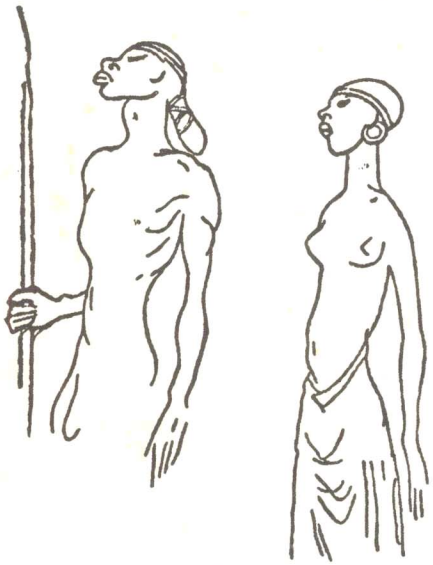
SHADOWS on the GRASS

ISAK DINESEN



Masai Moran and Ndito

ISAK DINESEN was the pen name of Baroness Karen Blixen of Rungstedlund (1885–1962), best known for two collections of stories, *Seven Gothic Tales* and *Winter's Tales*, and the autobiographical *Out of Africa*. Danish by birth, she wrote mainly in English and achieved her first literary fame in the United States.

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Portraits of Abdullahi, Aweru, and an Ndito of the farm by the author

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Farah

As here, after twenty-five years, I again take up episodes of my life in Africa, one figure, straight, candid, and very fine to look at, stands as doorkeeper to all of them: my Somali servant Farah Aden. Were any reader to object that I might choose a character of greater importance, I should answer him that that would not be possible.

Farah came to meet me in Aden in 1913, before the First World War. For almost eighteen years he ran my house, my stables and safaris. I talked to him about my worries as about my successes, and he knew of all that I did or thought. Farah, by the time I had had to give up the farm and was leaving Africa, saw me off in

Mombasa. And as I watched his dark immovable figure on the quay growing smaller and at last disappear, I felt it as if I were losing a part of myself, as if I were having my right hand set off, and from now on would never again ride a horse or shoot with a rifle, nor be able to write otherwise than with my left hand. Neither have I since then ridden or shot.

In order to form and make up a Unity, in particular a creative Unity, the individual components must needs be of different nature, they should even be in a sense contrasts. Two homogeneous units will never be capable of forming a whole, or their whole at its best will remain barren. Man and woman become one, a physically and spiritually creative Unity, by virtue of their dissimilarity. A hook and an eye are a Unity, a fastening; but with two hooks you can do nothing. A right-hand glove with its contrast the left-hand glove makes up a whole, a pair of gloves; but two right-hand gloves you throw away. A number of perfectly similar objects do not make up a whole—a couple of cigarettes may quite well be three or nine. A quartet is a Unity because it is made up of dissimilar instruments. An orchestra is a Unity, and may be perfect as such, but twenty

double-basses striking up the same tune are Chaos.

A community of but one sex would be a blind world. When in 1940 I was in Berlin, engaged by three Scandinavian papers to write about Nazi Germany, woman —and the whole world of woman—was so emphatically subdued that I might indeed have been walking about in such a one-sexed community. I felt a relief then, as I watched the young soldiers marching west, to the frontier, for in a fight the adversaries become one, and the two duellists make up a Unity.

The introduction into my life of another race, essentially different from mine, in Africa became to me a mysterious expansion of my world. My own voice and song in life there had a second set to it, and grew fuller and richer in the duet.

Within the literature of the ages one particular Unity, made up of essentially different parts, makes its appearance, disappears and again comes back: that of Master and Servant. We have met the two in rhyme, blank verse and prose, and in the varying costumes of the centuries. Here wanders the Prophet Elisha with his servant Gehazi—between whom one would have supposed the partnership to have come to an end after the

affair with Naaman, but whom we meet in a later chapter apparently in the best of understanding. Here walk Terence's Davus and Simo, and Plautus' Calidorus and Pseudolus. Here Don Quixote rides forth, with Sancho Panza on his mule by the croup of Rosinante. Here the Fool follows King Lear across the heath in the storm and the black night, here Leporello waits in the street while inside the palazzo Don Giovanni "reaps his sweet reward." Phileas Fogg struts on to the stage with one single idea in his head and versatile Passepartout at his heels. In our own streets of old Copenhagen Jeronimus and Magdelone promenade arm in arm, while behind their broad and dignified backs Henrik and Pernille make signs to one another.

The servant may be the more fascinating of the two, still it holds true of him as of his master that his play of colours would fade and his timbre abate, were he to stand alone. He needs a master in order to be himself. Leporello, after having witnessed his scapegrace master's lurid end, will still, I believe, from time to time in a circle of friends have produced his list of Don Giovanni's victims and have read out triumphantly: "In Spain are a thousand and three!" The Fool, who is

killed by the endless night on the moor, would not have become immortal without the mad old King, to whose lion's roar he joins his doleful, bitter and tender mockery. Henrik and Pernille, if left by Holberg in their own native milieu of Copenhagen valets and ladies' maids, would not have twinkled and sparkled as they do against the background of the sedateness of Jeronimus and Magdelone and the pale romance of Leander and Leonore.

I had in Africa many servants, whom I shall always remember as part of my existence there. There was Ismael, my gun-bearer, a mighty huntsman brought up and trained exclusively in the hunter's world, a great tracker and weather prophet, expressing himself in hunter's terminology and speaking of my "big" and my "young" rifle. It was Ismael who after his return to Somaliland addressed his letter to me "Lioness Blixen" and began it: "Honourable Lioness." There was old Ismael, my cook and faithful companion on safaris, who was a kind of Mohammedan saint. And there was Kamante, a small figure to look at but great, even formidable, in his total isolation. But Farah was my servant by the grace of God.

Farah and I had all the dissimilarities required to make up a Unity: difference of race, sex, religion, milieu and experience. In one thing only were we equal: we had agreed that we were the same age. We were not able to settle the matter exactly, since the Mohammedans reckon with lunar years.

We wander through a long portrait gallery of historical interest: portraits of kings and princes, of great statesmen, poets, and sailors. Amongst all these one face strikes us, an anonymous character, resting in himself, confident of his own nature and dependent on no one. The catalogue that you take up and into which you look tells you: "Portrait of a Gentleman." I shall name my chapter on Farah in an unpretentious way: "Portrait of a Gentleman."

In our day the word "gentleman" is taken less seriously than before, or seems to us to have once taken itself a bit too seriously. But so did Farah take himself seriously.

If the word may be taken to describe or define the person who has got the code of honour of his period and milieu in his own blood, as an instinct—such as the rules of the game will be in the blood of the true cricket

or football player, to whom it would not be possible in any situation to throw the ball at the head of his adversary—Farah was the greatest gentleman I have ever met. Only it was, to begin with, difficult to decide what would be the code of honour to a high-born Mohammedan in the house of a European pioneer.

Farah was a Somali, which means that he was no Native of Kenya but an immigrant to the country from Somaliland further north. In my day there were a large number of Somali in Kenya. They were greatly superior to the Native population in intelligence and culture. They were of Arab blood and looked upon themselves as pure-blood Arabs, in some cases even as descendants of the Prophet. On the whole they thought very highly of themselves. They were all fanatical Mohammedans.

The Natives of the land, the Kikuyu, Wakamba, Kawirondo and Masai, have got their own old mysterious and simple cultural traditions, which seem to lose themselves in the darkness of very ancient days. We ourselves have carried European light to the country quite lately, but we have had the means to spread and establish it quickly. In between, an oriental civilization, violent, cruel and very picturesque, gained a foot-

hold in the Highlands through the slave and ivory trade.

The finest ivory in the world comes from East Africa, and the old slave traffic, a long time before the discovery of America, was carried on along these coasts. From here slaves were freighted eastward to Arabia, Persia, India and China, also northward to the Levant; you will see little black Negro pages in old Venetian pictures. From here came the forty black slaves who, together with forty white, carried Aladdin's jewels to the Sultan on their heads. Zanzibar was the great centre of the trade. The Sultan of Zanzibar, I was told when I was there in 1916, was still paid an appanage of £5,000 as compensation for his loss of income from the slave trade. I have seen, at Zanzibar, the market-place and the platform where slaves were put up for sale.

The old commercial intercourse has left its traces in the language of the country. Each tribe of East Africa has got its own language, but all over the Highlands a primitive, ungrammatical lingua franca is spoken: Swahili, the tongue of the coastal tribes. Small children even, herding goats and sheep on the plains, would

understand and answer as we asked our way, or questioned them about water or game, in Swahili. I spoke Swahili to my Native servants and labourers on the farm, but as the farm lay in the Kikuyu district, our particular local jargon contained many Kikuyu words and turns of phrase.

The trade also brought the Somali to the country. Most likely Farah's ancestors had been enterprising buyers-up, very likely also hunters and robbers in the Highlands, and possibly pirates on the Red Sea.

The Somali are very handsome people, slim and erect as all East African tribes, with sombre, haughty eyes, straight legs and teeth like wolves. They are vain and have knowledge of fine clothes. When not dressed as Europeans—for many of them would wear discarded suits of their masters' from the first London tailors and would look very well in them—they had on long robes of raw silk, with sleeveless black waistcoats elaborately embroidered in gold. They always wore the turbans of the orthodox Mohammedans in exquisite many-coloured cashmeres; those who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca might wear a green turban.

The dark nations of Africa, strikingly precocious as

young children, seemed to come to a standstill in their mental growth at different ages. The Kikuyu, Kawirondo and Wakamba, the people who worked for me on the farm, in early childhood were far ahead of white children of the same age, but they stopped quite suddenly at a stage corresponding to that of a European child of nine. The Somali had got further and had all the mentality of boys of our own race at the age of thirteen to seventeen. In such young Europeans, too, the code of honour, the deadly devotion to the grand phrase and the grand gesture is the passion urging them on to heroic deeds and heroic self-sacrifice, and also at times sinking them into a dark melancholy and resentment unintelligible to grown-up people. The Somali woman seemed to have stolen a small march upon her male, and from the time when she can first walk until venerable high age presents the picture of the classic *jeune fille* of Europe: coquettish, wily, covetous beyond belief, and sweetly merciful at the core.

I had read the old Nordic Sagas as a child, and now in my intercourse with the Somali I was struck by their likeness to the ancient Icelanders. I was therefore