucher's squealing had increased in intensity. I had to save her. Not wait for rescue.

With shaking hands, I lifted the edge of the mosquito net. Something dropped onto my hand and scurried up my

arm. I swept the creature off. As the fold of the net slipped down behind me, I felt more creatures land in my hair and run across my face. The instant my feet touched the floor, they were smothered. I raced across the room to the light switch, feeling the creatures biting into me like red-hot needles. I hammered on the light to reveal the full horror of the scene.

The room was a seething, heaving black carpet of army ants.

Thousands of these insects, each over an inch long and with powerful pincers, darted across the floor, milled up the walls and swept over the mosquito net. I'd read about the devastation army ants can cause. How they advance in their millions. Smother animals in their path. Kill them. Strip the flesh from their bones. And these ants were angry – very angry – at being disturbed.

In one corner of the room, a swaying column of ants, at least a foot wide, and scores of ants deep, poured down from the ceiling into the food bin, the cereals being picked up and carried off, grain by grain. Droves of foragers weaved over the bed, the wardrobe and me. They were searching, attacking and digging their vicious pincers into anything that moved.

Poucher skittered round the room in a blind panic, her bodies pin-cushioned with ants. I staggered across to the door that led onto the veranda, trying to brush and pull off the ants that were scurrying up my legs. It was a hopeless task. For every one knocked off, three latched on.

The veranda was no better. It was a mass of ants. The light from my room picked out an undulating sea of black on the lawn. Not a blade of grass in sight. As I stumbled

towards the servants' quarters, Poucher bolted past me into the depths of the night.

My screams finally roused Yusefu. He darted down the veranda. 'Master Malcolm, you soon be done good,' he jabbered, as he swept me up in his powerful arms and swiftly carried me into the safety of the lounge – an area free of the army of ants. There, he crushed and prised off the scores of ants that still had their pinchers buried in my red-blotched, swollen arms and legs. He then raced through into the kitchen and hurried back, his arms laden with cans of insecticide spray.

'Here, let me help,' I urged, jumping up despite my burning limbs.

Slowly, we advanced into my bedroom, our arms stretched out, one can in each hand, spraying a path through the ants. We both began to cough from the pungent smell as can after can was poured on the writhing mass. The column of ants that ran down the corner of the room gradually collapsed. Layer by layer, the numbers dwindled. Dead comrades were abandoned. The rustling died away. The main body of ants moved on.

Back in the lounge, Yusefu smothered me with handfuls of calamine lotion. My arms, legs, torso and face were caked in cream.

'I look like a blancmange,' I said, staring ruefully down at my pink-streaked body.

'You go back to bed now?' queried Yusefu.

I shook my head vigorously. No way. I wanted to wait until Mother and Father came home and then be able to regale them with my ordeal. Besides, Poucher hadn't returned yet. I couldn't possibly go back to sleep without

knowing whether she was safe or not. Certainly not. No way. I'd sit in the armchair on the veranda and wait for them.

It was the car engine and the crunch of tyres on the gravel that jolted me awake. I watched the headlights weave round the drive. The car lurched to a halt and the lights extinguished. There was much banging of doors, giggling and fumbling with keys, before two very red-faced parents staggered up the veranda steps. They came to halt in front of me, swaying slightly.

'My dear … what on earth …?' exclaimed Mother, her hand flying to her face.

The evening's events, so carefully rehearsed in my mind, failed to materialize. 'Oh, Mum …' I sobbed, falling into her arms in floods of tears. 'Ants … ants …they …'

'Yes, damn pests,' declared Father, stamping his foot squarely on a solitary ant that had lost his column of compatriots.

'But there were thousands of them,' I wailed.

Mother and Father rapidly sobered up with the appearance of Yusefu, his arms stretched round a large cardboard box, brim-full of dead ants, which he dropped with a thud at their feet.

'My God, I see what you mean,' said Father, his voice cracking.

As if on cue, with ants still clinging to her, Poucher slipped out from the shadows and greeted us with a muted whine.

'Oh, Poucher,' I cried, dropping to my knees to crush her to me. 'Thank God you're still alive.' But we discovered, the next morning, that my pet bantams and ducks had not been

so lucky. They'd been taken by the marauding horde. All that remained, a few feathers.

Still, at least Poucher had survived.

And thank goodness she did because a few months later, she saved Mother and me from a vicious attack by a troop of baboons.

7

Saving Sooty the Cat

They say cats often acquire you rather than the other way round. That they just turn up. Pad through your house. Take a sniff or two. And perhaps then consider taking up residence. The decision resting on whether a large bowl of tasty food and a saucer of full cream milk are offered or not.

We certainly hadn't intended taking on a cat, much as I would have liked to.

And that's because Mother wasn't too fond of felines.

She and I sat on the veranda one morning having cold lemonades while we discussed this. I'd been trying for ages to convince her that having a cat would be no problem. She'd be OK with it. But try as I might, I couldn't persuade her to change her mind.

‘Sorry, dear,’ she said. ‘I’m just too uneasy when they’re around.’

‘But, Mum …’

Mother held up a hand. ‘I know what you’re going to say. That cats are fascinating creatures with great characters and an independent streak to be much admired. You’re right of course. Yet despite that, when I’ve tried to make friends with them over the years, I’ve failed miserably every time.’

‘But you could try again,’ I pleaded. ‘See what happens this time.’

Mother shook her head. ‘The wretched beasts seem to sense my nervousness and as a result, I swear they deliberately try to provoke me.’ Mother took a sip of lemonade. ‘So, the answer’s No.’

As if to explain her feelings, she went on to tell me about Bobby, the black and white cat owned by her school friend, Tricia. Whenever she visited Tricia, the cat fixed her with a penetrating stare and padded up, tail erect – a sign of greeting.

‘So, he liked you,’ I said.

Mother shook her head. ‘No way.’

I was told Bobby would then proceed to rub his head against Mother’s leg, smearing her with his secretions – his way of telling her she smelt funny and needed to be marked by his own scent.

I learnt that Mother once allowed Bobby to leap onto her lap, where he promptly curled round and settled down.

‘So, friends at last,’ I declared. ‘Did you give him a stroke?’

‘I tried,’ said Mother.

‘And …?’

‘He bit me.’

‘Oh.’

So, that was that. End of story. No more attempts to make friends with cats.

A week or two after that conversation, we were again on the veranda, only this time having afternoon tea. I’d returned home from school half an hour earlier and was eagerly devouring the latest exploits of Dan Dare in the *Eagle* comic which Mother had brought back from her shopping trip into Ibadan that morning. The comic was months out-of-date, having been imported from the UK but that didn’t matter. There were plenty of Dan’s Daring-dos to catch up on.

So, there I was, open comic spread across my lap, one hand holding a ham sandwich, the other turning the comic’s pages. So absorbed was I with Dan’s adventures, I failed to notice the little head that was suddenly bobbing beneath my armchair.

But Mother immediately spotted it.

‘Malcom, what’s that cat doing under your chair?’

‘What?’

‘That black cat. See for yourself.’

I pushed my comic to one side and peered under my chair.

There, crouched, paws tucked in, was a tiny black cat. ‘Why, it’s a black cat,’ I declared. The cat looked up at me as if to verify that it was indeed the cat that I was referring to.

‘Well, you know my views on cats, Malcolm. Shoo it away.’

I rustled my *Eagle* comic and uttered a very half-hearted, feeble, ‘Shoo.’

The cat took no notice.

'I can do better than that,' said Mother and stamped her feet while emitting a very loud, 'Scram.'

That did the trick. Startled, the little black cat shot from under my chair and sprinted into the nearby bushes to be swallowed up by the foliage.

'Let's hope that's the last we see of it,' said Mother, settling down to resume her tea.

I rather wished the opposite.

And my wish came true. But in a way that was really horrific.

The Land Rover had just dropped me off from school at the top of the dusty track that led down to our *gidah* before it sped on its way round Ibadan's suburbs to drop off other school kids along the way. The sun was still hot despite it being close to four o'clock and I could feel it burning through my school shirt as I shuffled down the track, satchel over one shoulder, making little clouds of red laterite dust as I went. I passed the entrance to our neighbour, Major Carr and his wife, who lived behind us in a similar *gidah* to ours. The entrance to our bungalow was the next one along. It was framed by two palm trees, one each side of the drive, and the *gidah* hidden from view by lofty bowers of hibiscus. It was always good to slip through that shady entrance knowing I was nearly home.

Only today, a car was blocking the entrance. A battered and very dusty cream Cadillac around which was a huddle of people. Amongst them, my mother and Yusefu.

I quickened my pace, wondering what was going on.

Mother spotted me and hurried over. 'Oh, Malcolm, I'm afraid there's been an accident.'

For an awful moment I feared it was Poucher. That she'd been run over.

'No, no, dear,' Mother reassured me. 'It's the little black cat that was under your chair the other day. It ran out in front of that gentleman's car just as he was passing our drive.' She pointed to a portly chap in a sweat-stained safari jacket, fanning his face with a bush hat. Clearly, he was distressed at what had happened and the heat was making his distress even worse.

I started to run over to the car where Yusefu was kneeling next to the front tyre. Mother tried to restrain me but I pushed her away. 'Is she alive?' I queried, peering over Yusefu's shoulder. The cat was stretched out on the track, very still, blood seeping from her mouth, making a red puddle in the sand under her jaw.

'She no dead,' said Yusefu. To prove his point, the poor cat gave a rattling, irregular gasp of breath.

'In which case, let's get her indoors and we'll phone Dad.'

Fortunately, Father was in the area and was able to get back within ten minutes. But that ten minutes seemed an awfully long time. We laid the cat out on a blanket on the dining room table, not wishing to move her more than necessary in case we did further damage.

'So, what's happened?' exclaimed Father when he eventually charged in.

'This little cat. It's been run over,' I said.

The cat was still flat out, unconscious.

Father began an examination.

He discovered the bleeding from the mouth was due to a broken tooth, nothing too serious. He palpated her limbs. No

fractures detected. But there was a grating noise from the pelvic area as he lifted her hindquarters.

'Ah, we've something wrong here,' he remarked quietly. 'Could be a break. We'll need to get her X-rayed to see if any damage has been done to her pelvis.'

It meant transporting the cat across to the Agricultural Department's veterinary clinic where there was an X-ray machine capable of doing the job. Meanwhile, Father gave the cat an anti-inflammatory injection to counteract the shock before she was eased into a basket and driven over for that X-ray. I went with him, anxious to find out if there was any serious damage to the cat's hindquarters.

Turned out there was.

Father bit his bottom lip as he studied the radiograph he'd taken of the cat's pelvis.

'Hmm. Just as I feared,' he said. 'Multiple fractures.'

'Sounds serious, Dad,' I said, peering at the X-ray, not really understanding what I was looking at. A higgledy-piggledy jumble of white bones against a black background.

Father nodded. 'It means her hindquarters are paralysed. She won't be able to walk.'

'Really? Not ever again?'

'That's a distinct possibility. Though we won't know for sure until she recovers consciousness and we can assess how she copes.'

'So, she *might* be able to walk again?' I queried.

Father shrugged his shoulders. 'Don't raise your hopes too high.'

'But it's worth giving her the chance, surely?'

'Let's see.'

‘I think we *should* give her a chance,’ I suddenly declared.

Father turned to me. ‘She’ll take a lot of nursing,’ he warned. ‘There’ll be no bladder control. So, we’ll have to be empty her bladder manually each day. And she’s bound to get constipated. It could take weeks before we see any improvement.’ From his tone, it was clear he was far from enthusiastic about the idea.

‘I still think it’s worth a go,’ I said, my voice suddenly filling with determination. ‘And I’ll do it, if you show me how.’

Father grinned. ‘Okay. We’ll give it a go. But first we’ve got to get your mum on side. You know her views on cats.’

I’d already thought of that and told Father I’d keep the cat in my bedroom. Turn it into a ward, the cat confined to one corner. That surely wouldn’t upset Mother.

Father and I confronted her with the little cat in her basket, trying to lick herself clean.

‘She’s a sweet little thing, isn’t she?’ I crooned, peering into the basket.

‘She’s going to be a fighter,’ added Father. ‘But will need all the help we can give her. Don’t you think, dear?’ He looked at Mother as he ran a hand gently down the cat’s back.

No way could she say No. And she didn’t.

It was an onerous task to keep the little cat clean and it was very, very time-consuming.

I watched one such session. Father manually expressed the cat’s bladder until the flow of urine slowed to a dribble. He then carefully manipulated out the faecal boluses from

the rectum. Finally, he washed down her hindquarters and dried and dusted them with talcum powder.

'There. All done,' he declared when he'd finished. It was done with quiet efficiency. No sign of emotion. No sentiments expressed. 'Now we need to think of a name for her.'

I already had. 'Sooty,' I said. So Sooty it was.

From then on, I looked after her, copying what Father had done twice a day.

First thing in the morning, I'd jump out of bed and cross to the corner where her bed was. There, I'd tickle her whiskers and she'd respond by rubbing her head against my fingers, purring loudly.

Three days after the accident, Sooty was strong enough to lift herself up on her front legs. By the end of the week, she'd peed of her own accord.

I informed Father. 'Why, that's marvellous,' he exclaimed.

'Yep, it's a great start.' I crossed my fingers, hoping the improvement would continue. And it did.

Over the ensuing days, the reflexes in the Sooty's back legs returned. She twisted round to look when Father pricked the skin of her rump. She began to flick her tail – until now it had been limp, without the slightest bit of movement.

'Looks like she's on the mend,' I enthused.

'But we're not out of the woods yet,' Father reminded me. 'We've still got to see whether she can walk or not.'

When Sooty finally managed to stagger to her feet, I saw it happen and let out a hoot of joy. 'Yippee,' I cried. 'You've made it. Well done, Sooty.'

Trembling, she was standing. Her hindquarters leaning against the bedroom wall for support. But nevertheless, she *was* standing.

When Sooty started tottering a few steps, I started to worry about Mother's response. Would she allow her into the rest of the *gidah*?

I eased Sooty into my arms and carefully carried her through to the lounge where Mother was sitting, reading a book.

'Sooty's starting to walk,' I said.

Mother placed the book on the arm of her chair and looked across at me. I waited with bated breath to hear what she'd say. 'You're going to ask me if we can keep her, aren't you?'

I gulped. Unable to answer.

'Well,' she went on, 'after all the wonderful care you've given the cat, I can't possibly say No, can I?' Her blue eyes twinkled.

I grinned broadly.

And Sooty stayed.

Though she walked with a limp, her right leg withered, the little cat soon became another precious member of our ever-increasing family. We witnessed some strange creatures turn up at our *gidah*. Very strange indeed. There was one in particular. A camel called Elizabeth which was to make her appearance a few months later.

8

Menaced By Baboons

Our menagerie of animals seemed to increase by the week. OK, I certainly had a fascination with animals – especially those of the unusual and exotic variety. And living here in Nigeria made it that much easier to be involved with them. Either spotted in the garden or observed at Ibadan Zoo. Plus the fact that Father, being a vet, was also involved with them, but usually on a much closer basis. He often brought home animals requiring veterinary treatment. Such as the young duiker – a deer with a broken leg and the hawk with a damaged wing. These animals would be accommodated in a variety of hand-made cages that were constructed rapidly out of packing cases and segments of steel mesh as soon as a new arrival needed housing. The cages were then stacked at one end of the long veranda that stretched in front of the *gidah*.

Poor Mother. She had to tolerate all of this.

As the weeks went by, she saw more and more of the veranda disappearing under a plethora of cages; each one eating into the available living area. Some big cages, some small cages. She never knew what bug-eyed creature might be the next to stare out of one.

To add to all of this, there was my own collection of animals. Two tortoises, a chameleon called Chloe, six bantams and four ducks. Plus a pair of geckos named Sid and Lawrence that scuttled across the ceiling of my bedroom each night. But there was one creature we had yet to acquire – a monkey. And actually, I wasn't so sure I wished to have any dealings with such a creature after a terrifying experience Mother and I had with a troop of them.

It occurred on one of our excursions to the River Ogan. This time, it was during the dry season – in stark contrast to our previous visit, which had been during the rainy season. Now, the river was a mere trickle.

With the river so low, it became a child's paradise. A terrific place to explore. Very exciting.

It was a delight to scramble across the gigantic, grey boulders, between which flowed rivulets of water. Foaming splashes of miniature waterfalls murmured down into warm pools, carved out in the rocks. Pools in which I could paddle and wade, wriggling my toes in sharp sand. Deeper pockets of water, dark and sinister, sucked and gurgled through the exposed tangled roots of teak and mahogany trees that overhung the river's banks. Here, I discovered shoals of mottled grey fish, trapped in these pockets until the next rains raised the level of the river. These fish proved a testing

time for Father's rod. But once hooked, made a delicious meal when cooked over a charcoal fire on the river's bank.

Mother and I left Father to catch our supper while we ventured upriver, with Poucher alongside us. We scrambled from one pool to another, enticed on by the sandy-fringed bays, the channels of tiny white rapids, their spray dancing into the air, catching the sun in myriads of miniature rainbows that shimmered and shifted across the ravine.

We trekked further than intended, caught up in the magic of the river. In the thickly wooded gorge, the dense shade occasionally gave way to pockets of sunshine that lit up the dank, dark banks where the soil was as rich as fruitcake. And here, alongside the clear gurgling water, butterflies were sitting, row upon row, their wings opening and closing slowly. With each up-turn of their wings, we saw flame-red change to white or sky-blue switch to purple. As Mother and I walked through them, they rose waist-high in a shimmering merry-go-round of colour.

'Beautiful, so beautiful,' murmured Mother as the butterflies dipped and wheeled around her. We were both entranced.

Moving further up the river, the woods gave way to gentler slopes, still boulder-strewn but more open; the river bed more spread out.

It was here I spotted a blur of brown move high above us on top of a crag. I screwed my eyes up against the glare, attempting to make out what it was.

'Can you see it, Mum?' I said, pointing.

She raised a hand to her brow and scoured the hillside. 'No. Can't see anything.'

'There, look. It's jumped,' I exclaimed.

The creature had scrambled down a few feet and now, no longer silhouetted against the sky, was easier to see.

'Hey, it's a baboon,' I said, jumping up and down. 'Just wait 'til I tell Dad.'

Mother wasn't so enthusiastic. 'I think we ought to be getting back,' she faltered.

Meanwhile, Poucher had sprung up onto a rock and was staring in the direction of the baboon, hackles raised. The monkey bobbed its head up and down, then disappeared.

'Come on, let's get going,' insisted Mother.

I turned away reluctantly. After all, it wasn't every day you saw a baboon.

Having gone a few yards, I couldn't resist the urge to look back.

'Hey, there it is again,' I yelled.

The baboon had reappeared halfway down the slope and hence much closer. He was leaning forward, knuckles resting on a rock, his shoulders hunched. He had a magnificent mane framing his head – thick, brown, flecked with black. Piggy, amber eyes stared intently down at us. He suddenly stood up, opened his mouth and exposed long, yellow fangs. He sprang forward, stopped, bent his head and raised his rump, then emitted a deep, menacing grunt.

My excitement instantly turned to fear. I'd read enough about baboons to know exactly what this fellow was telling us. And it wasn't good news.

It put an extra spring into my step as I hastily jumped from one boulder to another, attempting to catch Mother up, who'd had the sense to keep going and not stop like I'd done.

The baboon's grunt now turned into a barrage of shrill, angry barks.

I was startled. So was Mother. I saw her lose her footing. She slipped off a boulder, and careered down onto another one, her left leg buckling under her as she landed heavily on her side. She sat up with a groan. 'Damn,' she said, massaging her ankle. 'Think I've sprained it.'

Another series of staccato barks echoed across the gorge. Closer. I looked round nervously. A baboon leapt into view only feet away from the riverbank. Then another. And another. Well over a dozen or so. Brown heads bobbed. Menacing lips curled back, exposing yellow fangs. A very unfriendly troop had appeared, intent on defending their territory.

'We must get back, Mum,' I said, helping Mother to her feet.

We began the difficult task of edging our way downstream, navigating round the pools, Mother hobbling, clearly in pain. Every step seemed to be a signal for the baboons to follow. As the river bed narrowed, the ravine closing in, so too did the baboons. They loped nearer and nearer, urging themselves on with excited barks.

Up to then, Poucher had kept close to our heels, every so often, pausing to turn her head and emit a low growl in the direction of the troop.

Then Mother slumped down on a rock. 'It's no good. I'll have to rest a minute,' she gasped.

It seemed that the leader of the troop – the male we'd initially spotted – took this as a signal to launch an attack. He leapt from the bank, flying in a zigzag across the rocks,

rapidly bearing down on us. The rest of the troop shot down the bank after him.

At that point, Poucher slipped away from us, heading straight for the baboons, hackles raised.

'No, Poucher. Come back,' I screamed. 'They'll tear you to pieces.'

My order was disobeyed.

Purposefully, Poucher stalked forward, head lowered, tail stretched out stiffly behind her. Each foreleg and opposite hind-leg slowly raised before being replaced on the rocks.

The leader of the troop halted. He postured. Body raised and lowered. Lips retracted in a demonic grin. Eyebrows repeatedly shooting up and down. He grunted, sticking his chin out.

But still, Poucher moved forward stealthily, undeterred.

The distance between them narrowed.

Yards became feet.

The baboon faltered. Shuffled back a pace. Stopped.

Poucher stopped too, her whole body rigid.

They were testing one another. Daring each other to make the next move. The baboon sat back on his rump. Then, sprung up with a defiant snarl, his eyebrows almost meeting the top of his forehead. It was a gesture meant to frighten. To intimidate.

But Poucher stood her ground. Never flinched.

The baboon faltered, twisting his head away. The rest of the troop had stopped on the riverbank, awaiting his command. He turned back to face Poucher and with his mane fanned out by the breeze, he seemed to double in size. Terrifying. Threatening.

Poucher's head suddenly shot up and a deep, rumbling growl welled up from her throat. The baboon squealed and took a flying leap back. Encouraged, Poucher padded forward, barking furiously.

That was enough. The troop leader turned and with a final grimace over his naked red rump, he tore back across the rocks and up onto the bank to join the other baboons before they all streamed off.

We were safe. All thanks to Poucher.

When we got back to Father, we were full of what had happened. How Poucher had saved us.

As we finished telling him, he pursed his lips. 'You were very lucky,' he said. 'Baboons can be very savage.'

It was certainly an incident not to be forgotten, and the reason I wasn't too keen on meeting up with a monkey again.

But I was going to meet one sooner than expected. And at very close quarters. So close that I could easily have been badly bitten.

9

A Monkey with Toothache

‘Chuck’s been on the phone,’ said Father. ‘Wonders if I can pop over to the zoo and take a look at one of his Patas monkeys. He reckons it’s got toothache. Fancy coming along?’

I hesitated, thinking of that encounter I’d had with the baboons. But that had been in the wild. This would be in the zoo. Much safer. Besides, a monkey with toothache sounded interesting. Especially as I’d lost a tooth myself recently. It had been wobbly for ages before I managed to prise it out with my fingers. Maybe this monkey also had a loose tooth which needed Father’s fingers to yank it out. So, I said, ‘Yes, please, Dad.’

Chuck was already outside the monkey enclosure when we arrived. He gave each of us a hefty bear-paw handshake.

‘Welcome, welcome,’ he boomed with his customary split-melon toothy smile. ‘Good you come.’

The monkey pen was totally enclosed in mesh, fitted out with wooden perches, swings, and tyres suspended from chains. Plenty for monkeys to play with. Only there were none in sight.

‘They dum in der shed,’ laughed Chuck, pointing. ‘Tink they know you come.’

Leading off from the pen was a small tunnel, screened by a rubber flap, which gave access to the shed Chuck had indicated. A muffled volley of squeals and grunts was now coming from it.

‘It be Moses. He makes noise. Loud time,’ cried Chuck, stomping over to the side of the shed and giving it a hefty thump. ‘Moses, out der come. Mr good Doctor, he here to see dat tooth.’

Pale slender fingers curled round the bottom of the flap and lifted it a fraction. A pair of yellow-grey eyes peered out from a black, furry face.

Chuck thumped the shed wall again. ‘Come out, you. No be shy.’

Still the inmate of the shed wasn’t willing to emerge.

Chuck rattled the lock on the door. That did the trick. Out shot a lanky-bodied monkey with ginger-red fur, a sooty-black face, white-haired chest and long, stringy tail, carried erect.

‘Dat be Melinda,’ Chuck informed us. ‘One of der four Patas.’

She was closely followed by two more monkeys, one hugging a baby close to her chest.

‘Maureen and Mavis,’ we were told. ‘Moses’ wives.’

‘And here be der big boy himself,’ said Chuck, as a large, well-muscled monkey with a gleaming gingery coat, padded out through the tunnel. Wow. What a fine fellow this Moses was. Yes, indeed. Quite formidable.

He stood up on his back legs stretching himself to his full height, exposing his undercarriage; in doing so it was obvious why he was called a big boy. He wiggled his eyebrows at us and gave a short staccato grunt before dropping onto all fours again to nonchalantly saunter across the pen.

The female with the baby gave a whimper of fear and made a dash for the tunnel. In a flash, Moses leapt across and pounced on her back, sinking his teeth into her shoulder. She let out a scream and cowered in submission on the ground, rump in the air.

‘Hey! Hey! You dum stop dat,’ cried Chuck, followed by a foghorn. ‘No!’ and a rattling of the mesh.

Moses let go – the female shooting into the shed while he glowered at us. He then sprang. He hit the mesh with a violent crash, gripped it with both hands and shook it, teeth bared in a malevolent grin.

‘Ah, you be show-off big time,’ declared Chuck with a howl of laughter.

Father gave me a sideways glance, eyebrows arched.

I could guess what he was thinking. Moses wasn’t the only show-off big time.

The monkey continued to grimace, displaying long, vicious canines, one each side of his upper jaw. Even though I was standing some distance away, I could see the tip of the right one had broken off.

‘Dat’s der problem. You dum see?’ Chuck pointed at the blunted tooth.

Father nodded. ‘And see that red ulcerated area above it on his cheek?’ he said.

It was Chuck’s turn to nod.

‘It’s because of that broken canine,’ Father went on. ‘Infection has got in through the tooth and tracked up to Moses’ cheek.’

‘Ah, so what you do about dat?’

‘I’m afraid his tooth will have to be extracted,’ replied Father.

Chuck waved his hairy paws in the air, causing the sleeves on his voluminous white robe to billow out, making him look like a deflating air balloon. ‘Not good. Not good,’ he wailed. ‘Pulling dat tooth out will hurt big time.’

Father tried to reassure him that it would be okay. Moses would be given an anaesthetic. He wouldn’t feel a thing.

‘But den after dat, he feel pain?’ cried Chuck. There followed several more booming “Not good … Not goods …” as he jumped up and down with worry.

Eventually, Father managed to calm him down. But Chuck’s agitation had put him on edge. Beads of sweat trickled down his face and darkened the armpits of his shirt. I was the same. Nervous as to how the tooth extraction would go. After all, it wasn’t as if we could pop Moses in a dentist’s chair, ask him to open his mouth and say Ahh. Our heads would have been bitten off in an instant, bad tooth or no bad tooth.

Once Father had indicated he was ready to proceed, Chuck clapped his huge palms together and shouted for the head keeper to get in the enclosure with a net. ‘You no go

slow, slow,' he ordered as the little man scooted into the pen with a, 'Yes, massa. Me go quick, quick.'

And he was quick.

Chuck stood by the trapdoor of the shed, ready to bolt the flap closed once the three females had been run in. This they did with loud cries of 'prup … prup …' as soon as they caught sight of the catching net that the keeper was carrying.

Moses, in true macho manner, had no intention of being intimidated by the net and even after the keeper had entered the pen with it, he continued to pace up and down one of the perches, raising and lowering his head while emitting a series of threatening grunts.

Chuck heaved a sigh.

I bit my lip.

Father remained mute.

All of us waited for the next move. Would it be from the keeper? Or would it be from Moses?

Spellbound, I watched as the keeper advanced, waving the pole of the net in front of him. Moses backed along the perch and then swung onto the mesh, still grunting, clearly annoyed. I saw him sink back on his legs, ready to launch himself over the keeper's shoulder. But his move had been anticipated and as he took that flying leap, the keeper whipped the net over his head, swiping sideways so that the net crashed to the floor of the pen, Moses hopelessly entangled inside it. Putting one foot on the pole to anchor it, the keeper pulled the net down tight so that Moses was pinned to the ground. Helpless.

'Right. He dum ready,' the keeper declared with a grin and a whistle.

‘In you dum go then,’ shouted Chuck. ‘Quick. Quick. No waste time.’ He flapped his hands, gesticulating wildly at us.

So, Father and I raced in with the portable veterinary kit.

It was easy enough to jab the anaesthetic through the netting and into the muscle of Moses’ hind leg without getting bitten.

Within minutes, the monkey had succumbed and was unconscious. Father untangled him from the net and carried him across to a table in a nearby feed room where he stretched him out.

Chuck followed us in.

‘Dat der tooth big, big,’ he commented, running a finger along the side of the broken canine.

Father unrolled a pack of dental instruments. He then eased a scalpel blade up round the gum margins of the broken canine and used a dental elevator to prise up the sides, twisting it up and down, gradually loosening the tooth. It was fascinating to watch. There wasn’t any bleeding. If there had been, I might have felt a little faint. I could be rather queasy. There was a sudden crack as the tooth’s root parted from the jawbone. Father reached for the dental extractor, gripped the tooth and wiggled it back and forth, then yanked. Out came the tooth with a loud plop, leaving a well of blood into which Father quickly rammed some cotton wool to soak it up. I did feel queasy then. Just a bit.

‘What do you reckon?’ Father was eyeing the other canine tooth as he spoke. ‘Should I remove that one as well?’

He explained that though it would be a pity to remove a sound tooth. It meant that there would be less severe bite wounds to deal with should Moses attack the females.

‘Moses show who is boss man,’ declared Chuck. ‘So he dum do that many times.’

‘So, I’ll remove it then,’ said Father.

The second canine wasn’t so easy to extract, being well cemented in its socket. But after many minutes of sweating, ever fearful the chisel might slip and shoot up through Moses’ mandible, cracking the bone, he managed to pull it out.

‘Phew. All done,’ he exclaimed, waving the tooth with its long root in the air.

I suddenly had a thought. ‘Hey, Dad. Any chance I could have it as a souvenir?’

‘Well, it’s not really ours,’ replied Father, looking across at Chuck. ‘But if you ask nicely … maybe …’

There was a roar, a waving of a hairy paw and a split-melon smile as I was thumped on the back by Chuck. ‘Young Malcolm want der tooth. Young Malcolm can have der tooth.’

So, the canine became a souvenir of that day. To be added to my collection of shells, dead beetles, mouse skeletons and a mummified bat. To join those souvenirs, I wanted to find the sloughed skin of a snake. But before that happened, I had to confront a really, really huge snake that was very much alive.

10

The Python in the Pillowcase

It was the pillowcase zigzagging across the veranda accompanied by a very loud scream from Mother that announced the arrival of the next addition to our menagerie. One that we really could have done without.

I'd been in my bedroom at the time, trying to catch up on some homework due the next day when I heard the scream. It sounded a really serious scream. One that demanded instant investigation.

So, I picked a tool – that being a crayon with which I was attempting to draw a picture of our *gidah* – and rushed out onto the veranda. Father appeared at the same time from the lounge.

'What the heck's going on?' he cried as we both ground to a halt to stare at Mother in bewilderment.

She was attempting to balance on one of the two armchairs but wobbling all over the place, her arms rotating like aeroplane propellers. *Any moment*, I thought, *she might take off.*

'It's that. Over there. Look,' she shouted, her right arm slowly stopping its revolutions to point a shaky finger towards the front of the veranda and the steps down from it. 'Can't you see?'

Father and I did as instructed. Looked. And did see.

There was a pillowcase, its end tied with string, at the top of the steps. It was quite an attractive pillowcase with dark blue stripes zigzagging across a background of light blue. Perhaps not quite Mother's taste. She was more for liking patterns of pink roses and lilies. Flowery stuff. Not stripes. Nevertheless, a dislike of the pillowcase's zigzags would surely not be a reason for Mother to perch herself atop of an armchair and pretend to be a plane about to do a loop-the-loop. There had to be another, more rational, reason.

That became evident when the pillowcase's zigzags started to zigzag across the veranda floor towards her, the contents of the case hissing loudly. It suddenly stopped, deflated slightly, then reared up, one corner of the case flicking from side to side before it executed a perfect back flip, landing with a thump to continue its slide towards Mother.

Mother, on the point of flipping herself, whimpered, 'Don't stand there, helpless. Do something.'

'Oh course, dear,' said Father, hesitantly putting one foot in front of the other before freezing on the spot as the

pillowcase hissed once more and disappeared under Mother's armchair.

That evoked another shrill cry from her. And more wobbles.

'Shush, dear,' said Father. 'You'll frighten the snake even more.'

'Is that what it is, then?' screamed Mother. 'A snake?'

'I suspect so,' replied Father as the pillowcase reappeared on the other side of Mother's chair where it ground to a halt with another hiss. This generated a further wave of wobbles in Mother. 'Don't you think, Malcolm?' asked Father, turning to me.

To judge from all the hissing, those contents of the pillowcase, when turned out, would turn out to be a snake. And that's what I told him. But what sort? That remained to be seen.

Father suddenly decided action was required of him before Mother broke the springs in the armchair. He strode forward, lifted the bulging pillowcase and carried it through to the lounge where he heaved it onto the dining room table.

'Now what?' I said, following him in to stand a few feet from the table on which the pillowcase was now sitting silently.

'Well, perhaps we should open it up and see what we've got, uh?'

'What if it's a cobra?' The pillowcase suddenly hissed. 'And an angry cobra at that.'

'Highly unlikely,' said Father. 'Someone's obviously caught it up and dumped it on our veranda. They wouldn't have done that if it was a poisonous snake.' Father had begun feeling the pillowcase, running his fingers over the

contours of the inmate. ‘My guess is that it’s a python. From its shape, it certainly feels like one. Only one way to find out.’

Father cautiously untied the twine that had been knotted round the opening of the case and allowed the end to fall open. The sides rippled as did my insides, when a triangular head, with an arrow-shaped cap of chestnut scales, highlighted by a yellow stripe to either side, squeezed out of the gap, a forked tongue flickering. Then, like a gigantic tube of toothpaste that had been violently trodden on, out shot a python, its chestnut-blotched coils whipping across the surface of the dining room table. Its head disappeared over the side and pushed by the coils heaped behind it, the snake toppled over the edge. It spiralled rapidly down onto the floor, collapsing in a pile. The snake then rapidly began to untangle itself and shoot across the floor at a rate of knots to disappear into the darkness under the nearby sideboard.

‘Well, at least we know what we’re dealing with,’ said Father, sounding remarkably calm.

‘An African rock python,’ I said.

‘Indeed.’

‘Africa’s largest snake.’

‘Quite. Though judging by the size of this one, it’s only a youngster.’ Father marched over to the sideboard, dropped to his knees and with a two-arms-forward, spine-curved, knees-bent, pull-back-python-to-room pose dragged the python out. He then heaved it back onto the table.

‘It might have been spritely in its efforts to escape, but it’s not a very healthy-looking specimen,’ declared Father.

He pointed to the python’s scales. Even to my unpractised eye, I could see they were dull, dingy and dry,

hanging loosely from its trunk which, when I plucked up courage to run my hand down it, felt thin and gaunt.

The exertion required to make its escape had left it exhausted. Out of puff. It lay in loose coils on the dining room table, motionless.

'Wonder when this python last ate anything?' said Father. 'Indeed, I wonder if it can eat?' He cautiously stuck his forefinger out and touched its nose. No reaction. He ran his finger over its head. Still nothing. He then slid his forefinger and thumb along the sides of its jaw, squeezing slightly until its mouth opened. Using the forefinger of his right hand, he opened its mouth, the jaws widening and dislocating as they would if about to swallow a rat.

'Careful, Dad,' I warned. 'It might have a go at eating your hand.' But I needn't have worried. The snake was too weak to attack.

Father peered into its mouth. 'Well, it all looks normal, as far as I can tell.'

'So, what next?' I asked.

'Well, we can't let it go in this state. If we did, I reckon it wouldn't survive. That's probably why it got dumped on our veranda. Perhaps someone was hoping we could do something for it. Make it better.'

I shrugged. 'And can we?'

'Well, I guess we could try.'

'How?'

'By giving it some fluids for starters.'

'What, by giving it a drink?' I sounded doubtful. How on earth could you make a python take a drink if it didn't want to?

'By stomach tubing,' answered Father.

‘Really?’

‘Don’t sound so surprised. It’s not that difficult as you’ll see,’ said Father. ‘Even easier if you hold its head for me.’

‘WHAT?’

‘Hold its head,’ repeated Father. ‘Like this.’ He grasped the python’s head behind its jaws and lifted it up. The snake wriggled a bit and then went limp again. It stayed that way when I took over. I stretched it high enough up to hang level with Father’s shoulder.

He hastily lubricated a rubber stomach tube he’d snatched from his black veterinary bag and slid it down over the entrance to the python’s windpipe and down into its stomach. Using a syringe, he then squirted in some glucose saline from his emergency medical kit.

‘Right, that should help to give it some energy. Might even liven it up,’ said Father as he finished. ‘Now the question of where to house it.’

We exchanged glances. Anywhere in the *gidah* would be difficult knowing Mother’s dread of snakes. She was, at present, out on the veranda, recuperating with a cold glass of lemonade after her pillowcase encounter. To be told the python was staying for a while in the house would have thrown her into another fit of apoplexy. Especially if told the python might become more active now it had been given some fluids.

‘There is the broom cupboard on the walkway next to the bathroom,’ I suggested. ‘It’s separate from the rest of the *gidah*. And hasn’t any windows. Just a door. So, it won’t be able to escape.’

Father ran a finger and thumb through his moustache. ‘I’m not so sure,’ he muttered dubiously. ‘You go and discuss it with Mother. I’ll stay here with the snake.’

As anticipated, Mother was aghast at the thought of having the python anywhere on the property. Even if it was in an escape-proof cupboard like the one I was suggesting.

‘But, Mum,’ I implored. ‘It will only be for a couple of days while Dad gives it some more fluids. And then we’ll let it go. Honest.’

Eventually, after much badgering, I got my way. Mother reluctantly agreed. ‘But only for a day or so,’ she insisted. ‘Then you must get rid of it.’

The broom cupboard, once cleared of its brooms and other cleaning equipment, proved ideal. It was small with no hidey-holes for a snake to disappear behind. And the door to it had a sound, secure latch. I could see no reason not to use it to house the snake until Father felt it fit enough to fend for itself back in the wild.

I was confident it wouldn’t escape. Only somehow it managed to.

I’d been walking along the walkway to the bathroom, approaching the broom cupboard in which we had put the python. Only I knew before I even got to the door, that the python was unlikely to be inside. The reason? The door was ajar. I gingerly pushed it open further and stared inside. No sign of the snake. Nothing. I could feel my heart start to beat a little faster. I craned my neck behind the door in the hope it was coiled up there. Nope. No snake. My heart was definitely beginning to pound now. I could hear it in my ears, feel it thumping in my chest. Where was the wretched python?

‘What if it’s inside the *gidah*?’ I said to Father when I’d told him the python had disappeared. ‘Mum will go spare.’

With the help of the two houseboys, we did a thorough search of the *gidah* while Mother was out shopping in Ibadan that morning. No sign of the python. Not a coil in sight.

‘Him dum gone in der bush,’ declared Yusefu.

‘Seems like it,’ replied Father, turning to me. ‘Which is a good thing really if you think about it. Least out in the wild, there’s a good chance it will be able to find something to eat. Help in its recovery.’

I had thought of searching the garden, poking through the shrubs and parting the many clumps of lemongrass. But there didn’t seem much point. Father was right. Hopefully, the python was now able to fend for itself. It must have been hungry. I pictured it having devoured a rat or similar creature and was now coiled up safely somewhere that afternoon, allowing its meal to be digested. That meant I could relax. Not be worried.

But it was that afternoon that Sooty also disappeared. Agrr …

Usually she stayed around the *gidah*, venturing only into the garden to do her business or maybe catch the occasional lizard to bring home as a trophy. It was mid-afternoon before I realised she wasn’t around.

I asked Yusefu and Tobi, the other houseboy, if they’d seen her.

‘No, Master Malcolm. No see Sooty,’ they said, both shaking their heads. Father had gone off on a visit to a farm so couldn’t be asked.

‘I suspect she’s out hunting somewhere,’ Mother commented, relaxing with her post-shopping iced lemonade on the veranda. ‘I wouldn’t be too worried if I were you.’

Ah, but then Mother didn’t know about the python having escaped. And I wasn’t too sure about telling her. If I did, she’d be more than worried. She’d be frantic. Especially if there was a link to Sooty’s disappearance.

My mind went into overdrive. Could the python have pounced on Sooty? Could it at this moment, be resting in a sunny spot while the remains of our poor cat passed down through its innards? I couldn’t bear thinking about it. But I couldn’t help wondering.

It was Yusefu who raised the alarm. ‘Master Malcolm … der dum snake … I find,’ he cried running round from the back of the bathroom, gesticulating wildly as he jumped onto the veranda.

‘What’s this about a snake?’ exclaimed Mother, getting ready to spring onto the armchair once more. I quickly explained about the python, trying to reassure her that she wasn’t in any danger and that the python was likely to have disappeared into the bush.

‘Na … Na …’ said Yusefu, jumping up and down, very agitated. ‘Not in der bush. It in der soakaway. It stuck.’

‘I’ll take a look,’ I said to Mother. ‘You stay here.’

‘I most certainly will,’ she declared and abruptly sat down, pulling her shaking knees between her hands. ‘I’ve had enough of that creature as it is.’

I raced round to the soakaway with Yusefu. It was the same soakaway where we had smoked out the rat and cobra. Only this time, the hole into it was blocked by the python. The front third of its body was out-of-sight, down in the

hole. The other two thirds in a motionless line on the outside of the hole. The python was stuck in that position. And the reason? There was a large bulge in the python's body, wedged in the hole, which was stopping it from moving forward.

'He dum chop chop,' remarked Yusefu, pointing to the bulge.

'It's certainly eaten something,' I said before it rapidly dawned on me what that something could be. It was a horrible thought. But could be true. 'What if it's Sooty?' I asked Yusefu.

He shook his head sadly and tutted. 'If Sooty, it be no good.'

We decided to wait until Father returned to see what should be done. On seeing the situation for himself, he immediately sprang into action. 'Listen … We mustn't jump to conclusions. The python might not have eaten Sooty. But there's one way to find out for certain. We'll get an X-ray taken. See what shows up.' He gripped my shoulder. Felt the tremor in it. 'Be brave, son,' he murmured. 'Be brave.'

But I was imagining an X-ray of Sooty's mortal remains floating inside the python and felt far from brave.

The python got pulled out of the soakaway, bundled into the pillowcase we still had, and taken down to the vet clinic for that X-ray.

'Well there's certainly something there,' said Father, studying the radiograph he'd clipped up on the viewing screen once we'd managed to X-ray the python – not an easy task, the snake being rather lively. But between the two of us, we managed to pin it down on the X-ray plate, holding the bulging section between us as if we were about to pull a

cracker. But no Christmas hat, gift and joke here. Just a jumble of bones. Animal bones for sure. But feline bones? Sooty's?

'It's a rat,' declared Father. 'You can tell by that elongated skull and curved incisors.' He pointed to them on the X-ray.

'Phew. Thank goodness for that,' I exclaimed, wiping away the beads of sweat on my upper lip. Wherever Sooty was, at least it wasn't inside the python.

On the way back to the *gidah*, we stopped at a section of bush that stretched away to the hills in the distance. It looked like a python's paradise, hopefully teeming with tasty morsels for ensuing snake suppers.

'A good place to release the python, eh?' suggested Father.

I agreed.

So, that's where we let the python go, watching it weave away into the undergrowth and disappear from our lives.

Once home, Sooty reappeared into our lives in the gathering gloom of that evening. She hopped up the steps onto the veranda and dropped the mangled remains of an Agami lizard at my feet, its entrails slopping onto my sandals.

'Oh boy, I'm so glad you're back, Sooty,' I exclaimed, picking the mangled lizard up by the tail and tossing into the night sky before turning to pick up Sooty and give her a warm cuddle.

Sooty had returned safely.

But a few months later, Poucher disappeared for three days and we wondered if she'd ever return.

11

The Camel with a Sore Toe

Meanwhile, we continued to have callers turning up at our *gidah*. Some of the four-legged variety. Some of the two-legged sort. One of the latter was a Yoruba trader who would appear every four to six weeks, laden with huge woven grass baskets stuffed with items he wanted to hawk. There'd be a basket balanced on his head. Two baskets across his shoulders, and one tucked under his arm, strapped to his waist. That plethora of baskets earned him the nick-name of Ali Baba. He usually turned up at the weekend when he knew both Father and Mother would be at home, so there was more chance of selling some of his handicrafts. Despite being laden down with baskets, he'd pad swiftly and lightly down the drive, the hem of his sky-blue robe swirling in the dust, only stopping once he reached the steps up to the veranda.

‘Masa, Madam, Ali Baba here,’ he’d call out if we weren’t already on the veranda. ‘I bring plenty, plenty for you see.’

And without waiting for a reply, he’d lever himself and his baskets up the steps into the shade and start to unpack their contents, laying them in a circle around him for us to take a look. A cue for the haggling to start.

Mother and Father would settle themselves in the two armchairs. I’d sit on a black leather, white tassled pouffe – one purchased from Ali several months back.

Ali would tuck his robe under him and squat on the floor, a big grin on his wrinkled, white-whiskery-fringed face as he anticipated the haggling ahead.

‘So, what have you got for us today?’ Mother would ask, peering down at the objects Ali had put out for display: woven straw mats with dyed pictures of wild animals on them, necklaces of cream cowrie shells, black wooden elephant bookends, cow horns carved into crowned cranes, the tips of the horns being the birds’ beaks, small drums, bound in goats’ skins, and much, much more. All bought from remote villages scattered in the bush throughout the region and involving many, many miles of tramping along hot, sandy trails. Ali’s baskets gradually filling with his purchases. Purchases he hoped to sell on to people like us.

The bartering that ensued was thirsty work. So iced jugs of lemonade were always on offer.

‘Thank you, thank you,’ he’d exclaim, gulping down the glassful he’d been given. ‘I come long way with dis gift for Madam,’ he once said, holding up a necklace of cow-horn beads threaded onto string. ‘Very special.’

Mother took the beads and examined them.

‘Ivory,’ said Ali. ‘Madam can have at special price.’

‘Cow horn,’ replied Mother. ‘Cheap. Cheap.’

Ali rocked back on his haunches and laughed – a cackle that exposed a row of broken yellow teeth with a great gap in the middle. But he didn’t argue. He realised Mother knew cow horn when she saw it. Instead, he swiftly replaced the necklace in a pile of similar beads and twisted round to point to one of the mats he’d already rolled out. ‘Master Malcolm, … He like this, yes?’

I found myself staring down at a large, rectangular mat woven out of yellow, sun-bleached grass. Filling the whole of the centre was a camel, dyed in the brightest yellow one could possibly use.

Ali was quick to spot my interest. ‘Young master like dis big time,’ he remarked, looking across at Mother.

Mother looked at Father. Father looked at Ali. ‘How much?’

‘Four pounds,’ said Ali. ‘Good price.’

‘One pound,’ declared Father.

Ali hooted with laughter and shook his head vigorously. ‘Na … Na … Three.’

Mother interrupted, ‘Two.’

Ali clapped his palms together and wrung his hands. ‘Madam drive hard bargain. But for dis young Malcolm, I take two.’

So, the colourful camel mat became mine. Little did I realise that when I next met Ali Baba, he’d present me with a real camel which was just as colourful.

In the meantime, the camel mat, now in pride of place alongside my bed, stimulated my interest in such creatures. I looked up their details in my *Arthur Mee’s Children’s*

Encyclopaedia and was constantly spouting newly learnt facts to my parents.

One morning, as Father sliced the top off his breakfast boiled egg, I said, 'Did you know that camels have three sets of eyelids and two rows of eyelashes to keep the sand out of their eyes?'

'Really,' yawned Father, clearly not that interested.

Over lunch, I informed Mother that a camel's hump can store up to 80 pounds of fat which they can live off for weeks.

'How fascinating, dear,' remarked Mother as she shovelled a forkful of peas in her mouth.

At dinner, Mother and Father were told, 'Camels mix their spit with stomach contents so that they can spit further.'

My parents remained silent. Just chewed their food. Without spitting it out.

But it meant that when Ali Baba showed up the following month with a camel in tow, I did know a thing or two about them. She was a dromedary – a camel with just one hump. And Ali swayed up our drive atop of that hump, surrounded by his baskets.

I ran down the steps to greet him as he shouted and pulled at the camel's head rope until she tilted forward and bent her knees and then gradually subsided into a couched position on the drive. Ali levered himself off, still holding onto the end of her head rope.

'She dum fine,' he said as I cautiously approached her. I was thinking of the contents of her spit should she think to swing round and have a potshot at me. I didn't fancy a face-full of smelly green stomach contents. But if I stayed calm, then so should she. Besides, she had a leather head collar

encircling her nose and attached to the head rope, so was surely under sufficient control. Her nostrils flared as I got nearer. Nostrils that I knew could close in a sandstorm. Her lower lip dropped, parting from her upper one. Both were thick and rubbery. Both adapted to foraging and eating prickly plants that no other animal could eat. It was amazing what facts I'd picked up from my encyclopaedia. She stared down at me with a rather haughty, rather regal expression on her face, flickering her long eyelashes at me. I knew all about those eyelashes.

What I didn't know was her name. I was expecting a local native name liked Tife, Lola or Kanmi. Or even Moyo, the shortened version of Moyosooretoluwaseninuayemi.

'Elizabeth,' said Ali when asked.

'Elizabeth?' I echoed.

'Your Queen Elizabeth. She one fine lady. So, name dis camel like her.'

The image of our queen being associated with a hump-backed, multi-eye-lashed, droopy-lipped creature that was liable to spit, seemed somewhat disrespectful. But Ali Baba thought otherwise and had great respect for his royal-named camel. Not surprising as with her to ride, it meant he no longer had to walk tortuous miles, and he could carry many more baskets, and so have many more items for sale. That day, he joyfully displayed them, covering the whole of our veranda's floor.

But his next visit wasn't so joyous. He arrived, not astride Elizabeth's hump, but walking in front of her, leading her by her head rope. No cheery greeting. Barely a smile.

'Elizabeth,' he explained, as he slowed to a halt by the veranda steps. 'She no well. Bad foot.'

I called out to Father who was still indoors. ‘Dad, Elizabeth’s lame. Could you come and have a look?’

He appeared and briskly stepped down to us. ‘Lame you say, Ali?’

The trader nodded. ‘Back foot. No walk good. She like dis.’ He hobbled round in a circle, limping.

‘Right,’ declared Father. ‘Let’s get her couched first. Then we can take a proper look.’

Ali pulled at the head rope and made a few clucking noises with his tongue. Elizabeth moaned and puckered her lips. But didn’t budge. Instead, she gave a low rumble. Was she about to spit? Ali yanked at the head rope again, hoping Elizabeth would sink to the ground. But no, she remained standing while another rumble erupted up from her belly. Her neck arched, pulling the head rope out of Ali’s fingers. Then, she swung round baring a set of broken, yellow teeth before a stream of semi-digested cud showered through the air to splatter down Father’s front. It was green and lumpy and smelt as foul as an unemptied dog litter bin on a hot day.

‘I see, it’s like that, is it?’ said Father, wiping himself down.

Elizabeth lunged out again, this time emitting a deep guttural roar which tailed off in to a bubbling rumble as another lump of cud was prepared for ejection. Father, Ali and I swiftly jumped back. ‘Mmm … guess she’s in a bad mood,’ said Father.

‘Perhaps the foot’s hurting,’ I suggested.

‘Could be. All the more reason for taking a look,’ replied Father. ‘But first, we need to get hold of that head rope.’ He pointed to the rope dangling down from her head. ‘And then get her couched.’

‘Me try again, massa,’ said Ali, edging towards Elizabeth. She swung round with another determined lunge, the baskets on her back loosening, their lids coming off to scatter their contents across the drive. That spooked her even more. She gave a guttural roar, bared her teeth and spat in all directions. Ali leapt back. We now had a camel whose sides were heaving like bellows while white foam billowed round her nose and strings of sticky dribble drooled from her mouth. Not a pretty sight. Very unroyal.

Yet, we still needed to catch her up before we attempted to look at her feet.

‘Perhaps Yusefu and Tobi could help,’ I said.

Father hollered for the houseboys and within minutes they had come running out. He explained to them that between us, we had to get hold of the camel’s head rope and then force her to the ground.

‘Yes, sir, yes, sir,’ they chorused enthusiastically. ‘We dun do dat.’

Yusefu and Tobi spread out round Elizabeth’s head, sufficiently out-of-range of her teeth, though not from the spit that came flying out in all directions like an out-of-control garden sprinkler. But it didn’t deter them. They bobbed and weaved in front of Elizabeth, each clapping and calling for her attention. They really got into the swing of things, jumping up and down, like jacks-in-a-box, waving their arms above their mops of curls.

‘Elizabeth … here,’ shouted Yusefu.

She swung in his direction.

‘Here … Here …’ shouted Tobi.

She turned to him.

If Elizabeth wasn’t confused, I certainly was.

But the antics of the houseboys were enough of a distraction to enable Ali to eventually dart forward and grab her head rope. With her head once restrained, Elizabeth immediately calmed down though she still continued to puff out her cheeks. But she obeyed Ali's orders and sank down into the couched position we needed.

It meant her knees were now resting on the ground with her hind legs splayed out behind, toes uppermost.

Ali pointed to the two toes on her right-hind leg. 'Dat's der bad foot.'

There was another rumble from Elizabeth as Father and I edged round her hindquarters. Another warning that she was still angry.

'You dum stop dat,' said Ali. 'Bad girl.'

'Okay, let's see what we've got here.' Father crouched down alongside Elizabeth's massive thighs and reached down to pull some matted dead grass from between her right foot's upturned toes. 'Ah, here we go. Guess this is the reason for her lameness,' said Father, his finger circling the area between the two toes. It was swollen, the skin red and angry looking.

'An abscess?' I asked, peering over his shoulder.

'I should think so. Probably the result of a puncture wound.'

'You going to lance it then?'

Father looked up at me. 'Yes. Probably the best thing to do. If she lets me. And that's a big if.' He instructed Yusefu to go and fetch the medical set used for minor operations.

Father explained to Ali what he was going to do. 'Just hold on to Elizabeth as tightly as possible,' he warned.

'I dun do dat,' replied Ali.

When Yusefu returned with the medical kit, Father took out a scalpel handle and attached a blade to it. He then plunged the tip of the scalpel into the abscess. Out shot a fountain of yellow pus. Elizabeth shrieked. She wrenched her head round, dragging Ali with her. She lashed out her right leg. Father was knocked flying, falling back into my arms. We both crashed to the ground, engulfed in a thick cloud of dust. With another rumble of anger, Elizabeth pulled herself up.

Coughing and spluttering, we too staggered to our feet to see Ali was still dangling from her head rope, though his white robe was now smeared from top to bottom with green slime and snot.

'All done,' declared Father. 'Elizabeth will feel much better now that the abscess has been lanced.'

'Tank you. Tank you,' said Ali. 'You dun fine work.'

He continued to hold onto Elizabeth's head rope while the house boys gathered up the scattered contents of the baskets. When full, the baskets were strapped back onto her.

But not before Ali had bent down and picked up one small item.

He held it out to me. 'Dis for young master Malcolm, here,' he said as I took it. 'A tank you for help make Elizabeth good again. No pay. It be gift.'

I stared down at the object nestling in my palm. A broad smile creased my face as I recognised what it was. A tiny camel carved out of ivory. No bigger than a penny. Exquisitely carved. The details amazing in such a small piece.

'Why, Ali, this is very beautiful,' I said. 'Thank you so much. I will treasure it always.'

And I have treasured that tiny camel ever since.

A reminder of my exciting encounter with a real and very, very much bigger camel. Ali's Elizabeth.

12

When Poucher Got Savaged and Nearly Died

An evening stroll round the grounds of the *gidah* and beyond became a ritual once we acquired Poucher. It was a time to relish the cool of the night. Mother would lead the way, closely followed by Poucher and me. Sooty, our black cat, made up the rear-guard, a silent, slinking shadow. Though a wobbly shadow due to her wonky back leg.

'It's heavenly, absolutely heavenly,' Mother would exclaim, taking in gulps of cool air as we gazed up into the night sky. Above us a myriad of stars blazed. The Milky Way twinkled like a diamond-studded necklace draped across an indigo throat. A scent-heavy breeze whispered through the frangipani trees and date palms that bordered our

compound. Beyond, a dense, black tangle of elephant grass towered each side of the sandy track, seething with unseen creatures, rustling, rubbing, twitching. The ceaseless brittle click-click of cicadas. The muted whoo-whoo of an owl. The undulating rasp of a nightjar, its whirling tone like a clock mechanism about to strike the hour. Occasionally, we'd be startled by a shadowy figure slipping silently out from a narrow footpath in the elephant grass to one side – a mammy, swathed in dark blue, returning late from market, a bundle of firewood balanced on her head.

'*Jambo, jambo,*' she'd murmur, gliding across, before being engulfed by the grass on the other side.

One moonlit evening, the track had enticed us even further than usual along its silvery trail. I'd just bent down to watch a foot-long centipede churn across the sand – sand still warm from the day's heat. Like a mechanical toy, it moved in an undulating wave of legs. Precise. Direct. I was tempted to pick it up, place it back in the centre of the path and watch it skim forward again. But I didn't. Centipedes can sting.

Mother stopped to allow the centipede to lose itself in the undergrowth. As she waited, there was a rustle and the snapping of twigs. 'What's that?' Mother whispered.

Poucher gave a low growl. Another twig snapped. Mother stepped over the centipede, saying, 'Let's get back.'

I stood up. 'I'm sure it's nothing.'

Then, there was a snarl.

'Nothing, my foot,' spluttered Mother, who turned and started to sprint back towards the *gidah* with the speed of a gazelle if not with its grace. I quickly followed. As did

Sooty. I could see her reflected in the lights from the *gidah*, darting across the lawn.

'Hey, wait a minute. Where's Poucher?' I said, stopping to look for her.

'Don't worry, she'll soon be back,' replied Mother, as she scaled the veranda steps two at a time.

I hesitated. The drone of the cicadas was suddenly punctuated by a frenzy of barking, yowling and spitting. Beyond the compound, the undergrowth erupted in a maelstrom of snapping branches and tearing grass.

I fled across the compound towards the servants' quarters, wailing, 'Something's attacking Poucher. Quick. Help. Poucher's being attacked.' I could see Yusefu and his family preparing supper over a flickering fire. Yusefu jumped to his feet, joined by Tobi.

I gesticulated wildly. 'Poucher!' I screamed.

'We dun look,' said Yusefu. And he and Tobi then bravely trotted off into the darkness, the glint of machete knives in their hands.

Mother and I waited nervously on the veranda. I felt tears well up in my eyes. Mother gripped the sleeve of my shirt, pulled me to her and put an arm round my shoulder. 'Poucher can take care of herself,' she said. 'Don't worry.' But her faltering tone betrayed her fears. Father appeared from indoors and we told him what had happened. Like Mother, he tried to reassure me.

But I was convinced something terrible had happened. That Poucher had been harmed. Maybe killed. There was no stopping my tears. Hot and salty, they flowed down my cheeks.

The yowling stopped. An eerie silence ensued. Even the cicadas seemed momentarily to suspend their incessant drone. Straining my eyes into the darkness, I could just make out Yusefu and Tobi padding back into the compound. They stepped into the circle of light fanning out from the veranda, and shuffled from foot to foot, agitated.

It was Yusefu who spoke. 'No Poucher, master. She dun gone.'

At daybreak, we began the search.

The scene of the fight was found. Flattened grass. Blood. *Poucher's blood*, I thought miserably. Of her, there was no sign. Dragged away? Eaten?

'Now, pay attention,' barked Father, gathering Yusefu and Tobi round him. His moustache twitched. 'We go in der bush. Look for dat dog. Savvy?' he roared.

Two heads nodded vigorously.

But it was a hopeless task.

The elephant grass was too high, too thick. An eight-foot yellow barrier in which Poucher could be lying only inches away and still be missed. The grass was beaten, hacked, thrashed. We trampled down vast patches of it, probing the paths tunnelling through it. But to no avail. By mid-morning, the heat forced us to retreat. My shoulders burned. My temples throbbed. Light-headed, I staggered back to the *gidah* and desperately guzzled several glasses of lemonade.

Later that day, we tried again. But it was no use. We couldn't find her. Poucher had vanished.

The third evening after her disappearance saw me sitting morosely on the veranda as it got dark. Fruit bats emerged. They flitted and wheeled like black umbrellas, hurling

themselves into the indigo sky. Their high-pitched squeaks mingled with the rising drone of the cicadas.

My ears were accustomed to this twilight serenade. But I suddenly sensed another noise. Different. Not a squeal. More a whimper. The whimper of a dog. I leaned forward, the hairs on my neck tingling. My mouth dropped open as I strained to listen. To hear that sound again. My eyes searched the gloom. The red glow of the hibiscus blooms in the hedge at the bottom of the compound danced maddeningly in front of me, a blurred border melting into the night shadows. Then again, I heard it. A whimper. Legs trembling, I stood up. I took a step down from the veranda. 'Poucher?' I whispered, hardly daring to voice her name.

A blur of white moved in the darkness.

'Poucher!' I screamed. 'Poucher.' I leapt down the steps and raced across the drive, tore through the shrubs bordering the lawn with my feet scarcely touching the grass as I flung myself forward. I found her dragging herself through the hibiscus hedge. Her left hind leg trailed behind her, stuck out at an angle. 'Oh Poucher,' I cried and collapsed beside her, flinging my arms round her neck. 'You're alive.'

She gave a soft whimper and pushed her head against my chest. Her nose, hot and dry, brushed my chin. I could feel her lungs heaving, her breath fetid. I patted her back. Her coat felt spiked and encrusted. I slipped my arm under her belly. She groaned. 'There, there, it will be all right,' I reassured her as I knelt and slowly got to my feet, lifting her up, trying not to jolt her or hurt her.

I staggered back across the dark compound. The stench of rotting flesh filling my nostrils, a warm stickiness oozing down my arms.

Mother's hand flew to her mouth as we climbed onto the veranda. 'Oh, my God,' she exclaimed and sped indoors, yelling for Father.

I laid Poucher down, fighting hard to control the waves of nausea that threatened to explode from my stomach. Her wounds were horrendous. The skin had been ripped back from her midriff in a jagged tear. The muscles on the inside of her left thigh had been shredded to brown strings, exposing nerves, arteries and the pale grey glint of bone. The leg hung loose, caked in a thick purple crust of dried blood through which the torn flesh bubbled and glistened. Green-grey. Gangrenous.

Father was quick to assess the scene and Yusefu ordered to fetch a bowl of warm water and cloths. The two of us began the arduous task of gently soaking and lifting away the matted debris. The gaping wound, we didn't dare touch. Far too painful. Poucher lifted her head. Licked her lips.

'She needs a drink,' exclaimed Mother who had been hovering in the background, hands still pressed to her nose and mouth. She hurried away and returned with Poucher's water bowl. It was placed near her muzzle and I supported her head as she took many long gulps before, with a rattling sigh, she flopped back and closed her eyes.

'We'll get her down to the clinic and see what we can do for that leg,' said Father.

'Can you save her?' I faltered.

'Well, we'll certainly have a damn good try, that's for sure.'

Father and Yusefu lifted Poucher onto a blanket. I ran down the steps and pulling out the bolts, dropped the flap at the back of the Land Rover.

Once at the clinic, Poucher was laid out on the examination table. Her eyes momentarily flickered open before she slipped back into semi-consciousness.

Father paused a moment in front of a large glass medical cabinet, then opened its door and reached in for a brown bottle. From it, he poured some thick, yellowish liquid onto a wad of cotton wool. Immediately a sickly, sweet smell permeated the room.

'Chloroform,' he explained.

The chloroform was wedged over Poucher's muzzle. Within minutes, her breathing became slower, deeper and more regular. Father lifted one of her front paws. Let it go. It flopped back, limp.

'See?' said Father. 'She's out for the count.'

Between us, we then repositioned Poucher so that her injured leg rested on the edge of the examination table, the torn groin exposed while her right leg was levered back to one side and strapped to the edge of the table with bandage. Father began to manipulate the mutilated limb. He moved it backwards and forwards. Lifted it up and down.

'Is it broken?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'No. She's been lucky there. The femur's intact.'

Father reached across and pulled up a small metallic tray on which were piled scissors, needles and knives. He selected a scalpel, similar to the one used on Elizabeth, the camel.

With a swab in his other hand, Father began to scrape at Poucher's exposed flesh. Grit was poked out. Black, rotten muscle was cut away. Dead flaps of skin cut off. With forceps, he separated healthy skin from white underlying

tissue. It made a sound like tearing of paper. I swallowed hard.

'This is a nerve,' said Father, pointing to a glistening white thread that snaked through the muscles. Beads of blood began to well up. I gripped the edge of the table.

'Are you all right?' asked Father. 'You've gone very white.'

I nodded feebly.

Father continued to clean the wound. It was the rasp of the scalpel blade against Poucher's exposed femur that did it. I felt the heat. Smelt the fumes. Saw the blood. And fainted.

When I came to, I was stretched out on the couch in the next room. Poucher, her leg heavily bandaged, was curled up fast asleep in a large open-sided crate, layered in blankets.

My first words were, 'Is she going to be okay?'

'Fingers crossed, yes,' said Father with a smile.

My next question was, 'Will she be able to walk?'

Father hesitated before answering. 'Well, we'll just have to see.'

He explained that one of the main thigh muscles had been severed along with several nerves. He'd done his best to stitch everything back together again and providing he could control the infection, there was a chance Poucher would regain the use of her leg. 'After all,' he said, 'she's a tough old stick. Had to be, to crawl home in that state.'

The next few days were touch and go. Poucher's temperature soared. Father showed me how to take it, swivelling a greased thermometer gently up her bottom. I was soon adept at reading the temperature, praying each

time that it would drop. But it continued to remain at 104 F – three degrees above normal.

I made a medical card and carefully ruled out headings – dates, observations, temperature readings and food intake. I watched Father change the dressing daily. Then plucked up courage to ask if I could have a go.

'I don't see why not,' he answered.

He patiently showed me how to lay the penicillin gauze along the line of the wound – a long, neat row of blue stitches. There was a gap at one end from which yellow-green pus constantly oozed.

'Better out than in,' commented Father as he showed me how to compress one end with a thumb, and squeeze along the line of the wound to channel the infection out of the hole at the other end. The nozzle of a tube of antibiotic was then inserted into the hole and ointment squirted inside.

When it came to bandaging, I was all fingers and thumbs. At my first attempt, I was halfway through when I dropped the roll of bandage and watched it unravel itself across the lounge floor. Once I'd finally finished bandaging, I stood back, proud of myself.

'There, all done, Poucher,' I trumped.

She stood up and the dressing promptly slithered down her leg to end in a heap over her paw. I'd put it on too loose.

Poucher turned to give it a sniff. But she was a model patient, never making a fuss. She kept perfectly still while I tried again. I got it right that time.

Father showed me how to give her antibiotic tablets.

'Open her mouth and push the pill over the back of her tongue,' he instructed. 'Then hold her muzzle closed until she swallows.'

It was an easy task. But then Poucher was an easy patient and seemed to realise what was required of her. I soon discovered that by smearing the tablets with jam, Poucher readily took them from my hand with a deft lick of her tongue. One slurp and it'd be gone. Easy peasy.

Gradually the infection subsided. How proud I felt when I was able to record a normal temperature on her medical card. I could hardly believe it and shoved the thermometer back up her bottom just to make sure. Poor Poucher. The reddened skin over her thigh grew less angry. The bruising less severe. She began to use her leg. Hobbling cautiously at first. But soon trotting around with barely a limp.

Poucher's wounds continued to heal.

A week later, Father allowed me to remove her stitches.

Poucher lay on the clinic's examination table.

'Lift the loose end of the stitch with the forceps,' instructed Father. 'See the knot?'

I nodded.

'Now slide the scissors under it,' continued Father. 'Then snip.'

I snipped.

'Now gently pull.'

I pulled. Out came the stitch.

With all the stitches removed, I took them home and laid then out on my desk. I counted them. Forty-eight in total. A lot of stitches.

As I stared at them, thinking of how they'd helped stitch Poucher's life back together again, I made a resolution. One that I was determined to keep if at all possible. I would train to be a vet.

But an incident in my treehouse later that month nearly killed that idea. And me with it.

13

Terror in My Treehouse

As mentioned before, the lush vegetation we had round the *gidah* with bowers of purple, orange and white bougainvillea cascading down off the roof and framing the windows meant that we were a haven for all sorts of creepy crawlies. Millipedes, snails, frogs, toads and a mix of scaly-framed beetles looking like miniature dinosaurs. They all loved to lurk in the dark recesses of those shrubs.

But Mother made matters worse. She was a keen gardener and loved to cram as many plants into the garden as she possibly could. Thus, she created even more hidey holes for those creatures. They, in turn, provided a juicy supply of food for other creatures which Mother definitely didn't like. Snakes. We seemed to have more than our fair share of these reptiles in and around the *gidah*.

Their presence wasn't helped by the fact that Mother liked rockeries. She had insisted on having two great piles of boulders heaped each side of the veranda; the gaps between them filled with soil and planted with clumps of dense ivy, zinnias and tufts of spiky lemongrass. These rockeries presented bold splashes of red, orange and yellow against a jumbled mass of greenery. They did look spectacular and were much admired by visitors. Trouble was they were also adored by snakes. The word must have gone out to the local snake fraternity. *Hey mates, head over to the Welshmans. Plenty of shrubs to slither through. Great boulders to burrow under. And you can sun yourselves to your hearts' content on top of them. Just the place to chill out. Pure bliss and the occasional hiss.*

As a result, we were inundated with the wretched creatures. It made sitting on the veranda a somewhat unnerving experience since it was the inter-connecting highway between the two rockeries. You might try to laze in an armchair, feet up on a pouffe, but could never completely relax as, in the back of your mind, you couldn't help wondering what green, black or spotted-brown scaly creature might be gliding beneath you.

One morning, quite early in the day, Mother was doing some weeding while it was still cool and the sun had yet to climb the sky and beat down on her. She was concentrating on pulling out clumps of unwanted lemongrass from one of the rockeries. In the deep shade under a tangle of purple bougainvillea, I sat watching iridescent green sunbirds flit from bloom to bloom, dipping their beaks into the nectar of each flower. While flocks of other small finches swirled between the riot of pinks, oranges, reds and purples, their

crimson feathering making them look like showers of sparks from a gigantic bonfire. A magical scene. Mother's scream shattered the magic. Ripped it to shreds.

She, in pulling up a bundle of grass, had also pulled up a snake, tightly coiled through the coarse strands at the bundle's base.

'Aaah!' she shrieked, dropping the bundle. 'A snake.' And in a display of agility worthy of a mountain goat, she sprang from rock to rock to veranda in three flying leaps. Boing. Boing. Boing.

'What sort of snake?' I said, jumping to my feet.

'How should I know?' moaned Mother as she collapsed, quaking, in an armchair. 'But it was large and black.'

'Crikey,' I declared. 'Sounds as if it could be a black mamba. I'll go and take a look.'

'You be careful,' warned Mother.

I ran down the steps and round the base of the rockery to where Mother had dropped the bundle of grass.

The snake was still entwined in the grass, glistening, black-scaled.

'Yep,' I called out. 'It's a black mamba, all right.' I didn't venture *too* close as I knew black mambas were vicious. If disturbed, they didn't slither away like most snakes did, but were liable to turn on you and strike out. Only this wasn't going to happen with this particular snake as it was unable to move or strike since its poisonous fangs were embedded in a large, partially-devoured toad.

Meanwhile, Mother's shrieks had brought Yusefu and Tobi running out, machetes flashing in the sun. 'You no worry, Madam,' they shouted. 'We dum kill dat snake.' And with much whooping and yelling, they pushed past me to

winkle the snake out of the grass and slice off its head. The toad, reprieved from its venomous digestion, stepped out of the predatory jaws and crawled under a boulder. It had had a lucky escape.

The armchair into which Mother had collapsed was instrumental in a trick I played on her a few months later; and it involved another snake.

In the bottom right-hand corner of our compound stood a pine tree. It was tall, at least 30 feet high, and at its base, the trunk was very big. I tried putting my arms round it but they only reached halfway. But the tree was easy to climb as its branches stuck out at right angles to the trunk and were not too far apart. So, it wasn't long before I was shinning up it with practised ease. Bit like a monkey. As I climbed, the branches got thinner, the trunk smaller. But it didn't deter me from climbing higher and higher until eventually I managed to reach the top. There, the tree top bent with my weight. So, I had to be careful to hang on tight. But it was wonderful to sway from side to side, buffeted by eddies of warm breeze as I clung there, high up in the brilliant blue sky.

Such was my love of that tree that I hit on the idea of having a treehouse built in it. A place where I could retreat. My own private space. But I first needed to persuade my parents that it *was* a good idea. And that proved difficult to start with.

Over breakfast one morning, I decided to give it a go.

'Dad. Any chance I could have a treehouse?'

You should have seen how he spluttered into his cornflakes. Mother, too, paused, her hand holding her toast

and marmalade hovering, halfway on its journey to her mouth.

'A treehouse?' they both chorused.

'In that pine tree down in the bottom of the compound. Just a platform that I can climb onto. Nothing too complicated.'

Father turned to Mother. 'What do you think, dear?'

She took a decisive bite of her toast and chewed thoughtfully for a few seconds. 'Well, seeing as he's always up there, I suppose it wouldn't do any harm. Just a simple platform, you say?'

I nodded. 'A simple platform would be brill. I couldn't wish for more.'

Only I did.

Once a solid wooden platform 30 feet up the pine tree had been built by the house boys, I badgered Father again.

'Wooden walls and a window would be really nice,' I suggested. 'And perhaps even a roof.' Boy, was I pushing my luck.

But my luck was in. Wooden walls with a window were built. And I even got my roof.

But I hadn't finished. It was Mother's turn next.

'Mum. Can I have some curtains and cushions?'

Curtains and cushions were made.

So, I ended up with a very smart chalet up in the shade of that pine tree, supported on a platform lashed across two sturdy boughs. Here I could retreat from the heat of the day, fanned by the breeze, listening to it sighing through the needles while I gazed across to the red rusty-roofed town of Ibadan, a shimmering blur on the sun-scorched hills across the valley.

But only a few months later, disaster struck.

The rainy season had just begun. Torrential belts of rain, usually only lasting 30 minutes or so, would hammer down on the corrugated iron roof of the *gidah*. Each time it sounded as if a herd of elephants was thundering across it. And the din created drowned out speech. But it was exciting to watch from the veranda, looking out at the night sky. It would suddenly erupt in a blaze of lightning. Jagged silver streaks seared across it. Followed by almighty cracks of thunder that boomed over the hills. While rivers of rain surged down the drive, gouging out the sand and sweeping it across the lawn.

The morning after one particular savage storm, I discovered my little house in the pine tree had been destroyed. I ventured up to survey the damage. It was bad. The platform, being of solid construction, was still in place. But the walls and roof had collapsed in on themselves. Just splintered panels of wood remained. They needed to be cleared off.

So, over the edge of the platform went the wooden walls, crashing down through the branches. Down cascaded the remains of the roof. I picked up the soggy cushions and tossed them over. I picked up the bundle of soggy curtains. Out fell a snake – a small, mottled brown viper. It hit the floor with a thud, hissed angrily and rapidly wound into a coil, mouth open, ready to strike.

I screamed and stepped back into empty air. Only a wild dive at an overhanging branch prevented me from toppling over to join the cushions and timber splattered on the lawn below me. And there I remained, suspended like a hammock, arms round the branch, heels resting on the edge

of the platform. At the slightest movement the snake hissed and lashed out.

'Help.' My cry emerged as a mere whisper. But Yusefu and Tobi had heard my initial scream.

'We come young Malcolm,' they cried and swooped across the compound. Yusefu shinned up the tree. His fuzzy brown head cautiously slid into view at the other end of the platform. The whites of his eyes gleamed. 'Where dat snake?' he whispered.

'In that pile of curtains,' I hissed, unable to point.

A broom was slowly levered into view. With a deft flick, the bundle of material was swept off. The snake shot out, bounced down through the branches to be met with a sharp blow from Tobi on the lawn. I hoisted myself back onto the platform and scrambled down to examine the lifeless creature. Prising open its mouth, I was fascinated by the array of backward pointing needle-sharp teeth, the tiny tubular forked tongue.

Then my schoolboy sense of humour overcame my zoological interest. I decided to play a joke on Mother. I carried the viper up on the veranda and coiled it under one of the two armchairs there. I sat in the other one, waiting. Mother had gone to the market to do her weekly shopping; and I knew that on her return she'd sit and cool off over some iced lemonade. She always did. And today I knew it would be no different. Except today, she would get a surprise. I giggled at the thought of what was going to happen.

Mother duly returned, handing her bags of shopping from the Land Rover to Yusefu. Her face was pricked with beads of perspiration. Her cotton frock stuck to her in limp

wet folds. Up on the veranda, she collapsed in the armchair opposite me. ‘Phew, that’s better,’ she said, having taken a gulp of the iced lemonade that had been placed on the small table next to her. ‘So, what have you been up to, dear?’

I told her I’d been clearing the debris from the treehouse. No mention of the snake. Not until I’d taken several sips of my own lemonade. ‘Er, Mum,’ I said, in a voice that I hoped expressed concern, even if it wasn’t genuine. ‘There’s a snake under your chair.’

Mother calmly continued to sip her lemonade. No frantic response as I’d anticipated. How strange. Knowing her loathing of snakes, I’d expected her to leap up with a shriek of alarm.

I tried again. ‘Mum … There’s a snake under your chair.’

Still no reaction, other than a smile. ‘Yusefu warned me you’d coiled a dead snake under my chair.’

Oh, what a spoil sport, I thought. My little joke ruined.

At that moment, the snake started to move. Hell’s bells. It hadn’t been dead after all. Just unconscious. My voice immediately became strident. ‘But, Mum … that snake … it’s alive.’ I flapped my hands and pointed.

Mother continued to smile. ‘My, my, Malcom, you’re so convincing. You’d do wonders in the local amateur dramatics society.’

At that moment, the snake uncurled itself and slowly slithered forward, over Mother’s left open-toed sandal. Startled, she looked down. At which point, all hell broke loose. She leapt to her feet, knocking both the chair and table over. Lemonade showered in all directions. Her screams rent the air. The two houseboys raced out, each waving a

machete. The snake didn’t stand a chance, despatched in seconds. I too was despatched – to my bedroom for the rest of the day. Whoops.

14

Being Mum to a Monkey

Of the animals that came through our *gidah*, either on a temporary basis or more permanently, all were adults. That changed one weekend when Father received a phone call from Chuck at Ibadan Zoo.

Having finished talking to him, Father walked out onto the veranda where Mother and I were sitting, having our elevenses. Lemonade for me. Coffee for Mother. He looked distinctly nervous, pacing up and down, fiddling with his moustache.

'Who was that, dear?' asked Mother, sipping her coffee.

'Er … Chuck,' Father replied.

Mother replaced her cup in its saucer with a loud rattle. 'And what did he want?' Her tone echoed the cup's rattle. Both she and I knew that any communication with Chuck usually involved some ailing animal that required Father's

attention. Okay, if it was at the zoo. Mother didn't mind. All part of Father's job. She was not so enthusiastic if the animal landed back at our *gidah*. 'We've enough to cope with here as it is,' she'd complain as another poorly parrot joined several others in a makeshift aviary at one end of the veranda. Or a duiker was penned in one corner with a broken leg that Father had put in plaster. 'We're becoming more like a zoo every day.'

Father stood at the front of the veranda, the toes of his shoes level with the edge that dropped down to the rockery. Arms behind his back, the entwined fingers of both hands were twiddling as he gazed across the valley to the shacks sloping down from the outskirts of Ibadan.

'So?' questioned Mother again.

'It's one of Chuck's Patas monkeys,' said Father hesitantly, still gazing across to the opposite hill, fingers still twiddling nervously.

'And?'

Father turned to look at Mother. 'She's rejected her baby.'

Ah, so that was it. I could anticipate what was coming next. So could Mother. 'Well, we're not having it here,' she said.

Father turned, untangled his fingers and spread his hands out. 'Well, actually Chuck's on his way over with it now.'

I was delighted. From the downturn of Mother's mouth, she clearly wasn't.

Father tried playing on Mother's maternal instincts. 'Poor little thing's only a few days old. It will die if we don't do anything.' That didn't work.

‘Nonsense,’ replied Mother. ‘One of the keepers could have looked after it.’

I decided to intervene. ‘But Dad’s got so much more expertise. It will have a much better chance of survival with us. Less likely to *die*.’ I emphasised “die” to make it sound more dramatic. That didn’t work either.

Mother gave a loud, disapproving sniff while Father silently mouthed ‘Thank you’ at me for my support.

Mother remained unconvinced until Chuck arrived, ran up the steps carrying a straw basket under his arm, opened it in front of her and held up the baby monkey.

Who could have resisted those soft grey eyes, like huge moonstones that gazed out from a pink wrinkled face fringed with wisps of ginger hair, and lips curling back in a nervous grin? It would have melted the most hardened of hearts. Mother’s melted immediately.

Chuck explained what had happened. The mother of the baby was one of three female Patas monkeys that I’d seen at the zoo some months back. She was low in the pecking order and as a result, got bossed around by the male and the other two females. The dominant female in particular was very aggressive. So, within hours of the baby being born, she’d snatched it away from its mother and had been dragging it around the enclosure while its mother trailed after it, screaming piteously.

‘Der be much palaver,’ said Chuck. ‘All monkeys make song and dance big time.’

One of the keepers, alerted by all the commotion, had dashed into the pen and rescued the baby. But the mother refused to have the baby back. So, it now needed fostering.

‘Here baby be,’ said Chuck. ‘Me tink you do well for her. Yes?’ He pushed the ball of ginger hair, still clinging to his fingers at Mother, just as it let out a mournful little squeak. That sorrowful sound worked its magic. Mother was won over.

‘Oh, hark at him, poor little thing,’ she gushed, gently extricating the baby Patas from Chuck’s hands. ‘He must be starving.’

A feeding regime was instantly put into place. Powdered milk, mixed with warm water. A bottle and teat borrowed from Major Carr next-door, whose wife had recently had a baby.

‘For our Bonzo,’ she told Mrs Carr, having chosen the name for the monkey without consulting us. Clearly, she was determined to take control. Be in charge. Become Bonzo’s surrogate mum. But there was a problem at the outset.

Bonzo refused to suckle the teat when offered him. Wrapped in a towel on Mother’s lap, he twisted his head away every time Mother tried to push the teat between his lips. Milk dribbled down his chin. Milk soaked the towel. ‘Come on now, be a good boy for mummy,’ crooned Mother as another squirt of milk shot across the monkey’s lips without a drop being suckled and swallowed. I could see Mother was starting to get frustrated.

‘Let me help,’ I said.

So, while Mother held the bottle, I prised open Bonzo’s mouth.

‘Now, pop the teat in,’ I said.

Mother crammed the teat into the monkey’s mouth and Bonzo immediately clamped his jaws shut.

‘Now swallow,’ I murmured.

But Bonzo refused. Instead, he loosened his grip on the teat and his head lolled away from it.

Mother sighed. ‘I didn’t think it would be this difficult,’ she said.

‘We must just keep trying,’ I replied. ‘We’ll get there in the end.’

I moistened the tip of the teat with a drop of milk and smeared some more over Bonzo’s lips. His tongue poked out tentatively.

‘That’s right. You lick it off,’ I said. He did. And I saw him swallow. ‘Quick, Mum, slide the teat in now and rub it up against the roof of his mouth.’

Mother did as instructed. There was a twitch of the monkey’s lips as he squeezed the teat causing milk to squirt into his mouth. Followed by a very pronounced swallow. Hooray. Bonzo had cottoned on to what was required of him. He had started to suckle. We were away.

The next problem was where to house him.

Mother had quickly ripped up one of her cotton skirts to make a make-shift sling. This she draped over her shoulder and cocooned Bonzo in it. That was fine for the rest of the first day. But what about at night?

I saw Mother give Father a glance.

‘Don’t you dare even think about it,’ he said, anticipating what she was going to suggest. That Bonzo slept with them. And with the need for several night feeds, he knew there’d be broken sleep.

It was Bonzo himself who found the answer. With a tummy full of milk he dozed off in Mother’s sling but woke an hour later, full of energy, eager to explore his new surroundings. That included skipping down the walkway and

into my bedroom. There, he discovered Poucher's box and after lifting and looking under the dog's cotton covers, decided another nap was in order, and snuggled down between the covers to nod off again.

'Well, what do you know?' exclaimed Mother having followed Bonzo into my room. 'He certainly knows how to make himself at home. I wonder if Poucher will mind.'

Poucher didn't mind. And to prove the point, padded over and stood in front of her box. She reached forward and gave the bundle of monkey a sniff and then carefully climbed in alongside and lay down, curling herself round the sleeping baby.

'So sweet,' whispered Mother.

When Bonzo woke up, Poucher was still lying next to him and gave him a lick as he opened his eyes. Bonzo responded by stretching out one of his tiny hands and tweaking Poucher's whiskers. From that moment on, they were firm friends. They slept together and played together – Bonzo often piggy-backing on Poucher round the *gidah* and gardens.

'Such good friends, it's unbelievable,' remarked Mother as, from the shade of the veranda, we watched the two of them slip through the hibiscus bushes, Bonzo astride Poucher's back, reaching up to snatch at the trumpet-shaped crimson blooms they were passing under.

By now, Bonzo had progressed to wearing smart terry-towelling nappies. That had been Mother's idea. She cut them out from old bath towels so that accidents round the *gidah* were rare.

The monkey's meals soon settled into a regular self-feeding pattern. That was thanks to Father.

‘Can’t see why he shouldn’t feed himself,’ he declared one breakfast time. ‘Now we know he’s capable of suckling from his bottle.’

‘Just how do you propose to do that?’ queried Mother, ready to jump to Bonzo’s defence in case Father was suggesting something outrageous. Something her little darling couldn’t possibly be expected to do.

But it turned out to be a practical and sensible suggestion. Actually, quite clever.

By now, Bonzo had his own quarters. A caged-in end of the veranda where he could be safely penned when we were not around. It had perches, swings and a cosy corner in which he could sleep.

It was here that Father demonstrated what he had in mind. He tied Bonzo’s bottle, freshly filled with warm milk, to the inside of the mesh. ‘Now, Bonzo, let’s see how clever you are.’ He ushered the monkey in. ‘Breakfast is ready. Go on, help yourself.’

We all watched Bonzo climb up onto the mesh, sniff the bottle, grab its teat and start to suck. Our days of having to bottle-feed him ourselves were instantly over.

‘Clever Bonzo,’ murmured Mother.

Clever Father, I thought.

In no time, Bonzo grew from a helpless baby to a very active youngster, very inquisitive, constantly exploring, constantly getting into mischief. His escapades meant we had to keep a careful eye on him when he was allowed to roam in and around the *gidah*. Some of his misdemeanours were tolerable and amusing. Others more alarming and of concern.

The clothes line proved an endless source of fascination. Maybe it was the sight of washing flapping in the breeze that drew his attention to the clothes pegged on the line since he was always quick to unpeg them. The pegs tossed across the lawn. The undies, trousers, Father's office shirts to become dusty heaps on the ground.

We didn't dare leave any car window open. If we did, Bonzo was soon inside the car wreaking havoc.

'Oh, Lord,' cried Father one afternoon, having just returned from work. 'I've forgotten to close the window.' He hastily ran out of the *gidah* and shot down the steps to the Land Rover. Too late. Bonzo was already inside, his nimble fingers having swiftly raided Father's medical bag. Bottles of antibiotic, needles, syringes littered the seats. Pills showered the air like confetti.

We had to warn visitors to keep their car windows firmly shut after several incursions by Bonzo resulted in road atlases being torn up, ashtrays emptied and handbag contents tipped out.

He loved to join Mother on her forays into the garden when she did some early morning weeding. He'd watch Mother pull up some weeds and then copy her. Only he pulled up whatever happened to be around him. So, bundles of zinnias, canna lilies and other flowers got uprooted as well as weeds. Mother was not pleased.

Despite that, Mother's love for the little chap remained undiminished. Until the morning she had been distracted by a phone call from a friend. It was the sound of glass smashing onto the floor that alerted Mother to the fact that Bonzo was alone, in the next room, and definitely up to no good.

‘Daphne, I have to go,’ she hastily said to her friend as another crash resounded from the lounge.

Mother dashed through, fearing the worst. And was confronted with just that. A scene of mayhem where Bonzo, in the fifteen minutes or so that Mother had been on telephone, had done his worst. Wrecked items littered the room as if a tornado had torn through it. Mother’s carriage clock, her favourite timepiece, lay in ruins on the rug, its face smashed, its hands pulled off, its springs hanging out. No longer would it be able to tell the time. An oil painting of my granny had been pulled off the wall and the face chewed from the canvas, leaving the portrait headless. The smashing of glass that Mother had heard was two vases of flowers that now lay in broken shards, the petals of the flowers ripped off, the stems shredded. They lay scattered across the sofa, the cushions of which had been torn open, the feathers inside pulled out, the down to settle like drifts of snow over the floor, smothering everything.

In the centre of this destruction, crouched Bonzo, covered in white fluff, two pink petals sticking out of his mouth, grinning nervously as Mother entered the room.

‘Oh, Bonzo, how could you?’ she cried, bursting into tears.

Over dinner, the future of Bonzo was discussed.

‘We can’t go on like this,’ said Father. ‘He’s getting too destructive.’

‘You’re right,’ confessed Mother, reluctantly. ‘So, what should we do? We can’t keep him penned up on his own all day. That would be cruel.’

‘Couldn’t he go back to the zoo?’ I suggested.

‘Not sure the rest of the group would accept him,’ said Father.

‘But worth trying, surely?’

Mother intervened. ‘I agree. It’s worth a go. See what happens.’

Father pursed his lips. ‘I suppose we could reintroduce him to his mum first. See if she accepts him. Then try with the rest of the troop.’

With a plan formulated, it was time to put it into action without delay. But would it work?

We warned Chuck in advance of what we intended to try before turning up at the zoo with Bonzo the following day. He was dubious about our plan.

‘No me tink it work,’ he stated.

But all three of us persisted. And in the end, he relented.

Moses, the male Patas, and the two other females were kept out in the main enclosure while the sleeping quarters were shut off with Bonzo’s mother, Mavis, inside.

She looked the same as when I’d last seen her. A willowy, nervous creature with a fresh array of bruises round each eye and a wound healing on her back. Seems she was still being pushed around by the other monkeys.

‘Mavis get bitten too much,’ confirmed Chuck.

‘Well, here goes,’ said Father as he released Bonzo into the shed and we stood back to watch.

I wasn’t sure what to expect. Would he race across to fling his arms round Mavis uttering the primate equivalent of ‘Mummy Mummy’? No, he didn’t. But he did approach her, albeit it in a more cautious but curious way. There was much oscillating of eyebrows and ‘Ugh Ugh’ mutterings as he got nearer to her. Mavis cowered back into a corner, gave a

feeble grimace and averted her eyes, clearly puzzled by this bundle of ginger rolling towards her. Bonzo, having reached her, sidled along to her hindquarters. Here, he stopped, stretched out an arm to raise her tail and then bent forward to sniff her bum. At which point, Mavis gave a friendly 'Ugh' of her own, turned, picked up Bonzo and hugged him to her chest. An instant bond formed.

'Yes!' I shouted, gleefully punching the air. Father and Mother grinned. Chuck's face split into its customary melon-slice.

A week later, we returned to watch the reintroduction of Mavis and her son into the colony. Another testing time. Would they be accepted by the other Patas, especially Moses, the male who was very much the boss? Two keepers armed with sticks and dustbin lids stood by to create a commotion and act as a distraction should a set-to start between the monkeys with the danger of them tearing each other apart.

One keeper did start hammering on his lid when Moses, with a series of menacing grunts, charged at Bonzo, teeth bared. Mavis ducked behind her son while he stood his ground, rising up on his hind legs, not flinching. Moses braked, gave another less angry grunt, and then gave Bonzo a cursory nip to his shoulder as if to say I'm boss here and don't you forget it before walking away. From that moment on, he totally ignored Bonzo.

As for Melinda and Maureen, the other two females, they had been watching the proceedings with much hooting and jumping up and down as if to egg on Moses. But they too then fell silent. And in the future, whenever they tried to have a go at Mavis, Bonzo sprung to his mother's defence,

baring his teeth and copying his father with a series of menacing grunts. They soon learnt it was time to live happily ever after, knowing there'd be no messing with this monkey.

15

Operating on Polly to Save Her Life

Mother invariably commented on each new arrival at our *gidah*. But she wasn't the only one. Polly, our African grey parrot also kept a beady eye on whatever turned up next, usually with a whistle, a cackle or a 'Wotcha, mate,' greeting, leaning form her perch on the veranda to scrutinise the latest addition.

Bonzo had been fascinated by her and had shinned up her perch to take a closer look. Her vermillion tail was alluring. Too much of a temptation for an inquisitive monkey. His hand had reached up to yank some feathers out. Polly swiftly turned, and ducked down to give his fingers a hard nip. With an agonised 'Ugh' Bonzo lost his grip and dropped like a stone. He hopped away, clutching his

bleeding finger while Polly peered down and cackled with laughter. Bonzo learnt his lesson. He never ventured up Polly's perch again, afraid that her beak would dig into him again.

Mother and Father were also wary of her beak, knowing the power in it and how it could inflict a serious injury. So, they kept their distance though they loved her companionship. The way she'd chip into our conversations, mimic the ticking of the clock before it got smashed to smithereens, copy the dishes clattering together as they were collected up after meals. And each morning we were greeted with a 'Wakey, wakey'. After a few months that became, 'Wakey, wakey, rise and shine', to which, eventually, she added, 'you shower'. All so entertaining. All great fun. Life would have been very dull without her. So, when we discovered she was ill, it was worrying. So very, very distressful. Our emotions swamped with grief.

It had all been so gradual. Not noticeable at first. Just the occasional day when Polly didn't seem quite herself. Didn't quite finish off her pot of sunflower seeds. Left some of her peanuts unshelled on the bottom of her cage.

'I don't think Polly's quite herself,' I told Father one day. 'She didn't eat all of the banana I gave her.'

'What are her droppings like?' he asked.

'Well, they seem okay.' I had checked them earlier. Not many of them. But a normal grey-green in colour. And no looseness. 'But she's not her usual chatterbox. Didn't get a "Wotcha, mate" from her at all today. And that's worrying.'

Father nodded. 'Now that you mention it, she has seemed quieter than usual the past day or so. Perhaps I ought to catch her up and take a look.'

I could see Father wasn't too keen. No doubt worried he might get bitten. 'It might be an idea just to be on the safe side,' I said, encouragingly.

So, with towel in hand ready to bundle Polly in it, Father stepped up to her cage while I unfastened the door. Polly immediately sensed something nasty was going to happen and jumped off her perch and up onto the back bars of her cage where she glowered at us, growling, beak open wide, ready to bite. Father reached in, his hand protected by the towel, and swiftly grabbed her over her shoulders before she had a chance to flap her wings and escape. Polly was dragged out, her head now restrained between Father's forefinger and thumb though still covered by a fold of the towel while the rest of it was wrapped tightly round her wings to keep her pinned down and stop her from wriggling. With her in that position on the dining room table, Father expertly ran his fingers each side of her chest, feeling the muscles over her breast bone.

'Uhm …' he muttered. 'She's certainly lost some weight here.' He moved his hand up her neck, pushing through her feathers. 'Oh, and this is certainly not good.' He paused to spread the feathers at the lower part of Polly's neck to uncover the large lump he'd discovered.

'What is it?' I queried.

'Likely to be a tumour, I'm afraid. It's pressing on her food pipe and wind pipe making it difficult for her to eat and speak.' Father's voice broke as he uttered those words, realising what it could mean. 'Let's just put her back for the time being and discuss what we should do.'

With Polly once more in her cage, feathers ruffled and breathing a little rapidly after her examination, Father and I

went out onto the veranda to inform Mother of our findings. The concerned look on our faces must have said it all.

'Oh, dear,' she said. 'Bad news?'

'Polly's got a growth on her neck. She soon won't be able to eat or talk,' I said, my words shaky as I tried to control the tears welling up. No good. The tears spilled out and ran down my cheeks.

Mother looked across at Father. 'Could you not try operating? Remove the tumour before it gets worse?'

He hesitated. 'I'm really not sure I'm up to it. I haven't operated on a bird before.'

'That shouldn't stop you from trying. And if you don't, Polly's going to die anyway. And from what you're saying, that could be a long, lingering death.' Mother gave Father a hard, penetrating stare. 'And none of us would want that to happen, would we?'

I intervened. 'Mum's right, Dad. And you never know, Polly might pull through the op okay. So, surely it's worth taking the risk?'

Father shrugged and bit his lower lip. 'I guess you're right,' he said.

'Of course, he is,' insisted Mother.

'Well …'

'Good, that's settled then. No more to be said.'

So, the decision was made. The operation would proceed, despite the enormous risks involved.

The next day, saw Father and I down in the clinic, staring through the bars at a very poorly parrot. Polly had deteriorated overnight. Now, she was just about able to balance on her perch, huddled alongside her feed and water hoppers, both full, contents untouched. Her wings were

dropped, her feathers ruffled up, standing out like those on a moth-eaten feather duster. Her head was tucked into her shoulder, her eyes closed. With her neck curved at an angle, I could see it looked swollen; and poking through the feathers was visible the raised, pink lump – the cancer.

'Well, Polly, we're going to do our best to save you,' I whispered, hoping for a response.

Momentarily, she pulled her head from under her wing, gave me a sleepy look, before tucking her beak back under again.

Father got things ready. A pack of sterile operating instruments was opened onto a trolley next to the consulting table which was to become the operating table. Green drapes were laid across it. Then, instruments and swabs slid onto them.

Father drew up a dose of anaesthetic. His hands were trembling.

Was he really doing the right thing? I wondered. Could the tumour be removed? Could he possibly save Polly? Questions. Questions. Questions. The doubts swam through my mind as they had done through the previous night's fitful sleep when memories of our lives together so far, came flooding back. The crooning. The 'Wotcha, mates' whispered in my ear. Yes. Of course Father would give it his best shot. He'd do everything possible to save dear Polly's life.

While I held the syringe, Father opened the cage door and with a small towel winkled Polly out again. This time, unlike the day before, there was no struggle. Barely a movement. But she still had the strength to squawk. Shrieks that were piercing. Shrieks that pierced my heart.

‘I’m sorry, Polly. But it’s got to be done,’ Father murmured as she continued to frantically squawk, her cries muffled by the confines of the towel. With hands still shaking, he extricated one of her legs, parted the feathers and injected the anaesthetic I’d given to him. Within seconds, she was limp in his hands, her frantic shrieks dying away. Father stretched her out on the table and I helped to tape out her wings before he then carefully plucked the feathers from round her neck to reveal the tumour. It was a large misshapen raspberry of tissue that covered half the length of her neck and stretched up through her pimply skin as a pointed, yellow messy mass.

‘Horrible, isn’t it?’ I gasped.

Father nodded. He’s already warned me that the success of its removal depended on how adherent it was to underlying vital organs such as the windpipe and oesophagus and whether nerves would be damaged in his attempt to dissect it out. We were now to find out.

He carefully cut the loose skin around the tumour, avoiding the area that the cancer had eaten into.

‘I can’t remove too much skin as there needs to be enough left to stretch across and stitch together,’ he explained.

With forceps, he lifted the tumour and used eye surgery scissors to gently prise away the underlying connective tissues, tying off the tumour’s blood supply when he finally managed to expose it. Then, with a final snip, the tumour was free and he lifted it out.

‘Phew, it shelled out better than I’d expected,’ he said with a sigh of relief.

Some blood welled up in the gaping hole left. But not enough to worry about. A haemostatic degradable swab put a stop to that.

'Well done, Dad,' I murmured as he plopped the tumour into a plastic rubbish bag.

With the wound sutured and an antibiotic injection given, Polly was gently levered back into the bottom of her cage and laid on a wad of cotton wool to recover. I made a couple of mugs of coffee and we sat round the table, anxiously waiting for Polly to regain consciousness.

Fifteen minutes later, the anaesthetic had started to wear off.

Polly kicked her legs and then rolled onto her side. Her claws made contact with the bars of the cage, where upon she pulled herself over to grip one with her beak. Slowly – so slow, it was painful to watch – she began to haul herself up the bars. At the first attempt, still woozy from the anaesthetic, she lost her grip and seesawed back down to the floor of the cage. But at her fifth attempt, she managed to reach her perch and levered herself onto it. Here she sat, swaying alarmingly, her beak clamped to a bar in order to stop herself from toppling off. But at least she'd made it through the operation. But that wasn't the end of it.

There followed a desperate time back at the *gidah*. Daily, Father caught Polly up to give her an antibiotic injection. There was no struggle. No squawk. She ate nothing for three days. On the third evening, I tried with a tiny portion of banana smeared on my finger.

'Come on, Polly,' I urged.

She tottered across her perch, looked at me with eyes devoid of sparkle, but raised her head, opened her beak with

difficulty and tweaked my finger. A little of the mashed banana slid on to her tongue.

'Go on, swallow it, girl,' I cajoled.

Polly closed her beak, paused a moment, then swallowed. I felt a flicker of hope. Maybe, just maybe she'd pull through okay.

The next morning, I went through to the sitting room and as I opened the door, my heart skipped a beat lest I was to see Polly huddled dead in the bottom of the cage. But no. She was still on her perch. As I approached, she slowly waddled across, pressed her head down against the bars of the cage and in a croaky voice, my voice, said, 'Wotcha, mate!'

Choked, I replied, 'And the same to you, Polly.' As tears of relief rolled down my cheeks, I sensed then she was going to recover. And recover she did. The result? We were to have many more 'Wotcha, mates' over the years ahead as she continued to delight us with her companionship. An ever-loving friend.

All due to Father's brave effort.

Thank you, Dad.

16

Fond Farewells to My African Friends

When I reached the age of twelve, I had to return to the UK for schooling. I missed Poucher, Sooty and Polly, as much as I missed my parents. Dare I say it, even more so? School holidays saw me flying back out to Nigeria for joyful reunions.

Shrieks from Polly with a plethora of ‘Wotcha, mates’.

Excited woofs from Poucher who’d come bounding up, tail wagging so furiously, her hindquarters would roll from side to side. She’d then promptly sit and throw up a paw in a frenzy of shake-a-paws.

Sooty’s response was much more subdued. She’d pad up to me, give a muted meow while curling herself briefly round my ankles before trotting off to the fridge, expecting

to be fed. And if not, then she'd disappear next door to Major Carr's. Often staying there for several days. It seems that was becoming her second home.

I knew sometime soon my father's tour of duty in Nigeria would end. That my parents would return to the UK. They'd already discussed taking Polly back.

'She'd have to go by ship,' I overheard Father tell Mother. 'A six week trip. But that would be her quarantine period so she could come straight home when she gets off the ship.'

I sidled into the room at that point. Both Father and Mother gave me guilty looks.

'Er … we were just discussing taking Polly back to the UK,' said Father, his cheeks reddening.

'I know. I heard you,' I replied.

'That will be nice, won't it?' said Mother, also looking a little uncomfortable. I think both of them knew what I was going to ask.

'What about Poucher?'

There was silence for a moment.

'Will we be taking her back, Dad?'

He shifted from one foot to another, hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his shorts.

'Well, will we, Dad?' I persisted.

He gave Mother a despairing look. A silent "help".

In an instant, I knew a decision had already been made. I bit my lower lip, determined not to cry. After all, it wasn't the done thing for a thirteen-year-old to blubber.

Father sat down next to me and put his hand on my knee. He was never one to show much affection so this must have been quite an effort for him. 'Malcolm, we've given this a

lot of thought. We just wonder whether Poucher would be happy in England.'

'Of course, she would,' I cried. 'She'll be happy anywhere as long as she is with us.'

Mother interjected. 'But she'd have to stay in quarantine kennels for six months. And it'll be the middle of winter. Poucher's used to Africa. She was born out here. This is her life.' She paused. 'Besides which she is getting on a bit. Nearly ten years old now. Don't you think it would be a bit unfair on her, making her travel all those thousands of miles?'

'You're just making excuses,' I said, grimly, looking up at Mother. 'And to think Poucher saved your life.'

That hit home. Mother averted her eyes, studied her nails.

Father cleared his throat as if to speak. Then seemed to think better of it.

I could contain my emotions no longer. I leapt to my feet with a howl and stormed off to my room, slamming the door furiously behind me.

But I was right. The decision had been made, however unfair I thought it was. Poucher was to stay. And in fact, a prospective new family had already been found. As for Sooty, well she was now spending so much time over at Major Carr's *gidah* these days that I wasn't too worried about her. But Poucher was a different matter.

After a weekend of coercion, I was persuaded to meet her new owners. They were lecturers at the University of Ibadan. A couple with a boy of seven and a little girl of four. I confess to a stab of jealousy when Poucher trotted up to the children, wagging her tail and followed it with her

customary shake-a-paw. The kids squealed with delight and the parents patted and fussed over her. But that was Poucher for you. Friendly with everyone. A joy to be with. Without openly admitting it, I knew Poucher would soon settle down with her new owners. Just as she had done with us.

But when the time came, it didn't soften the wrench of parting. It didn't stop the tightening of the throat. The sting of tears fought back as I knelt down and stared into Poucher's trusting brown eyes for the last time.

'I'm going to miss you so much,' I sobbed, burying my head in her neck. 'You've been such a great buddy.'

Her pink tongue lolled out to lick the tip of my nose. With a little grizzle, she cocked her head. And then for one last time raised her paw. I shook it not in greeting, but in farewell.

'Bye-bye, pet,' I whispered. Then jumped to my feet and ran to the awaiting Land Rover to hide the tears I could no longer control.

Mother did her best to console me. But even her eyes were moist, shiny. 'She'll be in good hands,' she said. 'And I bet you one thing.'

'What's that?' I sniffed.

'That Poucher looks after her new owners just as she looked after us.'

And she was proved to be right.

Meanwhile, we packed our trunks, choosing many mementos of our time in Nigeria which we felt would be reminders of those tropical days. That included my little ivory camel – the gift from Ali Baba. Once back in the UK, they were unpacked while waiting for the one special living souvenir of our time out there. Polly.

When she arrived at Southampton, her cage had painted on it, in large red letters “I bite”. So, she’d obviously been up to her old tricks on her voyage over. Her mandibles ready to mash any sailors’ fingers if they got too close. She was silent on the drive home from the docks where Father and I had gone to pick her up.

‘Perhaps she’s ill,’ I said, anxiously, looking over my shoulder to Polly in her cage wedged on the back seat.

‘Don’t worry, I’m sure she’s fine,’ said Father, strumming on the steering wheel. But I detected a note of doubt in his voice. I knew he was as fond of Polly as me and wouldn’t want anything to happen to her. I had expected her to look thinner, maybe have a few feathers missing. Not a bit of it. Plump and bright eyed, she stared at us – but still not a word said. We needn’t have worried though. When we reached home, Father swung the cage onto the pavement as Mother leaned from an upstairs window. Polly looked up, fixed her with a beady golden eye, and in her voice yelled, ‘Hello, Muriel.’

Polly was housed in the kitchen where she soon picked up and imitated the sounds of daily life. Only deafeningly magnified. Cutlery into a drawer was like scaffolding collapsing. Filling the kettle, Niagara Falls. She did a wonderful imitation of a beer bottle top being removed. Phish. A glass being filled. Glug … glug. The beer drunk. Gump … gump. To be followed by a hearty belch. Father’s belch or Mother’s belch? I could never tell as they both liked their beer.

Within months of being back in the UK, my parents acquired a Maltese terrier. Perhaps as compensation for having left Poucher behind. We all agreed the most obvious

name for him was Yambo – the cheery hello the locals would use in Nigeria. It turned out that Yambo wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer and became a source of delight for Polly. She'd imitate the back-door bell ringing. Yambo would skitter across the lino, barking his head off. 'Go in your box, Yambo,' she'd command. The little fellow meekly obliged. 'Sit, Yambo,' she'd order. The dog sat, puzzled. Then she'd burst out laughing. Wicked parrot.

Though it was good to have Yambo around, he was a constant reminder of Poucher thousands of miles away in Nigeria; and I often wondered how she was getting on.

Then, one frosty December morning, an air-mail letter arrived. It was from the Freemans – Poucher's new owners.

'There, what did I tell you,' exclaimed Mother, halfway through reading it.

'What's happened? What's happened?' I yelled, hopping up and down. 'Come on, Mum … tell me.'

'They say that their little boy was playing in the garden when he disturbed a spitting cobra. Poucher ran between the boy and snake, barking. The snake apparently spat at her.'

'But she was all right, was she?' I knew the danger of those snakes. They could spit venom into your eyes with deadly accuracy.

'Well, she was partially blinded. But has recovered fully now. Here, why don't you read the letter for yourself?' She handed it to me.

I scanned its contents. Eagerly devouring every word describing Poucher's heroic action.

The letter ended with a P.S.

We can't thank you enough for giving us such a loyal and faithful companion. She's a much-loved member of the family.

Those words made my heart skip a beat. I smiled to myself. If Poucher was happy, then I too was happy. Happy with the memories I had of that wonderful dog. And indeed, happy with memories of all those other animals that had played such an important part of my life in Nigeria and made it such an exciting time: Sooty, Elizabeth the camel, that python and Bonzo and the baby Patas monkey, to name a few.

They live on, forever in my heart.