RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Flamingo Feather

Laurens van der Post

CONTENTS

About the Author

Laurens van der Post was born in South Africa in 1906, the thirteenth of fifteen children in a family of Dutch and French Huguenot origins. Most of his adult life was spent with one foot in Africa and one in England. His professions of writer and farmer were interrupted by ten years of soldiering in the British Army, serving with distinction in the Western Desert, Abyssinia, Burma and the Far East. Taken prisoner by the Japanese, he was held in captivity for three years before returning to active service as a member of Lord Mountbatten's staff in Indonesia and, later, as Military Attaché to the British Minister in Java.

After 1949 he undertook several official missions exploring little-known parts of Africa, and his journey in search of the Bushmen in 1957 formed the basis of his famous documentary film and book *The Lost World of the Kalahari*. Other television films include *All Africa Within Us* and *The Story of Carl Gustav Jung*, whom he met after the war and grew to know as a personal friend. In 1934 he wrote *In a Province*, the first book by a South African to expose the horrors of racism. Other books include *Venture to the Interior* (1952), *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961), and *A Walk with a White Bushman* (1986). *The Seed and the Sower* was made into a film under the title *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, and, more recently, *A Story Like the Wind* and *A Far-Off Place* were combined and made into the film *A Far-Off Place*.

Sir Laurens van der Post was awarded the CBE in 1947 and received his knighthood in 1981. He died in 1996.

Also by Laurens van der Post

IN A PROVINCE
VENTURE TO THE INTERIOR
THE FACE BESIDE THE FIRE
A BAR OF SHADOW
THE DARK EYE IN AFRICA
THE LOST WORLD OF THE KALAHARI
THE HEART OF THE HUNTER
THE SEED AND THE SOWER
JOURNEY INTO RUSSIA
THE HUNTER AND THE WHALE
THE NIGHT OF THE NEW MOON
A STORY LIKE THE WIND
A FAR-OFF PLACE
A MANTIS CAROL
JUNG AND THE STORY OF OUR TIME
FIRST CATCH YOUR ELAND
YET BEING SOMEONE OTHER

With photographs by Burt Glinn

A PORTRAIT OF JAPAN
A PORTRAIT OF ALL THE RUSSIAS

To
Maria Magdalena van der Post, my mother, and the many good and dear people of all colours who made the fast vanishing Africa of my vanished boyhood

“I owe more than I can say to my wife,
Ingaret Giffard, for preparing my manuscript
for publication and for keeping the
desire to write alive in me.”

Flamingo Feather

A Story of Africa

Laurens van der Post

‘Le rêve est le vrai dieu des Primitifs.’
LEVY-BRUHL

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

CHAPTER I

Feather at Nightfall

MY STORY HAS its manifest beginning in that moment when I came out on the stoep of my house in the turbulent twilight and heard on the steep slope below me the sound of desperate running, followed almost immediately by the exultant war-cry of the Amangtakwena: “Mattalahta Buka!” “At last we kill!”

The year was 1948, the day July 12, the hour 5.30 in the afternoon and the place my own home, which stands high on a slope of the grey mountains behind the village of St. Joseph’s in the peninsula of the Cape of Good Hope. On a clear day I have a superb view north over the blue waters of the Bay to where the far purple Hottentots-Holland Mountains push the incredible Cape Hangklip so determinedly into the sea that, as its name “Hanging Rock” implies, it leans heavily over its own base to stare sombrely into the waters of the Indian Ocean snorting wearily far below. But that evening as I came out on the stoep there was no view at all except smoking village lights. Not only was the day nearly over but also the fierce storm had suppressed what little glimmer of light was normally left at that hour. I slammed the front door quickly behind me because of the gale. The cry that had gone up and the sound of those desperate feet was still clearly in my ears despite the wind’s moaning.

It was the last sort of cry I would have expected at that time and in that place. Though there are many ’Takwena[fn1] working in the Peninsula, they do not go roaring and plundering through the suburbs over week-ends as a number of other tribesmen do. Yet I did not doubt my senses for one second. I know the ’Takwena well. They are my favourite African people. I had in fact, only a few minutes before stopped writing in the midst of the nineteenth chapter of my work, *The Mind and Myth of the Amangtakwena*. So, as I heard those voices come ringing with a dark, archaic will straight out of authentic ’Takwena hearts and throats, I found myself spurred unhesitatingly into action.

On either side of the front door of my house are two very beautiful Somali shields which I once brought back with me from the north-west frontier of Kenya. Each is flanked with an heraldic cluster of the most decorative and deadly Massy throwing spears. So great was the feeling of urgency released in me by that cry, and so instinctive my acceptance of the fact that somehow I was there in a relation of special responsibility towards it, that I wasted no time on going back into the house to fetch a gun but jumped towards the right-hand cluster of spears. Doing so, I saw the face of Umtumwa, my personal servant, my old batman and friend in war and peace, appear at the drawing-room window hard by. His massive, distinguished ’Takwena face, nose flat and ridiculously wrinkled, was pressed tightly against the glass, as it was each evening for a last brief look-out before he drew the curtains on the dying day.

“Umtumwa, follow me quick!” I shouted at the top of my voice, while wrenching a spear out of the socket with such force that the whole lot clattered to the ground.

A look I’d so often seen on his face in the war in Burma possessed Umtumwa’s features. Instantly he vanished from the amber window and I knew he’d not only heard my cry but understood its urgent nature.

I’ve never moved faster in my life as I went down the twenty-one steps leading from the stoep to the drive which led into the garden. But Umtumwa came faster still, for I heard his heavy naked feet thud on the ground not far behind me. Yet alas! we were neither of us fast enough.

I came out on the dim, winding roadway leading up from the village to my house to hear first another: “Buka edabuka! Kill! and kill!”, then three heavy thuds and with each thud a heavy involuntary grunt, the meaning of which was unmistakable.

The light of the nearest lamp-post was made dimmer by the storm but it was just good enough to show me a tall dark figure go down before a group of seven prancing black shapes.

“Stop that and stand, Fingani[fn2] dogs,” I shouted at them in their own tongue.

“Litter of bitches, miscarried children of hyenas,” Umtumwa roared behind me. “Do as you’re told for Umtumwa of Amantazuma comes.”

Polite, dignified, and self-controlled in ordinary life, Umtumwa in action was a great and fertile swearer.

Immediately the prancing figures became still with the shock of their surprise at being so boldly challenged on such a night and in so unlikely a place. For a brief moment they seemed paralysed with apprehension and then six of them broke and ran. The seventh, obviously the leader, took one more jump towards a dark shape on the ground, whirled a hunting-stick above his shoulders and brought it down with a crack like the smack of a bullet on the prostrate head before he, too, turned and ran.

“Stand or I’ll shoot,” I shouted, so enraged by the meanness of the blow that I forgot I’d only a spear and no gun with me. The fellow took no notice and merely went down the hill in long, effortless strides. Realizing the futility of giving chase I stopped short by the fallen man, just as Umtumwa caught up with me, moaning to himself in a storm

of rage: “Oh, what an evil blow! Oh, what evil men!” Then without waiting for permission he snatched the spear out of my hand.

The last of the seven men was fast nearing a steep bend in the road and there was no time to waste. Umtumwa, in a flash, had the spear poised above his shoulder and aimed. For a brief moment he twirled and vibrated the slender shaft so vigorously and expertly that it sounded almost like a tuning-fork in the air, and then he launched it after the fleeing man. I caught my breath with suspense and so, it seemed, did the storm, for the wind dropped into a lull. I heard the spear take to the air with a silky swish, and far below us the sea hissed like a brood of angry mambas on the foaming beaches. It was, so it appeared to me, a great and deadly throw, for I distinctly saw the point of the spear as it flashed underneath the lamp-light making straight for the fatal join of neck and shoulders in the back of the running man. But at the critical moment he stumbled on the steep slope, went down on hands and four feet[fn3] like a cheetah, and as he went down the spear just scraped the top of his head and removed some kind of cap he was wearing. Almost simultaneously he righted himself with incredible agility and without bothering about his head-gear vanished round the bend. I heard a heart-rending moan from Umtumwa. Then the fanatical wind broke loose again.

“No! Umtumwa, no!” I ordered him, for he was about to resume the chase. “Leave him to the police. We’ve more urgent work to do here. Run up to the house. Call the rest of the household and come back as fast as you can with blankets!”

He was off at once. I knelt down and lifted a great black head as gently as I could on to my hands from the shingled road, saying again and again in staccato Sindakwena:[fn4] “Friends! Help. All right now. All over.”

He did not answer but only moaned to himself, as I’ve so often heard the deeply-hurt African do, without complaining

but as if trying to relieve an agony by making rough music of the pain. I'd time barely to establish that he was stabbed deep in several places and bleeding fast, when Umtumwa came back with my cook, gardener, houseboy, *umfaan*[fn5] and two rugs. We laid the wounded man on a rug. Even in that dim light I could not but notice how quickly a stain of blood spread like a sunset shadow in the soft wool. We covered him over with the other rug, lifted him gently between us and soon had him in my big, warm kitchen on the floor by the fire which was burning brightly in a large open old Dutch hearth, with two of my softest cushions under his battered head. As the kitchen door shut behind us, I heard fresh forces for the gale coming, like a pack of wolves, down the mountain-side.

"Umtumwa, you know as well as I how to dress wounds, get the field dressings from my study quick, while I telephone for the doctor."

I was put through quickly to my own doctor, who fortunately lived only a few miles away. He, good fellow, although Sunday evening was almost the only night he ever had alone with his family, just said: "I'm coming at once," and rang off before I could even say thank you.

I came back into the kitchen to find my five servants forming a tense half-circle round the wounded man. Umtumwa had already clapped field dressings to all the worst stabs. There were four of those as well as numerous minor cuts, two in the side of his chest, one in the thigh and one in the pit of the stomach. When I saw the crimson stain in the purple of his stomach my heart sank, for I realized then not only how slender were his chances of recovery but also how great his pain.

"Get me the morphia quick, Umtumwa," I told him while I knelt by the man's side.

I'm afraid I didn't even bother to sterilize the hypodermic needle, for I knew somehow that all I could do was merely to drug and not cure this man's pain. I put the needle into his

arm. As I did so, he suddenly opened his eyes wide and looked into mine. I shall never forget that look. It is a look proper not only to man but to all deeply-hurt and dying animal matter. I've seen it in the eyes of my askaris, dying in the slimy green of Burmese jungles, far from their trembling purple and buff African uplands. Africans can endure the most amazing physical suffering provided the causes of it are concrete and visible. But when this look of which I speak comes up on dark, valedictory waves of the outgoing tide of their blood, I know that the answer of life is finally and irrevocably in the negative.

Kneeling there, I found myself instantly and profoundly moved by it. I've seen many people die in many different ways but I never get used to dying and death. I always feel when I meet it as if it comes for the first time, and I uncover all my mind and heart humbly before such uncomprehended royalty. This man was an utter stranger to me, but in that look he was suddenly very close, was almost part of me, if only because we are in life all near to one another in our common nearness to this end which ultimately makes us one.

As his eyes opened with this great impersonal tide of light, he seemed to have just enough of his receding self left to distinguish my white face close to his black one and to read the compassion in my eyes. Then the most amazing thing happened. A slow, fluttering smile moved over his thick, firm lips and he said quite distinctly: "It is you, Bwana. It is you I see. Ekenonya! Ekenonya!"

I wish I could translate the meaning of "Ekenonya" adequately but, alas, there is no English equivalent and it must be experienced and lived to be fully appreciated. I can only say that it is a kind of ecstatic "thank you", an expression of the most profound gratitude of which the Amangtakwena are capable. It is a "thank you" addressed not merely to another person nor even to a God, but to all

life and all the great shimmering African totality of things. And as he said “Thank you” thus, he died.

“Auck! My bwana! Auck! Auck!” Umtumwa exclaimed in Sindakwena. “He goes the long way to the great sleep. But he saw you, Bwana! He saw you!”

So Umtumwa, too, had not failed to notice the recognition implicit in that last moment. Yet I had never seen this man before. Africans don’t all look alike to me as they do to so many of the townsmen in my country. To me their faces are all sharply individual and distinct. Moreover, I have as good a memory for faces as for names and I was convinced this man and I had never met before. So I shook my head sadly and said: “Yes, Umtumwa, he thought he knew me—but I don’t know him. Have you any idea who he could be?”

“None, Bwana, except this!” he answered, sinking to his knees by the dead man’s side and pointing a long finger at two thin black lines tattooed lightly on each cheek.

I caught my breath in surprise, for those marks were tattooed only on the faces of ’Takwena royalty and their immediate descendants; two for a man and three for a woman. They helped to account at once for the tense look I’d noticed on the servants’ faces when I first came back from the telephone. I was about to speak again when the bell for the front door overhead rang in our ears with such violent and sudden hysteria that my *umfaan* Tickie, absorbed in the tragedy, gave a startled gasp.

“That will be the doctor, Umtumwa,” I told him. “Show him in here. Then take a torch, go and retrieve my spear, and have a good look round the place to see if those devils have left anything behind that will help us to trace them.”

When my poor old doctor joined me, wet and breathless from the speed with which he’d come, he gave the dead man one look and said simply: “I’m sorry, Pierre, I came as fast as I could but obviously not fast enough.”

“You’ve been wonderfully quick,” I replied, looking at the grey, old-fashioned head bowed over the body. “But I don’t

think you could have saved him even if you'd been here when it happened."

"Looks like it," he agreed, throwing the rug clear of the body.

I, too, looked closer and noticed all sorts of details I had no time or mind to notice before. The dead man was dressed like a sailor. His feet were bare but he wore a pair of sky-blue merchant seaman's jeans. The jeans were unbuttoned and the dark blue jersey above them was still as Umtumwa had left it, tucked firmly under his armpits and chin. A leather belt, undone, was lying underneath him with the empty sheath of an able-seaman's knife attached to it, a knife drawn probably in defence. But a 'Takwena *sailor*? I thought, that's curious.

"You're right, Pierre," the doctor said, standing up with a sigh. "He'd no chance whatsoever. How did it happen?"

I took the doctor into my study, gave him a large whisky and soda and started telling him. Half-way through I heard the front door open and shut and Umtumwa's barefoot tread in the passage. To my surprise the feet stopped at the door, and suddenly Umtumwa stood in the entrance with an eager, portentous face. But some instinct made me sign to him not to come in.

However, the front door had hardly shut on the doctor's "Good night, Pierre. I'll report to the police myself in the morning," when Umtumwa stood beside me.

"Please, Bwana! Please come quickly to the kitchen!" he pleaded earnestly.

I followed him readily and found the rest of my staff, their backs to the dead man, standing with solemn, anxious faces by the kitchen table. They raised their eyes, the light of apprehensive drama in them silently begging for some kind of reassurance, then dropped them again to focus on a strange assortment of objects on the table, presumably those Umtumwa had collected outside. To this day the memory of that odd assortment, lying on the white surface

of the clean scrubbed kitchen table like a *nature morte* by a surrealiste of genius, is enough to provoke, with unbelievable freshness, the emotions let loose in me by the events of that evening.

First of all there was my spear, and neatly impaled on it a cloth cap such as stokers and trimmers used to wear ashore. Beside the spear lay what looked like a cheap yellow envelope, official foolscap size, torn, muddy, stained with blood and yet with writing on it. Then a pink and white bird's feather so light that, as we looked, the draught from the far end of the room to the fire tilted it on its side. I glanced up at Umtumwa and he, reading my thoughts, confirmed my fear with a low: "I looked everywhere, Bwana, but that was all I could find."

The spear, the cap, a torn and seemingly empty envelope, one slight feather and a dead, silent body, with the mark of Bantu royalty on it, were all we had from which to read the meaning of this tragic evening.

Yet my servants now all looked up at me as if they thought I would read it at a glance.

I walked to the head of the table, picked up the spear, removed the cap, saying: "You threw well, Umtumwa. It's not your fault that the spear didn't find its mark."

That brought him briefly out of his anxious solemnity. A smile of great delicacy appeared on his broad features, a smile of such shy and sensitive pleasure that he instantly raised his long hands to his face to cover and protect it.

I turned the cap round my fingers. Though I have no special knowledge of such things, I knew at once it was not of British or American make. It was pre-eminently the continental idea of a sailor's cap. There was no maker's or ship's tag inside it.

Next I picked up the feather and as I did so I immediately felt the atmosphere between me and my servants change. The tension I'd observed in them ever since we spotted the mark of royalty on the dead man, rose swiftly to a steep,

new pitch. I looked from one to the other but they did not see my look: their eyes were only for that feather.

"Feather of a flamingo, flamingo's feather," I exclaimed, holding it up to the light, and five pairs of 'Takwena eyes followed the movement of my hand but not one of them spoke. "Where did you find it?" I asked Umtumwa as casually as I could, because for some unknown reason my heart suddenly began to beat faster as if it already knew something my mind did not.

"In his hand," he said pointing to the dead man.

"What d'you think it is?" I now asked softly, but clearly determined to get an answer.

He did not reply but suddenly bowed his head, troubled and ashamed. The other heads followed his example. So there it was beyond doubt: more than anything else this feather was the cause of the tension between us.

"What is it, Umtumwa? Why don't you answer when I ask?" I remonstrated.

"Forgive me, Bwana," Umtumwa said at last, a conflict of loyalties so keen in his eyes that he looked as young and helpless as did his kinsman Tickie the day I came on him with his mouth full of forbidden kitchen sugar. "Forgive me, but it is forbidden to speak of this. It is only Amangtakwena 'business'!"

I nearly smiled at the way he popped the English word "business" into his formal Sindakwena sentence. The others simultaneously finding their courage uttered a deep "Aye. This is Amangtakwena 'business'."

Disappointed, but knowing of old the utmost importance of patience in all dealings with 'Takwena, even 'Takwena who knew and loved me as these did, I said no more, put the feather beside the cap, and picked up the envelope.

Then I got the shock of the evening, designed for me in particular. The letter was clearly addressed to:

"Pierre de Beauvilliers, Esq., D.S.O.,

Petit France,
St. Joseph's,
Cape Peninsula,"

and it was written in a hand I knew as well as my own.

"D'you remember Colonel Sandysse, Umtumwa?" I asked, my throat suddenly dry.

"How could I not remember him," he answered almost reproachfully. "Did not I share blankets with him and you many a night in Burma?"

"Well, this writing," I said, "is Colonel Sandysse's[fn6] writing."

"Auck! Bwana!" he exclaimed, unbelief clearly marked on his face. "How can that be when the Colonel as we all know is dead."

"Indeed he is *thought* to be long dead, as you say. But how can that be when this writing is clearly his, and the ink not so very old?"

"Auck, Bwana, there is powerful Tagati,[fn7] mighty medicine, in all this," he said, giving the facts grudging and awesome acceptance at last.

"Is there anything you know about this feather that might help to explain this letter?" I pressed him quickly while he was exposed in his surprise.

He drew back at once, hung his head obstinately and reiterated: "No. There's nothing to tell! The feather is only Amangtakwena business."

"Listen!" And this time I addressed them all. "Listen . . . carefully . . . Have you not told me I am like a brother to you all?"

"Aye! Bwana. Aye!" They responded at once without reserve. "You are truly a brother and father to us."

"Then listen. In a few minutes I must pick up the Efoena-Indabakulu[fn8] and call the police to this house. They will look at all these things and ask many questions. One thing they are certain to do is to pick up this feather." I took it up and

held it in front of their hypnotized eyes. “And ask each of you, ‘What does this mean?’”

“Oh, no, Bwana,” they cried in dismay. “The police must not see it. You will surely not let them!”

“Why not?” I countered quickly.

“It would be very wrong,” Umtumwa said lamely; the rest feeling trapped, stayed silent.

“How can I judge whether it would be wrong or not when you will not tell me?” I told him sternly. “What strange good reasons are there that you should have to hide their goodness from a brother?”

The look of misery on their faces was so great that I realized the battle might yet be won. So I pressed on quickly. “Tell me what it is that troubles you, and if it’s as you say, we will not show the feather to the police, and will speak of it only among ourselves.”

At this, significant glances passed swiftly from one to the other of them. Then somewhere within themselves, without a word being spoken, their individual meanings became one. Tickie’s fresh young eyes suddenly shone with relief and Umtumwa lifted up his glance to meet mine, saying: “Bwana, it is the sign for all the Amangtakwena that a great dream has been dreamt again.”

“What great dream, Umtumwa?” I asked, my heart and mind going black with apprehension, for did I not know something about the Amangtakwena and their great dreams?

“I do not know that yet,” he answered sombrely, and pointing to the dead man added, “Even he who carried the feather would not have known. All we know is that when such a feather is passed among us by such a one as he, it is a sign that a great dream has been dreamt. Then no matter how far from Umangoni,[fn9] one man from each group of us must hasten to be home in the spring in order to be told of the dream and its meaning, so that at the end of the summer, when the fields are harvested and the corn is in

the bins, the dream can be lived out. . . . But I have done wrong to speak so much, for it is forbidden to talk of this to anyone except ourselves."

He finished in such distress that I put my hand on his shoulder and said: "Shame, Umtumwa, shame. Am I not like one of you? Have I been a friend of your people for nothing? You have done right to tell me. I give you my word that we shall speak of this only among ourselves. Here . . . I give you back your feather!"

He held out two great hands cupped gratefully together as if they were about to be filled with gold, and I dropped the feather into them, like a flake of light on a shadowy pool, before continuing: "All I ask is that this envelope with the Colonel's writing on it is spoken of only among ourselves. It, too, is only our business!"

At that they cheered up greatly and with obvious approval watched me pick up the envelope and put it away in my wallet. I was certain they felt reassured by my last request because it made us equal, united us firmly in a reciprocal role of keepers of one another's secrets, and I knew more than ever I could now rely on them.

"And this spear, Umtumwa," I went on. "It had better go back to its place on the wall. Only this cap, we'll leave that for the police to see."

He took the spear as if it tingled between his fingers and exclaimed with totally unexpected anger, "This spear, Bwana: he is 'no damn good'."

"No good, Umtumwa!" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"He would not fly true. He is bad, bad, bad," and he shook it as a mongoose does a snake it has just killed.

I didn't agree with him, of course, but I've learnt from long experience what harm is done daily to the African by denying him the symbolic gesture of the meaning which he cannot express in words. He's continually experiencing new meaning for which his capacity for abstract expression is not

great enough. He’s forced, therefore, to act it openly, or covertly, before he consciously thinks or speaks it.

So I told Umtumwa, not without regret, for I like my spears and love the associations they help to maintain in my mind: “Then do what you think is necessary with it, Umtumwa.”

He gave me a grateful look, put the spear over his knee, snapped it in several places, separated the wood from the head which he kept, and threw all the rest into the fire, while I went to telephone for the police.

But, I confess, no sooner was I out of the warm kitchen and alone in that long, familiar passage of my home, than I was filled with a profound, nameless fear and wordless apprehension. I felt as if Umtumwa’s gesture of punishment of the spear were a kind of intuitive warning that the approach symbolized by spears was no good in the problem that had been thrust on us, and that we would have to do much better than that if we were to solve it in time. That “in time” tolled out in my mind like a mediæval bell at nightfall, and I heard again Umtumwa’s sombre, reluctant voice explaining that one of them would have to “hasten to be home in the spring to hear the dream so that at the end of summer it could be lived by all.” Our spring in this Southern Cape was only three months; and the end of summer only six months away. Yet the heart of Umangoni, where the great dreams of that great people are dreamt and told, was several thousands of miles away: difficult miles, made more dangerous, my intuitions warned me, by our inability to understand the situation. Unconsciously I quickened my pace and found myself taking up the telephone and summoning the police in a voice made unusually authoritative by a sense of the need for haste.

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fn1 The Amangtakwena are popularly called that.

fn2 Finganis are a sub-tribe of the Amangtakwena, to this day infamous for their betrayal of a great chief two hundred years ago.

fn3 Literal translation of Afrikaans idiom for a person on all fours.

fn4 The language of the Amangtakwena.
fn5 *umfaan:* ’Takwena youth.
fn6 Pronounced “Sands”.
fn7 Sindakwena for magic.
fn8 Literally “Who desires speech with who”, the Sindakwena for telephone.
fn9 The land of the Amangtakwena.

CHAPTER II

The Great "Togethernesses"

THE POLICE CAME and behaved very much as police do the world over on these occasions, except perhaps that they were less interested in this murder than they would have been had the victim been white. However, they were conscientious enough and asked me all the prescribed questions. Much to my relief, they appeared so satisfied with my answers that they hardly questioned my servants at all, the young Inspector in charge finally shutting his leather notebook impatiently in its clasp and saying: "Ag! Meneer. I'm sure it was just another of those faction fights. We have dozens of them every week-end. Once these creatures get some illicit brandy in them there's no knowing what they'll do."

I then drew his attention to the stoker's cap on the table. Like me, he did not believe in the possibility of the dead man and his assailants being genuine sailors, saying: "Ag! Meneer: these fellows don't go to sea. They wear any uniform they can get hold of. He probably got this second-hand from a Greek pawnbroker. All the same, I'll get the water police cracking on it at once."

Soon after that the police left, taking the dead body, no longer black but now purple in its ancient, royal cold. I went alone to my room, eager to come to terms with the emotions and wild speculation let loose in me by the events of the evening. But I didn't find it easy. I went and stood at

the window, parting the curtains and looking out. A bright light was shining in the window of Umtumwa's room in the servants' quarters, and between us the storm charged ceaselessly streaming so fast with long phantom hair of elongated mist, torn and tattered cloud, that Umtumwa's window looked like the glow of the cab of a great Northern Express drawing its darkened coaches through the night with proud dispatch. The storm, indeed, seemed to have achieved its climax. It sounded as if the world outside had suddenly emptied itself of substance and gone as hollow as a plundered tomb with the great wind of time itself howling around inside it. The house was shaking like the deck of a windjammer, and in the rare lulls I heard the wind on the fringes of a weird pocket of calm fly deeper into the night like a salvo of shells out towards an ocean target. Yet I did not mind it. It seemed curiously appropriate to the moment. I got into bed and turned out the light.

I'd have liked to fit the situation and the day's events into a nice, neat explanation, designed with clear, two-dimensional logic in my mind. But I couldn't. I even failed utterly to focus the events of the evening in the order wherein they'd occurred, for at each twist and turn in my reasoning I found the flow blocked, with seeming incongruity, by the vision of a young Chinese General who had shared a cell with John Sandysse, Serge Bolenkov, and myself in a grim Japanese prison outside Harbin. I hadn't thought of him for years, but now there was in my mind his slight, maidenish figure and high-pitched, sing-song, girlish voice, insisting that I should relive my associations with him.

I remembered him lecturing to us one cold day in prison. "You Europeans," he said, "have a tendency to select from life only the facts that suit your immediate, practical purpose and to despise the rest. You're a great people for setting up partial systems and partial investigations and persuading yourselves in the process that they can be elevated to totalities. You ignore that life itself has a

purpose and totality overriding yours and often in direct opposition to it. We Chinese make many mistakes, but not that particular one. We are obsessed with the totality of things. That is why we often fail in the specific and practical. We see cause and effect as but two of several aspects of the paramount drive and purpose of life. Cause and effect to us are really by-products of the ultimate purpose which causes and effects all. Chance or what you call ‘luck’ is another manifestation of the same thing, not just an accidental occurrence unrelated to the general order of events, but also part of a fundamental law of whose workings you are either painfully ignorant or arrogantly contemptuous. We, however, have profound respect for it and are continually studying it and devising methods for divining the nature of this law. We do it instinctively. You see, it is precisely the togetherness of things in time, not their apparent unrelatedness in the concrete world, which interests us Chinese. Our scientists have actually invented a system for devising the typical and abiding ‘togetherness’ of chance, time, and circumstance for each individual. It is not perfect, of course, but it is amazing how it works. Would you like to try it?”

At first we three had declined this offer politely. It sounded to us no better really than a suggestion that we should consult a gipsy crystal. Besides, at this time, John, Serge and I were completely absorbed in a long, patient plan for escape from prison. Serge Bolenkov was a White Russian, liked and admired by both John and me, who spoke several Central Asian tongues and was convinced he could make his way safely back into Russia. The gallant Russian resistance against the Germans had revived his pride in his people to such an extent that his bitterness over the 1917 Revolution had vanished and made him determined to return to Russia.

But we were, after all, all three of us completely cut off from the outside world and under suspended sentence of death, and it’s amazing how such a combination of

circumstances stimulates the irrational perceptions in human nature. Once the escape plan was completed the little General's offer became more and more attractive, until finally we decided unanimously it could do no harm to ask him to divine the great togetherness of chance, circumstance and time for the success of our scheme.

So the three of us went together to the little General for advice by divination. The result of it was he'd told John and Serge to try to make good their escape in five days' time at two in the morning, on the night of the new moon. That shook our faith in him at first, because it was mid-December 1944 with the snow, ice and long-maned winds of a desperate winter driving from Siberia with fast accelerating speed across the wide, featureless Manchurian plains. But he insisted that the "togetherness of things" favoured escape for John and Serge only at that moment.

Then he looked at me compassionately and said, sadly, that I was not part of the pattern he'd just read. When I asked "Why?" he smiled, a whimsical, introverted smile and told me gently there never was a "why" in "the great togethernesses", only a "thus", and my "thus" was "so".

I believe we'd have rejected the whole thing as nonsense if, on the very next day, a friendly, Christian Korean guard had not come to warn me that I was once more to be taken away by the secret police for interrogation and he greatly feared I would not come back alive. So I made John and Serge promise that if I were not back by the night of the new moon, they would pool my supplies and money and make their break without me, according to the little General's estimate of "togethernesses".

I was duly fetched by the secret police and I did not come back into the general prison again until two days after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. I myself was then almost dead but was able to discover that John and Serge had escaped on that night of the new moon in December and had not been recaptured. But the general opinion in prison

was that they could never have survived the dreadful winter outside. As for the “little General”, he too was gone, tortured to death for heroically refusing to let one word about our plans cross his lips.

In the months and years that followed, John and Serge appeared to have vanished for ever, and after two and a half years search was abandoned. They were officially presumed dead, and accepted as such by all except John’s mother, Lady Sandysse, and his youngest sister, Joan. I myself did not know what to think. It was not that I believed in their being alive so much as that I couldn’t accept the fact of their death. Somehow or other my uncertainty had been sustained—as I now realized with the letters in John’s own hand on a blood-stained envelope dancing like a crackle of flame in the dark before my eyes—by a submerged faith in the timing of their escape according to the General’s reading of their “togethernesses”.

Then, suddenly, as I lay there with brittle eyes wide-open, unable to sleep, it was no longer the General’s face, but Joan Sandysse’s face which occupied the forefront of my memory, for, after all, it had all begun with Joan. My own private and personal beginning in the affair was not there and then but years back. It began for me, to be precise, at three o’clock in the afternoon of June 17, 1937, in the Grootekerk, the first church ever built in Southern Africa. I was sitting in our pew, my heart black with misery and my mind full of a thousand resentments, Oom Pieter le Roux, my dead mother’s brother and only surviving kinsman, beside me. My father was dead and we were there for his funeral service. The church was crowded out with people, for my father, by the time he died, had become a legendary figure in Africa.

In 1899 at the age of twenty-one, when the war broke out between Britain and the Republics up north, he’d at once decided to leave Petit France, his rich and comfortable wine estate in the Cape, and to hasten north to join the Free

State Commandos. He was a superb horseman and shot, a fearless and passionately self-reliant person, and soon made a unique military reputation for himself as a leader of an independent and daring band of scouts. He could hardly credit the news of the surrender at Vereeniging in 1902, and resolved that he personally would never accept so unfair a defeat. So, disbanding his scouts, he quickly made his way north and, one cold, grey morning in July 1902, slipped quietly over the Portuguese border to start a new life in a foreign country at the age of twenty-four as a professional hunter. Even the great and generous Act of Union failed to break through the ice formed in his heart by the Boer War, and finally his friends at the Cape one by one stopped urging him to return and even ceased writing to him. It was at this stage, with his bitterness and disillusionment at their deepest, that he met my mother in romantic circumstances in Tanganyika. They were married a month later and except for six months before and six months after my birth, were never again parted. Even my birth in 1917 was not allowed to make much difference, and, when it was clear after six months that I was as strong and sturdy a male animal as had ever been born in East Africa, my mother packed up at once in the town to which she had been sent and went off to rejoin her husband who, together with her brother, Oom Pieter, was hunting elephant on the Abyssinian frontier. From then on the four of us were inseparable as we wandered and hunted from one end of Africa to another. I was not sent to school: my mother taught me to read and write, my father to shoot, Oom Pieter to ride and a host of other hunter’s crafts. From our servants and black hunters I learned the languages and rich, instinctive lore of Africa. We rarely went near the towns except to sell our ivory and skins and to replenish our supplies. So I grew up contained in ancient Africa as few white people could ever have been.

Then one day in 1934 my mother fell ill. All our proved and trusted remedies failed to cure her. Panicking for the

first time in our lives, we forgot all our prejudices against travelling by train, flagged the Southern Express at a sun-bleached siding in the far northern bushveld, and took her to the little hospital in Fort Beaufort. But already we were too late. Within a fortnight she died. Yet before she died she made my father promise that he would go back to his home in the Cape. I suspect that when she saw our three faces bending anxiously over her she read them, in the light of her own illness, in a way they'd not been read before. Behind our features burnt black by the implacable sun of the interior I believe she saw submerged something too great for mere flesh and blood to endure. I suspect she realized we stood there not as three free men but as prisoners of my father's iron resentment over a war fought far back at the beginning of the century. Drawing my father's head to her for the last time she'd said: "Promise to go back: promise to accept the past; not to judge but to accept. And homeward, please; home, my dear love." And without an instant's reservation or hesitation, my father had said simply: "I promise."

So, once my mother was buried, we hastened north again to sell our wagons and equipment, and to pay off our loyal old servants and bearers. That done, we turned south.

In the Cape my father's return caused a great and long-sustained sensation, for, the last of the self-exiled Boer leaders, he was, as I said earlier on, a legendary figure. But the labour of reintegration for so stricken a spirit was too great, and I fear neither Oom Pieter nor I helped him much. I could not take calmly to my first orthodox schooling. I felt trapped in this new civilized situation and seethed with rebellion. Then poor Oom Pieter found tending neat, algebraic vineyards so little to his taste that after six months of it he announced regretfully that he was going back to his old life. My father did not try to stop him, but watched him go with such a fierce flame of longing and envy in his eyes that I was for a moment appalled by the

power of the aboriginal nomad in the three of us. Then in May 1937 came an invitation for me to join Oom Pieter on an expedition into the Congo. It was selfish to inflict another separation on my father at that moment but I couldn't help myself. Yet if my going was a defeat for myself, his consenting to it was a victory for him, and I shall never forget the tender look in his eyes when I said good-bye to him. I never saw him again. Oom Pieter and I were about to set off into the blue when an urgent telegram summoned us back to the Cape. But my father died some hours before we could arrive.

So there I sat at the funeral service, staring in front of me with such a fierce pain of misery in my heart that no tears could come. I hardly heard the sombre words of the service but longed passionately to have done with it all, so that I could get on my horse and ride alone with my unhappiness far out into the hills. Then suddenly an odd thing happened. I found my eyes slowly drawn upwards and my vision pulled subtly and yet surely out of its inner focus. I had, to the best of my belief, no conscious role in this reorientation of my senses. I was as sealed-off from the people and the world about me by my misery as a silkworm in its cocoon. Yet there I was slowly but unmistakably being forced back into cognizance of my surroundings. The movement continued until my eyes came to rest on the back of the Governor's pew on the other side of the aisle, three rows in front of ours, and I found myself looking at a young girl who'd deliberately turned her head to look at me. As our eyes met she made no effort to turn away. I had time to notice that her eyes were calm and wide, and intensely blue. In that light, under a big, black straw hat she wore pushed back slightly from a brow rather broad for a girl, but white and unbelievably calm, her eyes were almost purple. Two long plaits of black hair fell over her shoulders, and this contrast of blackness and blueness, of the white of her skin and the black of her hair, this counterpoint of fair and dark in her, of