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Elspeth Huxley

THE FLAME TREES
OF THIKA

Memories of an African Childhood



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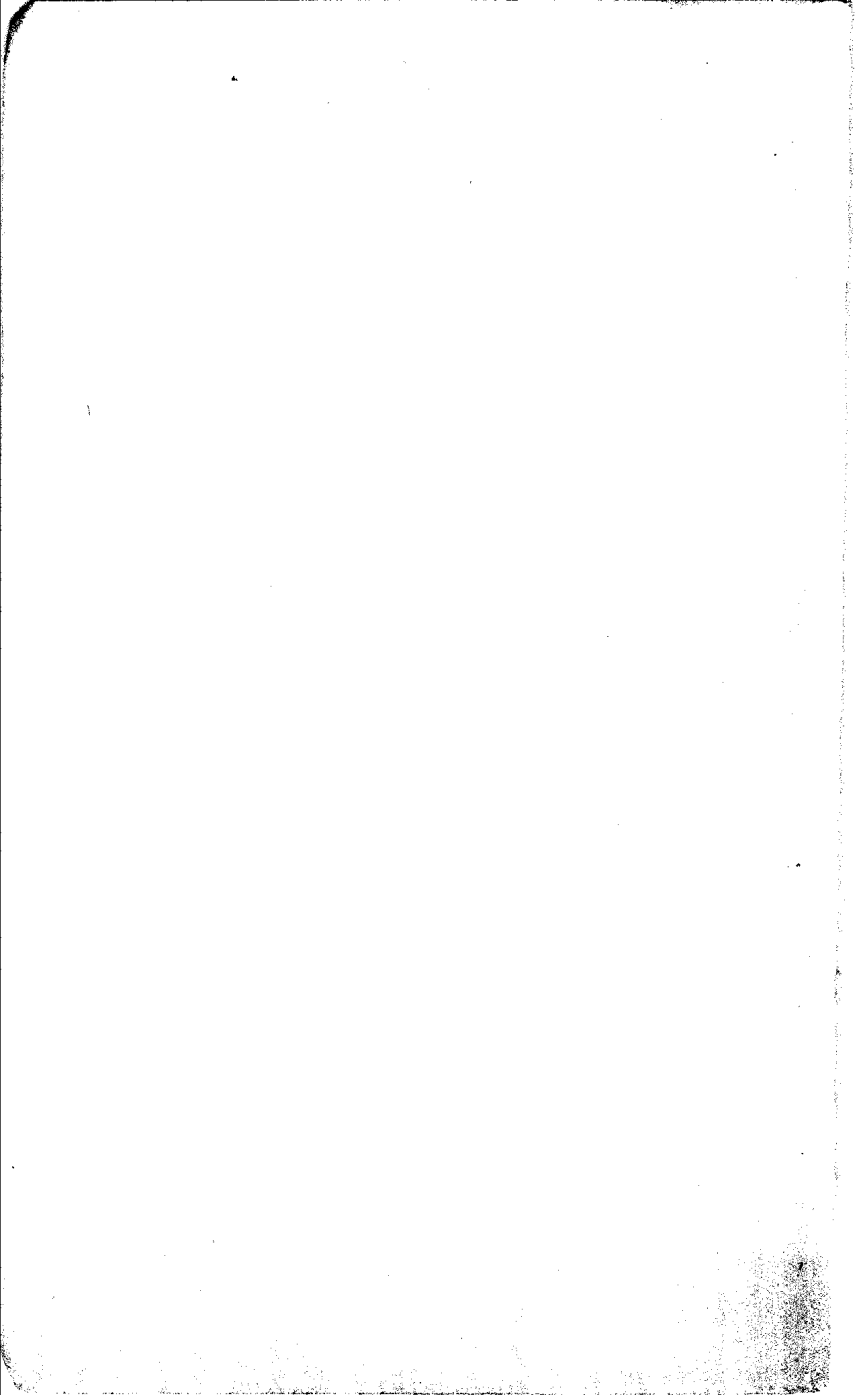
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TO THE IMAGES OF WHOM
ROBIN AND TILLY ARE REFLECTIONS,
AND THE GHOSTS WHO
SLEEP AT THIKA



Chapter I

WE set off in an open cart drawn by four whip-scarred little oxen and piled high with equipment and provisions. No medieval knight could have been more closely armoured than were Tilly and I, against the rays of the sun. A mushroom-brimmed hat, built of two thicknesses of heavy felt and lined with red flannel, protected her creamy complexion, a long-sleeved white blouse clasped her by the neck, and a heavy skirt of khaki drill fell to her booted ankles.

I sat beside my mother, only a little less fortified in a pith helmet and a starched cotton dress. The oxen looked very thin and small for such a task but moved off with resignation, if not with speed, from the Norfolk hotel. Everything was dusty; one's feet descended with little plops into a soft, warm, red carpet, a red plume followed every wagon down the street, the dust had filmed over each brittle eucalyptus leaf and stained the seats and backs of rickshaws waiting under the trees.

We were going to Thika, a name on a map where two rivers joined. Thika in those days – the year was 1913 – was a favourite camp for big-game hunters and beyond it there was only bush and plain. If you went on long enough you would come to mountains and forests no one had mapped and tribes whose languages no one could understand. We were not going as far as that, only two days' journey in the ox-cart to a bit of El Dorado my father had been fortunate enough to buy in the bar of the Norfolk hotel from a man wearing an Old Etonian tie.

While everyone else strode about Nairobi's dusty cart-tracks in bush shirts and khaki shorts or riding breeches, Roger Stilbeck was always neatly dressed in a light worsted suit of perfect cut, and wore gold cuff-links and dark brogue shoes. No bishop could have appeared more respectable, and his wife, who looked very elegant, was said to be related to the Duke of Montrose. Roger Stilbeck had met us at the station when we arrived and Mrs Stilbeck came to see us off, a mark of grace by no means conferred on every buyer of her husband's land.

Tilly, eager as always to extract from every moment its last drop of interest or pleasure, had ridden out early on the plains to see the game, and had returned peppered with tiny red ticks. These she was picking off her clothes while she supervised the loading of the cart. Wearing a look of immense concentration, as when at work on her embroidery, she popped them one by one with finger and thumb. Mrs Stilbeck watched with fascinated horror. Then she put a pale, soft-skinned hand to her eyes.

'Roger,' she said, 'I don't feel very well. You must take me home.'

Tilly went on squashing ticks while a great many Africans in red blankets, with a good deal of shouting and noise, stowed our household goods in the cart. There was a mountain of boxes, bundles, and packages. On top was perched a sewing-machine, a crate of five Speckled Sussex pullets, and a lavatory seat. The pullets had come with us in the ship from Tilbury and Tilly had fed them every day and let them out on the deck for exercise.

Robin, my father, did not come with us in the cart. He was there already, locating the land and, Tilly hoped, building a house to receive us. A simple grass hut could be built in a couple of days, but this needed organization, and Tilly was not counting on its being there.

'I only hope that if he builds one, he will do so on the right farm,' she said.

Farm was of course the wrong word. My father had picked out on a map five hundred acres of blank space with a wriggling line, presumed to be a river, on each side.

'Best coffee land in the country,' Stilbeck had remarked.

'Has anyone planted any yet?'

'My dear fellow, there's no need to *plant* coffee to make sure of that. Experts have analysed the soil. Altitude and rainfall are exactly right. Fortunes are being made already out at Kiambu. You've only got to *look* at the place to see how well everything grows. The trouble is to keep the vegetation down.'

'It's untried land?' Robin ventured.

Roger Stilbeck rolled up the map. 'You're right, of course, about that. If you're in any doubt, my dear fellow, I shouldn't look at it. Between ourselves, I'm rather glad. Buck Ponsonby has bought a thousand acres a bit farther out and he was keen as

mustard to get the whole block. I told him I couldn't let him have it as I'd given my word to another fellow. This leaves the way clear. What about a ranching proposition down near Voi? Or there's a syndicate starting to buy up cheap land in Uganda. . . .'

Robin bought the five hundred acres between the wriggling lines at Thika. He paid four pounds an acre, a fabulous price in those days. As this was much more than he could afford, he also bought a share in the syndicate in Uganda, which Roger Stilbeck said was certain to make a great deal of money in a very short while and which would therefore enable him to finance the coffee enterprise at Thika. On paper, the logic was inescapable. The Uganda syndicate made nothing at all for fifteen years; Robin received the annual accounts, which nearly always started with the item: 'To manager's funeral expenses, six rupees.' After that it went into liquidation.

Robin got a map from the Land Office with a lot of lines ruled on it, from which the position of our holding could be deduced. Nothing had been properly surveyed. The boundary between the land earmarked for settlement and land reserved for the Kikuyu was about a mile away.

'Any amount of labour,' Roger Stilbeck had said. 'You've only got to lift your finger and in they come. Friendly enough, if a bit raw. Wonderfully healthy climate, splendid neighbours, magnificent sport, thousands of years of untapped fertility locked up in the soil. I congratulate you, my dear fellow, I really do. You've been lucky to get this opportunity. Buck Ponsonby was bitterly disappointed. Best of luck, and look us up when you come in for the races. Keep in touch, old man.'

When our oxen had plodded over Ainsworth bridge, just beyond the Norfolk, we were out of the town. The dusty road ran through a mixture of bush and native shambas, where shaven-headed women in beads and leather aprons weeded, dug, and drew water from the swampy stream that gave the town its name in gourds or in *debes*, those four-gallon paraffin tins that had become a universal water-vessel, measure, and roofing material. The road was not a thing that had been made, it had simply arisen from the passage of wagons. For the most part it ran across a plain whose soil was largely murram, a coarse red

gravel that baked hard and supported only thin, wiry grass, sad-looking thorn trees, and tortured-branched erythrinæ, with flowers the colour of red sealing-wax.

It became very hot in our ox-cart, or on it rather, as we had no covering. Tilly hoisted a parasol with black and white stripes which helped a little, but it had not been made for tropic suns. I was fortunate; being only six or seven, I wore no stays or stockings, but Tilly was tightly laced in, her waist was wasp-like, her skirt voluminous, and the whole ensemble might have been designed to prevent the circulation of air. In a very short while the dust and sweat combined to make us both look like Red Indians, with strange white rings around our eyes.

Once out of the town the oxen flagged, and no wonder, and the driver shouted less. He fell into a kind of shuffle beside the beasts, who were coated now with flies. We had to keep flapping flies off our own faces. When we encountered a span of sixteen oxen drawing a long, low wagon we were immersed in a thick red fog which made us choke and smart and settled over everything. The stunted thorn-trees and shrubs beside the road were coated with it and we travelled always with its sharp, dry, peculiar smell tickling our nostrils.

One cannot describe a smell because there are no words to do so in the English language, apart from those that place it in a very general category, like sweet or pungent. So I cannot characterize this, nor compare it with any other, but it was the smell of travel in those days, in fact the smell of Africa – dry, peppery, yet rich and deep, with an undertone of native body smeared with fat and red ochre and giving out a ripe, partly rancid odour which nauseated some Europeans when they first encountered it but which I, for one, grew to enjoy. This was the smell of the Kikuyu, who were mainly vegetarian. The smell of tribes from the Victoria Nyanza basin, who were meat-eaters and sometimes cannibals, was quite different: much stronger and more musky, almost acrid, and, to me, much less pleasant. No doubt we smelt just as strong and odd to Africans, but of course we were fewer in numbers, and more spread out.

All day long we passed through flat country with distant ranges of hills and one abrupt round bump, Donyo Sabuk, standing out from the plain. This was where a rich, benign, and

enormously fat American sportsman lived on a large buffalo-infested ranch called Juja, dispensing hospitality that, even in those hospitable days, was legendary, when he was not riding about on a mule that could barely be seen beneath him – he weighed over eighteen stone – shooting animals. All day long we saw game of many different kinds. The animals were still there in unsuspecting millions, they did not know that they were doomed. Tommies with their broad black insignia wagged their tails as if the world belonged to them, giraffe bent their patch-work necks towards the small spreading acacias. No one has ever seen a thin zebra, although they are stuffed with parasites; these were no exception. They looked like highly varnished animated toys. It would be tedious to list all the kinds of animal we passed.

‘We might see a lion’, Tilly said, ‘if we keep a sharp lookout.’ Lions were often observed to stroll about in broad daylight among their potential dinners, who displayed no alarm. But we did not see any lions; Tilly said they were asleep in the patches of reed and papyrus we passed from time to time. She longed to stop the cart and get out to look for them, as people sometimes stopped the train from Mombasa if they saw a fine specimen. We jolted on, getting hotter and hotter, and more and more irritable and sore. At last we reached Ruiru, about half-way. We were to stop there for the night. About fifteen miles a day was all that oxen could be expected to manage, or porters either, when they carried sixty-pound loads. It was quite enough, too.

Ruiru was just a few dukas kept by Indians and a river crossing, not even a bridge: a causeway made by shovelling murram into the swampy stream and putting up some white posts. In the rains it was awash or under water and wagons often stuck, sometimes for days. Tufted papyrus grew all around, like a forest of feather dusters standing on end. A small dam had been built at Ruiru, and a flume to carry water to a turbine which made Nairobi’s electricity. Once an inquisitive hippo, unable either to advance or reverse, had got wedged in the flume, and all Nairobi’s lights had failed.

Our host for the night was a large-framed, flat-faced, beefy South African called Oram, a hard-bitten man in his late fifties who seemed to me immensely old, I suppose because most of the white people one met then were young, like my parents.

Henry Oram was the kind of man who never settled down. He had left a prosperous farm in the Transvaal, and before that in the Free State, and before that in the Cape, to come to B.E.A. (as everyone then called it), and bully into productiveness another patch of bush and veld. He had a little bougainvillea-covered house of corrugated iron, full of sons. A number of green, shiny coffee bushes grew in rows all round it and were expected soon to make him rich, but now he could see signs of a neighbour's cultivation on the opposite ridge.

'It's getting overcrowded,' he said in a South African voice, flat and strong like himself. 'It's time I moved on.'

'Where to?' Tilly inquired.

'They're opening up new land beyond the Plateau. Splendid country, they say. No settlers yet, no natives, lots of game, and centuries of untapped fertility. I'm off to have a look at it soon.'

'But your coffee's only just coming into bearing.'

'This place will be a suburb of Nairobi in a few years. There's talk of a railway to Thika, soon there'll be a horde of Indians, someone will start a club. . . .'

'I don't see anything wrong about a club. And now your wife has made a home. . . .'

'With a wagon, a fire, and a pound of coffee any true woman can make a home,' Henry Oram replied. Tilly thought him pompous, but he may have been pulling her leg. They had quite a comfortable house at Ruiru and, as Robin pointed out, would probably sell the place for a nice profit and get a lot of good land farther out for next to nothing.

Tilly, who had the home-making instinct, remarked to Mrs Oram: 'You will be sorry to leave, now that you have made a garden.'

'Oh, but the whole country is a garden; a garden God has planted. Look what He has provided - streams to drink from, trees for shade, wild fruits and honey, birds and beasts for company. How can any of His creatures improve on that? Isn't it a waste of time to plant a border when the rain coaxes up a dozen different kinds of wild flower? There's nothing I love better than to walk in the wilds and return with my hands full of the bright jewels of veld and forest - the shy creepers, pink storm lilies, humble forget-me-nots.'

'They die quickly in water,' Tilly said coldly. She reacted like a clam to this sort of thing, and when she summed up Mrs Oram as a gushing woman, Mrs Oram was condemned. Yet the Orams were hard workers, their hospitality was always unstinted, and their craving for the wilder places of the earth was genuine. But everything had to be twice as big as life size.

'They are romantics,' Robin suggested later.

'They are fools,' Tilly replied. She disapproved of romantics, but of course was one herself, though she concealed it like a guilty secret. It is always our own qualities that most appal us when we find them in others, and for this reason Mrs Oram entered into her bad books. Nevertheless she was grateful, and later on sent Mrs Oram a turkey and several packets of English seeds.

Chapter 2

BEFORE the sun was really hot next morning the little weather-beaten oxen with their humps and sagging dewlaps were in spanned and we set off again down the wagon track.

On our right the tawny plain stretched away, a bowl of sunlight, to the Tana river and beyond: you felt that you could walk straight on across it to the rim of the world. On our left rose a long, dark-crested mountain range from which sprang rivers that watered a great part of Kikuyuland. These rivers, no larger than streams, had dug down through soil red as a fox and rich as chocolate to form steep valleys whose sides were now green with young millet and maize. So numerous were these streams that on a map they looked like veins and arteries in a diagram of anatomy. Our track crossed them at the point where the intervening ridges flattened out into the great plain, so we had to ford several streams; but their banks were no longer steep, and their water was becoming sluggish. Instead of mossy rocks and ferns and trees bending over rushing water, we traversed incipient swamps with papyrus and reeds.

Sometimes we passed or encountered Kikuyu travellers, the

oaks of the women always bent low under enormous burdens suspended by leather straps that bit into their sloping foreheads. They wore pointed leather aprons and trudged along looking like big brown snails. As a result, no doubt, of this pack-animal existence you never saw a good figure, except among the young girls; once married, the women's breasts sagged like empty purses and their legs moved in a quick, shuffling gait.

The men, on the other hand, were slim and upright and often had a remarkable look of fragility; their bodies were hairless, shining, and light. The young warriors wore their locks embellished with sheep's fat and red ochre and plaited into a large number of short pigtails to hang down all round, like the fleece of a long-haired sheep; they walked with a loping stride quite different from the women's plod. By now the influence of missionaries and Government combined had put them into blankets, which they wore like togas, knotted over one shoulder. Most of the blankets were red with black stipes and looked well against coppery skins and gay red and blue ornaments. Ear-lobes were pierced, and the hole enlarged to take plugs of wood, coils of wire, or bead necklaces that hung down to their shoulders; the young bloods wore a beaded belt from which depended a slim sword in a leather scabbard dyed vermilion with an extract from the root of a creeper.

We had with us in the cart a cook-cum-houseboy called Juma lent to us, as a great favour, by Roger Stilbeck to see us in. He was used to grander ways and, the farther we travelled from Nairobi, the more disapproving he became of the local inhabitants, who to me looked as wild and exciting as the gazelles and antelopes.

'They are small like pigeons,' he said loftily. 'They eat chickens, which make them cowardly. Look at their legs! Thin like a bustard. And their women are like donkeys, with heads as smooth as eggs. They are not to be trusted. Why do you wish to live amongst such stupid people? Here your crops will not prosper, your cattle will die. . . .'

Juma was a Swahili from the Coast, or said he was: Swahilis were fashionable, and quite a lot of people who were nothing of the sort appointed themselves as members of this race, with its Arab affinities. He also claimed to be a Muslim, though it was hard to say in what this consisted. We never saw him at his

prayers and doubted if he knew the direction of Mecca. His only strict observance was his refusal to eat meat unless the throat of the animal providing it had been cut. So when Robin shot a buck, a knife would materialize in Juma's hand, he would gird his long white *kanzu* round his waist (he wore nothing underneath) and sprint like a flash to the stricken antelope. He was a great meat-lover.

He was also a magician. With three stones, a few sticks, and one old, black cooking-pot he would produce a four-course meal a great deal better than anything to be had in most restaurants or hotels. He had the secret, known only to Africans, of serving food hot and promptly, and yet not dry and burnt, at any hour of the day or night. Cooks were men of substance and authority, respected and well-paid. Juma made the most of his superior position. In fact he was a bully - large, strong, and black-skinned.

'We are coming now to the country of the cannibals,' he said facetiously, and quite untruthfully. 'These Kikuyu, they scavenge like hyenas, they will dig up corpses and eat them. Sometimes their women give birth to snakes and lizards. They have never heard of Allah. They eat the intestines of goats and circumcise their women. They - '

'Silence, Juma.' Tilly commanded. She was hot, tired, dusty, and in no mood for anatomical gossip, and her understanding of the Swahili tongue was still shaky. Although she had studied it with her usual energy and grasp on the voyage out, her phrase-book, acquired from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, had not always suggested sentences most helpful to intending settlers. 'The idle slaves are scratching themselves' . . . 'Six drunken Europeans have killed the cook' . . . turning these over in her mind, on top of the ox-cart in the sun, she doubted if their recital, even in the best Swahili, would impress Juma favourably.

After his remarks I stared at the passing Kikuyu with a new interest. They looked harmless, but that was evidently a pose. We passed a woman carrying a baby in a sling on her back, as well as a load. I could see the infant's shiny head, like a polished skittle ball, bobbing about between the mother's bent shoulders, and looked hopefully for the glimpse of a snake or lizard. But no doubt the mothers would leave these at home.

‘These oxen,’ Juma grumbled, ‘they are as old as great-grandmothers, their legs are like broken sticks, this driver is the son of a hyena and lacks the brains of a frog. When the new moon has come we shall still be travelling in this worthless cart.’

‘No more words,’ Tilly said snappily. Juma had a patronizing air that she resented, and she doubted if he was showing enough respect. Those were the days when to lack respect was a more serious crime than to neglect a child, bewitch a man, or steal a cow, and was generally punishable by beating. Indeed respect was the only protection available to Europeans who lived singly, or in scattered families, among thousands of Africans accustomed to constant warfare and armed with spears and poisoned arrows, but had themselves no barricades, and went about unarmed. This respect preserved them like an invisible coat of mail, or a form of magic, and seldom failed; but it had to be very carefully guarded. The least rent or puncture might, if not immediately checked and repaired, split the whole garment asunder and expose its wearer in all his human vulnerability. Kept intact, it was a thousand times stronger than all the guns and locks and metal in the world; challenged, it could be brushed aside like a spider’s web. So Tilly was a little sensitive about respect, and Juma was silenced.

We came at last to a stone bridge over the Chania river, newly built, and considered to be a great achievement of the P.W.D.s. Just below it, the river plunged over a waterfall into a pool with slimy rocks and thick-trunked trees all round it, and a little farther on it joined the Thika. This meeting-place of rivers was a famous hunting-ground; not long before, Winston Churchill had slain a lion there, and many others came to camp and shoot. The game, like the soil’s fertility, seemed inexhaustible; no one could imagine the disappearance of either.

A hotel had been started just below the falls. It consisted of a low-roofed, thatched grass hut whose veranda posts were painted blue and gave the place its name; of three or four whitewashed rondavels to sleep in, and a row of stables. The manager was a lean, military-looking, sprucely-dressed man with a bald head and a long moustache, who had the misfortune to be very deaf. One day a safari visitor, admiring his host’s neat attire, rashly asked: ‘Who made your breeches?’ After he had bawled this