

Happy Valley

Chapter One

'The dreaded Masai country'

SURROUNDED BY A Masai war party intent on cutting him to pieces, the Scots explorer Joseph Thomson did the only thing possible to save his life. He took out his false teeth and flashed them at the advancing warriors.

The Masai drew the obvious conclusion. Clearly the twenty- five-year-old white man, the first they had ever seen, was a sorcerer and caster of spells. Abandoning all thoughts of murder, they turned to run and were only persuaded to creep back after Thomson had discreetly replaced his teeth and tapped them with his knuckles to show how firm they were.

'As they thought I could do the same thing with my nose or eyes,' he recalled, 'they hailed me as a veritable *lybon n'ebor* [white medicine-man].'

But being a medicine-man worked both ways, as Thomson was soon to find out. An epidemic of rinderpest was ballooning outwards across the Kenya highlands in 1883, killing Masai cattle in tens of thousands and rotting the flesh of the unfortunate creatures which still remained alive. As he continued on his journey, word quickly went ahead that the white man with the strange hair was responsible for this devastating disease and the famine which followed on its heels. He would shortly catch up with his reputation.

Thomson was in Kenya, then known as Masai Land, at the behest of the Royal Geographical Society. He was looking for a practical short cut from the ports of the East African coast to Lake Victoria and the central African kingdom of Baganda.

Instead of taking the comparatively safe but long and unhealthy southern route, the short cut was to push straight through territory dominated by the most warlike tribe south of the Sahara, territory that was the last truly mysterious part of Africa since John Hanning Speke had identified Lake Victoria as the probable source of the river Nile in 1862.

The society was mean with money. At first it was prepared to put up only £2,000 to finance Thomson's expedition, when experienced Africa hands were agreed that a caravan through Masai country could not be properly equipped and fitted out with fighting men for

less than double that amount. That was why the youthful Thomson was in command. No one else wanted to know.

Yet Thomson was not in the least put out. Already the veteran of two African expeditions, he firmly believed in the lucky star which had been with him all his life - and besides, exploring was the only work he knew. At the age of only eleven he had volunteered for Stanley's expedition to find Livingstone, only to have the scheme vetoed by his mother. He was driven forward by an obsession, a never-ending desire to see over the next horizon, to climb the highest mountain and cross the widest desert. That he might end up spitted on the spear of a Masai *morán* in the process never seriously entered his head. As well as immense self-confidence, he possessed an abundance of the quality which, above all else, had served to bring one quarter of the world under British domination - a complete inability to appreciate the true gravity of the danger lying ahead.

To be fair, Thomson fully realised that testing the viability of the short route to the central lake would be no easy task. He found out as soon as he arrived on the slave trade island of Zanzibar to begin recruiting porters for a caravan to the interior. 'The very idea of going to the dreaded Masai country was sufficient to take their breath away,' he discovered. The only porters willing to risk their lives with him, and then only after he had promised to ask no questions about their past activities, were 'the blind and the lame, the very refuse of Zanzibar rascaldom, beachcombers, thieves, murderers, run-away slaves, most of them literally rotten with a life of debauchery'. And even these fully intended to desert with three months' advance pay as soon as they had gone a couple of days' march up-country.

Fortunately, Thomson had been to Zanzibar before and was more than wise to their game. Backed by an illiterate Maltese sail maker named James Martin, who had begged to join the party, he took elaborate precautions to make sure no one should escape until they reached the Masai. Camp was always pitched in an open spot, and Thomson ostentatiously gave his sentries orders to shoot anyone attempting to sneak out at night. Once among the Masai, he calculated that desertion would cease to be much of a problem. With warrior *morans* prowling around the camp perimeter, thirsting for the slightest excuse to test their spears, nobody in his right mind would ever drop behind.

After several weeks of preparation, during which Thomson sometimes wondered whether it would ever get under way at all, the expedition finally left the Mombasa mission station that was the gateway to Africa on 15 March 1883. Somehow he had managed to scrape together more than a hundred porters. Twenty-nine carried beads - not then a cliché - to distribute to the natives. Thirty-four carried iron, brass or copper wire,

fourteen cloth, fifteen personal stores, nine clothes, boots and books of poetry, five ammunition and six scientific apparatus or photographic equipment. There were also two donkeys, Nil Desperandum and Excelsior, who answered when in the mood to Dick and Billy.

Thomson himself stayed to chat with Mrs Shaw, the missionary's wife, while the caravan filed past him on the outward leg of a journey that was to cover thousands of miles over the next fourteen months. Not until the last man had shouldered his load did he take leave of the English couple. 'I shook hands with my pleasant hostess,' he wrote, 'lifted my hat, and set my face towards the setting sun.' A quarter of an hour later, he was in the unknown.

The following day, though still far away from Masai country, the caravan had its first glimpse of what a marauding war party could do in the form of hundreds of skulls strewn across the ground where *morans* had slaughtered three hundred Nyika tribesmen. And that night, in spite of Thomson spreading false rumours that the Masai were already in their rear, two men managed to desert.

For the most part, however, the tribes lying in the expedition's immediate path were not only friendly but obligingly anxious to please. At Ndara, for instance, about ninety miles inland across the waterless Taru desert, the caravan received an enthusiastic welcome from the women of the Teita tribe, who ran to greet it with curious stares and excited laughter. From underneath his pith helmet, Thomson surreptitiously noticed that the girls had 'pendant breasts flapping against their bosoms like half-empty, loosely-attached leather bottles'.

'In a short time,' he went on, 'we found ourselves camped under a shady sycamore, drinking deep draughts of clear water from a cool rill which splashed and tumbled down the rugged face of Ndara, and invited us by its merry music to the luxury of a bath.'

Sadly, though itching to tear off his clothes and plunge straight into the delicious water, Thomson just could not bring himself to do so. The man who had explored a thousand horizons was suddenly bashful. He found himself quite unable to strip naked before the interested gaze of the assembled natives. Only after the bottle-breasted girls had wended their way home towards nightfall, with many a wistful backward glance, did the great white god at length unbutton his clothes and surrender himself to the welcoming stream - and then only after he was absolutely sure no one was peeking from the bushes.

As the expedition advanced with tortuous footsteps towards the beginnings of Masai country proper, rumours began to expand and multiply at an alarming rate. There was peace, there was war, there was famine in the land ahead. The last caravan to venture

among the Masai had reportedly been responsible for the killing of a girl - an unheard-of occurrence and a clear breach of the rules of war in a society where women constituted a source of wealth. The whole country was said to be screaming for revenge. If rumours were to be believed, thousands of warriors were ready and waiting for Thomson's inadequately armed party to step into their territory. Prospects of a peaceful passage to Lake Victoria seemed doubtful in the extreme.

Yet when at last it came, the expedition's first contact with the Masai was nothing like as traumatic as conjecture had led Thomson to expect. Indeed, compared with the build-up, it was something of an anti-climax.

News reached the caravan by way of a group of Masai women, themselves returning from a food-buying expedition, that the European's presence had been reported to the tribal elders, who were even now considering what to do about it. In view of the killing of the girl by the previous caravan, opinion was heavily divided as to Thomson's future. Some were for annihilating him on the spot. Others were curious to see a man of whom they had heard such interesting descriptions. After much quarrelling therefore, they had compromised by agreeing to send a deputation to interview Thomson the following day. On the result of that meeting would his future depend.

Understandably Thomson admitted to being in an excitable and anxious condition next day until he should learn his fate. Privately he was determined to press on and enter Masai Land come what may - but he would naturally prefer to make the crossing in peace, with the active blessing of the inhabitants. By mid-afternoon he had reached the height of nervousness when loud chanting from the forest told him his hosts had arrived.

'Seizing a tuft of grass in one hand, and our guns in the other, in token that we meant peace, but were prepared to fight, we proceeded outside to hear our fate,' he reported. 'Passing through the forest, we soon set our eyes upon the dreaded warriors that had been so long the subject of my waking dreams, and I could not but involuntarily exclaim "What splendid fellows!" as I surveyed a band of the most peculiar race of men to be found in all Africa.'

Splendid indeed. Six foot tall, daubed in oil and clay, armed with shovel-headed spears and shields of bullock hide, they carried themselves with the aristocratic dignity of men who reigned unchallenged throughout the length and breadth of their world, and knew it. The Masai were afraid of no one, least of all a white man. Because they were not afraid, and could afford to be magnanimous, they had agreed among themselves to let the caravan pass in peace.

This was wonderful news. Thomson promptly invited the warriors to spend the night at

his camp, which they duly did, looking around inquisitively and examining everything he showed them with the combination of curiosity and aloofness which was a major characteristic of their tribe. Taking great care not to favour one more than any other, Thomson ceremoniously presented a gift to each warrior from his stores. He was not a fighting man. He intended to prove that it was possible to cross Masai Land without firing so much as a single shot in anger. To this end his caravan contained sixty thousand specially prepared sets of coloured beads so that, if anything did go wrong, he would always be able to buy his way out of trouble.

Trouble was coming, though, and not the kind that could be met with generous handouts of wire, beads or cloth. For Thomson was about to be betrayed. Though the Masai elders were in favour of the white man's passing, it seemed the younger men could not bear to let the opportunity for such sport slip through their fingers, and their impatience had prevailed over wiser counsel. Having nothing better to do, warriors for miles around were gathering together in organised groups, savouring the imminent prospect of a massacre. Before long, they would be on the move.

Learning that an attack was planned for next morning, Thomson frantically sifted through his options. To press on in the face of impossibly superior numbers - as many as two thousand warriors might be coming for him - was clearly out of the question. Though no coward, he was not looking for 'sensationalism and adventure' - his was a scientific expedition, with definite geographical goals which would not be served by unnecessary slaughter. If he could not go forward, therefore, he would have to go back. The whole idea of retreat was utterly repugnant to him but, try as he might, he could see no feasible alternative.

So he conceded to the inevitable and gave orders for camp to be struck that night, secretly after dark, so that the lurking *morans* would know nothing about it until the withdrawal was well under way. Not a sound broke the stillness as the porters carefully packed their loads and shouldered their equipment. As soon as the caravan was ready to move, extra wood was heaped onto the camp fire to build up a strong blaze as the porters tiptoed silently into the outer darkness. They knew the first half mile would be the most dangerous, because the column had to pass within a whisker of the warriors' camp. Every man in the expedition prayed that Dick and Billy, the two donkeys, would not choose this particular moment to start braying, and their prayers were answered to the letter. It was not the donkeys who broke the silence but the surrounding hyenas, whose scalp-prickling laughter mocked the unhappy porters and hastened them in their flight.

Once safely past the warrior camp, the men quickly picked up speed, anxious to put a

good distance between themselves and the long-legged Masai while they had the opportunity. The night was heavy with tropical rain, and there was also thunder and lightning, but nothing could deflect the terrified porters. Driven now by headstrong panic, they pushed on for most of the night, cold, wet and exhausted, until at length they reached shelter just before dawn and threw themselves down to rest. Now, at last, they thought, the expedition would be abandoned. Now, at last, they would be returning to the peace and tranquillity of the coast.

Unfortunately for them, Thomson was never a man to give up without a struggle, particularly now that he had had his first exhilarating taste of the Masai. He shared the general gloom for a day or two, but not for longer. It was obvious that what he needed were reinforcements - both of men and trading goods - such as could only be obtained from the coast. Oblivious to the cursing and complaining which now broke out behind his back, he ordered the 'insolent and mutinous' porters to set up camp where they were, under the command of James Martin. He himself would make a lightning trip on foot to Mombasa - a small matter of two hundred miles there and another two hundred back - to recruit the extra men he was undoubtedly going to need.

In just over a month Thomson was back up-country, having obtained the necessary porters cum fighting men through a combination of press ganging and force of his powerful personality. With them came an additional twenty-one loads of wire, ten of cloth and five of beads to tickle the ever-outstretched palms of the Masai. Gunfire and loud cheering greeted his return, for in spite of themselves the men of the expedition were beginning to warm to Thomson, a man far removed from the missionaries of the coast who summed up their experience of white men. And now that he had rejoined them, the lucky star in which he placed such faith was about to shine on him once more.

He met up with a one-eyed slave trader named Jumba, a half-Arab, half-negro Swahili who made a fat living out of transporting slaves and ivory to the coast for export to Arabia. Jumba was a hard man and a seasoned traveller. More important, he was in command of a large caravan about to enter Masai Land. And he was prepared to let the white man's column come along too.

This was all Thomson needed. Together, the two caravans added up to a force of several hundred armed men, more than a match for even the most numerous Masai war party. This time there would be no going back. On 11 August 1883, filled with renewed confidence and rising expectations, Joseph Thomson re-entered Masai Land for the last time.

By early September, after a lengthy trek dogged every foot of the way by *morans* eager

for blood but settling for beads and cloth, the convoy arrived in the cloud-covered uplands of Kenya, overlooking the Great Rift Valley which splits Africa from Egypt to Mozambique. The route had taken them across an enormous plain beside which ran the cold waters of a river the Masai called Uaso Nairobi. At the head of the plain lay a thickly forested region occupied by the Masai's ancient enemies, the Kikuyu, a wily people whose strength lay in their ability to use the forest to their own advantage. As the caravan progressed towards the Rift Valley, the Kikuyu had made several attempts from the protection of the trees to stampede Thomson's cattle. When that failed, they sent their women to trade with his porters - or rather to rob them by the not particularly subtle method of luring them into the woods where Kikuyu warriors were waiting with heavy clubs.

Nobody was happier than Thomson to leave the Kikuyu behind at length and descend 2,000 feet onto the volcano-strewn floor of the Rift Valley. As far as penetrating Masai Land was concerned, the major part of the expedition was coming to an end - northwards, the remainder of the journey to Lake Victoria and Baganda would soon lead through relatively peaceful country. Despite the initial setbacks, and there had been many, the expedition was beyond doubt a success. Though not yet free of the Masai, Thomson could afford a pause for rest and recuperation. On 30 September, he pushed his way through thousands of zebra to pitch camp along the luxurious shores of Lake Naivasha, some 360 miles and six months from his starting point at the coast.

By measuring the temperature at which water came to the boil, he could calculate that the altitude was around 6,200 feet above sea level, which explained the coolness of the evenings. To the east rose up a distant chain of mountains, perhaps forty miles long, their summits hedged in cloud. The local Masai had no collective name for these mountains, though other people called the area Nyandarua. Unaware of this, Thomson decided to christen them the Aberdare range after Lord Aberdare, president of the Royal Geographical Society and sponsor of the expedition.

Yet though the highest peak in the Aberdares stands at an impressive 13,120 feet, it was not that which held Thomson's attention as he turned his face towards the rising sun. He was far more interested in something else, something which might or might not lie beyond the Aberdares. He was interested in investigating a thirty-four-year-old claim that somewhere in the plain behind, almost straddling the Equator, lay an enormous mountain covered in eternal snow.

The claim had been made by a bespectacled German missionary carrying an umbrella and burdened with the unmelodious name of Ludwig Krapf. On 3 December 1849, while

unsuccessfully attempting to convert the Kamba tribe to Christianity on behalf of Great Britain's Church Missionary Society, Krapf had noticed a gap in the rain-swollen clouds north west of him, through which he distinctly saw 'two large horns or pillars, as it were, rising over an enormous mountain covered with a white substance'. This was the first recorded sighting by a European of the mountain known to the natives by many names, and to the Kikuyu as Kerinyaga, the mountain of mystery, usually abbreviated simply to Kenya.

In his own day, Krapf's report had been widely ridiculed by geographers in far-away London, unwilling to accept that their personal theories could be confounded by the existence of snow on the Equator. They talked instead of chalky earth, or white stones littering the summit, anything but snow. Krapf, they argued, was no scientist but a missionary blinded by religious zeal, and probably off his head after too long in the tropics. Mistakes, after all, could easily be made in heavy cloud. Nor were they impressed by one of Krapf's colleagues, Johann Rebmann, who had already recorded the existence of another snow-topped mountain further south, a mountain called Kilima Njaro. One geographer, who had never set foot in East Africa, sneered openly at Rebmann's claim and called it 'a most delightful mental recognition only, not supported by the evidence of his senses'. In other words, anyone who said there was snow on the Equator was a liar.*

*The missionaries' claims to be taken seriously were in no way aided by their own cackhandedness in recording their sightings. Krapf made no attempt to get an astronomical bearing on Mount Kenya, and subsequent efforts by English geographers to establish its whereabouts had to be based on an abstruse calculation of how much distance he might have covered in each day's march from the coast. Using this method, E. G. Ravenstein of the Royal Geographical Society placed Mount Kenya in the empty plain south west of Lake Naivasha. Thomson had only to look over his shoulder to see no mountain there. Krapf's own map put the mountain in the Tanzanian sector of Lake Victoria. But native reports must have convinced Thomson that east of the Aberdares was the place to look.

Curiously, very little notice was taken at the time of a Captain Short, who also claimed to have seen a snow mountain in 1849. On Krapf's map, Short's mountain lay slightly north of the Equator, between Archer's Post and the Lorian Swamp - much closer to Mount Kenya's true position.

But Thomson had climbed the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro on his way up-country and had seen snow with his own eyes. If one report was true, why not the other? Sitting in his tent at Lake Naivasha, with the main purpose of his mission well on the way to completion, he had time to contemplate the secondary reason for his journey, which was to check out Krapf's report and make an attempt to pinpoint Mount Kenya. Jumba's men would soon be going north in search of ivory, but there was no reason why Thomson should follow at once. He decided instead to take a small party on a flying visit in search of the mysterious second mountain.

His Swahili companions were horrified. 'On mooting my scheme,' he remembered, 'it was received with laughter and incredulity, which changed to remonstrance and profound astonishment when it was seen that I was serious. "What!" said they; "do you think you can penetrate a district with a few men, which we should be afraid to attempt with several hundreds? ... Do you know that a few years ago a caravan of two hundred was totally annihilated in that very district?" ...

My only reply was that Mount Kenya had to be reached somehow, as all my countrymen wanted to know the truth about it; moreover, I had now learned something of the ways of the Masai, and thought I might rely upon my character as a *lybon* (medicine-man), where men and guns were of little use.'

He got his way, of course, as he so often did. Taking thirty of his best men, plus a similar number of Swahili traders who appear to have followed him everywhere out of the curiosity of sane men for a lunatic, he set out towards the east on 6 October, armed with little more than a rifle and a set of false dentures.

Almost immediately, while on his way around the northern-most shoulder of the Aberdare range, he was intercepted by a group of Masai who insisted that he should use his magic powers to turn back the plague that was decimating their livestock. Thomson thought fast. The plague would certainly stop, he promised, but only ten days after he had left the neighbourhood. This idea gained a mixed reception from the dubious warriors - it was only after considerable argument among themselves that they reluctantly agreed to let him continue his journey unmolested towards the north east.

He was now in an enchanted green land of wild fig trees, podo and cedar-like junipers, often a hundred feet tall, mingled with clumps of yellow cassia and maidenhair ferns clustered along the banks of the clear mountain streams which trickled down towards the plains. The altitude was so high that the grass outside Thomson's tent was unmistakably covered in hoar frost in the mornings, a phenomenon he greeted by dancing a Scotch reel in his overcoat - to the consternation of his shivering porters, for whom the highlands held no charm. Coast-bred every one, they longed only to return to the life-giving warmth of the open veld, far below the mist-drenched champagne country that now enveloped them.

To cheer them up, Thomson waited a couple of hours after daylight for the sun to take the chill off the air, then took his rifle into the nearby bush in search of wild game for the pot. Full stomachs all round would do wonders for morale, particularly as the Masai pestering of the past few days had made it impossible for the party to cook any food - they had been living off mealie cobs prepared before they set out.

As luck would have it, the first animal he came across was not a candidate for the

cooking pot at all, but a fully grown leopard, concealed in a patch of tall grass intermingled with bamboo towards the top of a steeply wooded slope. It growled as Thomson approached, then retreated into heavier under-growth before he could get in a shot. Undeterred, Thomson plunged in after it. Though not edible, a leopard would nevertheless make an impressive entry in his trophy book, if only he could bring it down.

Crashing headlong through the scrub, he climbed rapidly upwards towards the crest of the ridge, intending to get a good view of the leopard's movements from the top. He got a view, all right, but not the one he had been expecting:

'Through a rugged and picturesque depression in the range rose a gleaming snow-white peak with sparkling facets, which scintillated with the superb beauty of a colossal diamond,' he later wrote. 'It was, in fact, the very image of a great crystal or sugar-loaf. At the base of this beautiful peak were two small excrescences like supporters to a monument. From there, at a very slight angle, shaded away a long glittering white line, seen above the dark mass of the Aberdare range like the silver lining of a dark storm-cloud. This peak and silvery line formed the central culminating point of Mount Kenia.'

The mountain was a good sixty-five miles away, but looked much closer because of the thin highland air. Entranced, all idea of hunting forgotten, Thomson simply stood and stared. And even as he watched, soft clouds came hurrying in from nowhere to gather protectively round the summit, like nuns defending the Mother Superior from rape. Yet Thomson had already seen more than enough to lure him onwards. His eyes filled with unaccustomed moisture - he had become the first of many Europeans who would weep for Mount Kenya.

To his everlasting regret, though he went on to reach the base of the mountain, he was prevented from climbing it by the Masai, more than ever convinced by now that he was behind the plague blackening their land. The party had run out of beads to distribute, and though Thomson had been removing his teeth at least once every hour for the benefit of his onlookers, this was no longer enough for the *morans*. The teeth caper was wearing thin. They wanted to see him take out his eyes and nose. Failing that, they would kill him. So there was nothing for it but yet another retreat after dark, in several groups this time so as to reduce tracks through the scrub. Because of the excessively cold mornings, the Masai could be relied upon not to leave their huts until long after daybreak, by which time Thomson and his men were already far away. Instead of retracing their steps, they headed north west out of Masai Land towards a prearranged rendezvous alongside Lake Baringo. A few days' forced march across a plateau in which 'buffaloes, zebras, elephants and

rhinoceroses were in astonishing numbers' then brought them to safety and a cheerful reunion with the rest of the caravan.

The reunion celebrations did not last long, however, for Thomson's bottomless fund of energy soon took him west towards Uganda and the great inland sea of Lake Victoria, while the Swahili traders continued north in their hunt for ivory. Thomson considered pressing right on to the Nile, but eventually decided against it. For him, the high spot of the expedition was already over. His thoughts lingered long on Mount Kenya and the Aberdare region, a marvellously temperate land to which he had so readily adapted because it 'roused stirring memories of home scenes, so distinctly 'European-like was the aspect of the crags'. It was his considered judgement that 'a more charming region is probably not to be found in all Africa'.

Of the return trip to Mombasa he remembered little, because a serious attack of dysentery - which would have killed a lesser man and, indeed, almost killed him - left a blank of many weeks in his mind. Having walked on his own two feet all the way to Lake Victoria, he was now carried back towards the coast by his porters, who had come to believe that no disaster could possibly strike the expedition while its leader remained alive. From their own point of view, this was absolutely correct. Though Thomson personally disapproved of the practice, it was customary then for porters to forfeit their wages if by any mischance the expedition leader died on them.

He arrived back at the Mombasa mission station on 24 May 1884 - Queen Victoria's birthday - having not seen another white face for almost a year. He had penetrated Masai country, and he had confirmed the existence of Mount Kenya. More than that, he had neither fired a shot in anger nor hanged a porter during the entire period - both of which made him unique in the annals of African exploration.

On the debit side, his health had been ruined by a prolonged round of fever which he himself recognised would shorten his life by several years. Even the soothing effect of the return sea voyage failed to restore his strength. When he got back to England, having travelled via Zanzibar and Bombay, he half-jokingly described himself as 'a sad wreck - only a few planks, as it were, holding together'. And the ordeal was not yet over.

On 3 November 1884, after a lengthy convalescence, Thomson was well enough to present himself at the University of London theatre in Burlington House for a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society at which he had been awarded star billing. The meeting was a personal triumph on a large scale. Some of the more sensational aspects of the journey had been judiciously leaked in advance, with the result that geographers from all

over the country had gathered to hear him speak. Proceedings were opened by Lord Aberdare, proud patron of a new mountain range, who spoke with unrestrained admiration of the great difficulties and danger Thomson had faced. The Times reported it thus: 'In his expedition Mr Thomson had marched about 3000 miles, of which 1200 lay through wholly new countries (Cheers).' For the fifth son of a onetime stonemason, he had indeed come a long way.

Thomson's book *Through Masai Land* came out in January 1885 and was an immediate best seller. The irresistible combination of volcanoes, mountain ranges, wild animals and wilder men - not to mention occasional glimpses of naked black women seven feet tall - guaranteed it a wide circulation in Victorian England and won for its author an instant entrée to high society. But Thomson found this adulation overpowering. It meant that his time was no longer his own - wherever he went he had to fight off requests for interviews, lectures, articles and after-dinner speeches, all of which served to tie him down and box him in. The wilds of unknown Africa were where he wanted to be - London he could live without.

One of the first to read *Through Masai Land* was an ambitious twenty-eight-year-old divorce lawyer named Henry Rider Haggard, who had only that year been called to the Bar. As a young man he had been sent to South Africa to make his fortune but had come to the conclusion, between the Zulus and the Boers, that there was no future in it. So he had returned with reluctance to England to set up house in West Kensington. While doors all over London were being opened to Thomson, Haggard's one aim in life was to write a better adventure novel than one published two years previously - R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. In Joseph Thomson he found his plot.

Imagination fired by the Masai expedition, Haggard promptly sat down in the dining room of his Kensington house and in six weeks early in 1885 wrote *King Solomon's Mines*. Though he placed the 'Kukuanaland' of the story firmly in what is now Zimbabwe, he borrowed his geographical props wholesale from Thomson. He did, after all, have an interest in East Africa - a kinsman, D. C. Haggard, was British vice-consul on the Arab island of Lamu, off the Kenya coast.

King Solomon's Mines is narrated by the white hunter Allan Quatermain, who leads two European companions, Sir Henry Curtis and Captain John Good, across unknown wasteland in search of a legendary diamond mine. Stumbling across an arid desert - such as the Taru, standing between Mombasa and the Kenya highlands - they come eventually to a range of mountains perhaps forty or fifty miles away:

'There, straight before us, were two enormous mountains, the like of which are not, I

believe, to be seen in Africa, if, indeed, there are any other such in the world, measuring each at least fifteen thousand feet in height, standing not more than a dozen miles apart, connected by a precipitous cliff of rock, and towering up in awful white solemnity straight into the sky. These mountains standing thus, like the pillars of a gigantic gateway, are shaped exactly like a woman's breasts. Their bases swelled gently up from the plain, looking, at that distance, perfectly round and smooth; and on the top of each was a vast round hillock covered with snow.'

Allowing for artistic licence - Mount Kenya is 17,058 feet, Kilimanjaro 19,340 feet, and they are separated by just over two hundred miles - Haggard stuck closely to Thomson's original story. No more so than when the three explorers have their first meeting with the warlike Kukuana tribe: "What does that beggar say?" asked Good. "He says we are going to be scragged," I answered grimly. "Oh Lord," groaned Good; and, as was his way when perplexed, put his hand to his false teeth, dragging the top set down and allowing them to fly back to his jaw with a snap. It was a most fortunate move, for next second the dignified crowd of Kukuanas gave a simultaneous yell of horror. and bolted back some yards'

King Solomon's Mines was published just nine months after *Through Masai Land*, and within a few weeks had sold more than five thousand copies, little short of miraculous for an unknown writer of boys' stories. In the next decade it would sell tens of thousands more, for Haggard had unerringly put his finger on the new mood of the British public. The nineteenth-century upsurge in education - combined with a growing awareness of Britain's imperial role, fuelled by greater access to library books and newspapers - had given the masses a taste for mystery and romance which Africa filled to perfection. Men like Thomson inked in the blank spots on the globe, and people at home loved them for it. Here was the heady thrill of adventure, the lifeblood of the *Boys' Own Paper*, to be read below desk lids or by candle in the dorm after lights out - and by many of those adults whom Thomson customarily referred to as 'easy-chair geographers'.

Yet there was more to it than adventure, much more. Though Thomson had been prepared to wander through Masai Land simply for the hell of it, the hard-nosed businessmen of the Royal Geographical Society who had put up the cash for his expedition were far more interested in what might come of it in the way of trade. Trade, and ensuing profit for the motherland, was the one and only reason for the existence of the British Empire. At a time when the great powers of Europe were beginning to look towards Africa as a massive counter in the absorbing game of politics, Thomson's journey raised the question of just how much profit could be squeezed from this vast new territory, at present under no country's sphere of influence.

Thomson himself, a romantic pure and simple, vigorously opposed the idea of opening up the area to commerce. He did not see himself as the representative of Mammon. As far as he was concerned, he told the *Pall Mall Gazette*: 'You cannot trade in that region unless the Masai allow you, and at present they would rather have your head than the present of a linendraper's warehouse.'

Others agreed with him. At a time when budgets were things that balanced, powerful forces in Parliament, notably Lord Salisbury, were convinced that any British involvement in East Africa could only lead to financial disaster. And though some people talked fondly of building a railway along Thomson's route from the coast to the flourishing kingdom of Baganda, the Foreign Office's official view was that the five hundred miles in between constituted a sterile region of which nothing could be made. On the face of it, even the most optimistic had to admit that the prospects for trade did not look at all good.

Yet there were other, even more important considerations to be taken into account. For Germany, newest and most obstreperous power in Europe, was making hesitant but unmistakable attempts to muscle in on the new country. Inch by inch, peering over their shoulders all the while, the Germans were edging towards Uganda and the headwaters of the river Nile in a determined attempt to secure a strong foothold in the area while the parsimonious British were occupied elsewhere.

This was a threat which London could not ignore for long. He who controlled the Nile could effectively dominate the agrarian economy of Egypt, whose Suez Canal provided the short cut to India and formed an indispensable strut in Britain's imperial strategy. General Gordon had pointed out as much while Governor-General of the Sudan, only to see his plan for subduing the Masai and securing the Nile for Britain turned down by a Government ruled by Little Englanders for whom any colonial involvement was a sin.

But whether the Government liked it or not, Germany was already on the march. Behind her would come the French and the Italians. There was just no way the British could avoid becoming involved in the scramble for Africa.