

Tennis and The Masai

Chapter One

On the narrow beach below Fort Jesus, a group of Germans were having a party. It was getting towards evening, and after the heat of the day they were glad to throw off their protective clothing at last and frolic naked in the shallows. From the Indian Ocean a late breeze had arisen, ruffling the flag of the republic of Kenya which had basked unassumingly above the battlements for most of the afternoon. The Germans danced in the breeze and bellowed with delight. They were tourists, uncircumcised mostly, enjoying the simple noisy pleasures of their kind. They splashed and sang, the men displaying tight Aryan muscles or an enormous beer belly according to age, the women exuberant white buttocks or the mottled abominations of the Munich hausfrau.

From the veranda of the Mombasa Club, sheltered behind palm trees, two officials of the administration sat side by side in identical cane chairs, observing the revellers on the beach. It was the hour of day at which, in colonial times, tea had been served, and the tradition had been scrupulously preserved. There was a cup of tea beside Mr District Commissioner Karanja, although shortly he would follow it up with the first whisky and soda of the evening; another at the elbow of Mr bin Seyd, superintendent of police.

'Look at them,' said bin Seyd. 'Look at the way they dance. I wonder if we ought to allow it.'

'There's no law against dancing. It would be impossible to enforce.'

'There's a law against nudity.' Mr bin Seyd was a devout coast Muslim. 'They've no right to strip off like that. It's illegal in a public place.'

One of the younger Germans had a tennis ball, which he had been bouncing up and down with ruthless Teutonic efficiency. He retrieved it now from the grassy stretch in front of the club. He was wearing a string of beads, purchased that morning in the bazaar, and nothing else. As he ran to collect the ball, it was difficult not to admire the pristine simplicity of his nakedness, the unaffected, savage good humour of his laugh. In common with the others on the beach, he had smeared his body all over with grease kept in a plastic bottle for the purpose. The result, in the evening sunlight, was a magnificent sheen.

'A pastoral people, in their way,' observed Karanja. 'One can't expect to change them overnight. They're tourists, after all. One doesn't want to frighten them off.'

'Nonetheless, Commissioner, it isn't right. You're the Bwana DC. You ought to do something.'

Karanja's was a life full of burden. 'There are times, you know, when I envy them their simplicity,' he confessed. 'Look at the way they're enjoying themselves. No cares, no worries. Happy as the day is long.'

He was beginning to tire of the Germans. He flicked his fly whisk irritably, and bin Seyd saw that the subject was closed. One after the other the two officials settled deeper into their chairs, the same chairs - or rather the same positions on the veranda - occupied by successive District Commissioners and superintendents of police for almost a hundred years. At the back of the veranda there were the same month-old copies of *Punch* and *Country Life* in leather folders; in front of it the same flagpole and bronze ship's cannon facing out to sea. The coast of East Africa has known many conquerors over the centuries - Turks, Arabs, Portuguese - and all have left their marks in various ways. But it had taken the English to build a club.

The first conquerors to leave a mark of any permanence were the Portuguese. On a coral ridge overlooking the old harbour they raised the bastion of Fort Jesus - Matodi in Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief* - nearly four hundred years ago, and for a century there- after held it against Arab fleets from Oman. Sieges and shipwrecks were commonplace in the early days, sails from Lisbon a rarity. Plague, treachery and murder ruled the garrison. Men slipped over the wall at night, lowered on ropes, while their enemies waited in silence to behead them; others were assassinated, or blew themselves up in the powder magazine in their hour of defeat. Not until the coming of the British had the fort been able to relax. The walls since then had faded to a Mediterranean combination of tan, pink and blue, with bougainvillea along the ramparts and bushes of frangipani. The fort no longer served its original purpose but was simply a tourist attraction, the only building of any antiquity along the coast.

On the beach below, the Germans had found a tom-tom. It seemed unlikely that they would allow such a discovery to pass unnoticed. Nor did they. 'Happy as the day is long,' repeated Karanja above the din. 'How I envy them.'

Unlike bin Seyd, Karanja was a Kikuyu from up-country. For eight years, give or take a few months, he had been Commissioner in Mombasa, responsible for the administration of government' among the alien, hostile people of the coast. Religious and tribal differences separated him from the population under his control, a cultural gap impossible to span. He was a lonely man. He spent his days sitting in judgment, giving out the law, presiding over a thousand trivial disputes, a thousand familiar accusations of corruption and incompetence. His wife, Kikuyu like himself, complained repeatedly of the heat at sea level. They looked forward to the day when they could retire to the house they had bought in the heart of the Kenya highlands. Karanja hesitated to call it a' cottage. Often, as an apprentice administrator, he had heard his British masters speak wistfully of rose and honeysuckle in Hampshire, but somehow the word seemed inappropriate for the functional tin-roofed structure in which the Karanjas took their leave.

'How are things at home?' asked bin Seyd. 'Family all right?'

'Very well, thank you. Muriel has been under the weather again, but she's better now. She wouldn't

go to the doctor. You know what she's like.'

'The boys?'

'They're away at the moment. At school. James is at Wellington now. He's doing very well.' There was pride in his voice.

'And your younger son?' bin Seyd struggled to remember the name.

'Stephen. He's still at Haggard Hall. He's taking the common entrance next term.'

Again Karanja spoke with pride, but also with a slight unease. Haggard Hall was a Kenya prep school, an exclusive establishment to which all the aristocratic white settlers sent their sons. Stephen Karanja was one of half a dozen token black boys accepted into the school at the same time as the photograph of Sir Winston Churchill in the dining hall was replaced with one of Jomo Kenyatta. Karanja senior was happy to see his son in such a place. Like all sensitive parents however, he also experienced occasional feelings of guilt. He missed his boy around the house. Letters from Stephen were few and far between, but always distant, always slightly impersonal. There had been one recently which he had not entirely understood, and it had disturbed him.

The letter was in his pocket now. Karanja took it out and read it again: '*We beat Pembroke House two-one last week. I got five lines for ragging. Major Gale says he will beat me if I do it again. Smith-Baggot's flamingo has died.*'

There was more, but Karanja did not read on. He handed the letter to bin Seyd and tapped it with his finger. 'There. What do you make of that? *Ragging?*'

The dictionary had not been illuminating. *Ragging: to rebuke, scold, tease, torment, make hay of (person's room etc), indulge in horseplay, engage in ballyragging, spree; lark, play rough jokes on.* Karanja was a cultivated man; he appreciated that English is a language of idiom. He knew also that he could never be a party to the intimate argot of the English boarding school. Nevertheless the idea of his son making hay of someone's room struck him as unlikely. Reading between the lines - Stephen had warned him that letters were censored - he wondered if there was not something going on that he ought to know about, that was being deliberately kept from him.

'I don't understand it,' said bin Seyd, returning the letter. 'Really it's most unusual.'

From across the island - Mombasa is an island - came the familiar chuntering sound of the night train to Nairobi. Usually Karanja was pleased to hear it, for it meant that he could decently order a drink from the bar. Since the withdrawal of the British it would have been a foolish man who attempted to set his watch by the train's departure, but the sound was nevertheless a comforting one, a reassuring tradition in a restless world. In the early years of the century, when the train had set off uncertainly on a journey to nowhere in particular, it had been derided as the lunatic express. Nowadays it enjoyed a certain prestige as one of the last romantic railway journeys of the age. From Mombasa it led across the causeway to the mainland proper, the gateway to Africa, and for the next

eight hundred miles pursued a hazardous course across a land resonant with the old names of empire. The man-eaters of Tsavo; the snows of Kilimanjaro; the flame trees of Thika. Nairobi, home to a pair of English Dukes, paramount chiefs both; Naivasha, where Sir Henry Rider Haggard had set much of his fiction and where, even now, Stephen Karanja risked a thrashing at Haggard Hall. The Rift Valley, which splits the world from the Holy Land to Mozambique; Happy Valley, where the ten commandments had never penetrated. Up nine thousand feet and down again across the equator to the mimosas of Lake Victoria - eight hundred miles of swamp and desert, jungle and plain, a journey like no other in the world.

'Late again, the train,' said bin Seyd happily. Between the smartly uniformed Kenya Police and the civilians of the Railways and Harbours Board there was a mutual contempt inherited, as so much else, from the British.

'I wonder sometimes what does go on at Haggard Hall,' said Karanja. 'My boy won't tell me. Whenever I ask him he just clams up, says I wouldn't understand.'

Across the island, the train let out a series of toots as it reached the causeway. The journey had begun. Thus had it tooted for Edward, Prince of Wales and his American mistress Lady Furness; for Winston Churchill and Theodore Roosevelt; for Hemingway, Blixen, Huxley and Ruark; and for all the younger sons, the aristocrats in disgrace, some to remain in exile for ever, others to reappear after only a few weeks, hurrying home to write a book with Lion, Safari or Masai in the title. Towards the same time tomorrow - assuming no elephants on the line, locusts in the engine, floods, bush fires or even *shauri ya Mungu*, the will of God - the train would be approaching Naivasha, six thousand feet up in what had once been the White Highlands; and from his classroom Stephen Karanja would hear it in the distance, as his father heard it now.

Karanja's thoughts went with the train as it crossed to the mainland. Usually at this time he would be squirming round in his chair to catch the barman's eye - but not tonight. He had something else to do. Instead of a drink he called for pen and paper. He was going to write to Haggard Hall. The headmaster's name was Gale. Karanja wanted to hear from Desmond Gale. He wanted. to find out more, everything a parent ought to know, about *ragging*.