

8. Love and Orphans

‘Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.’

– Albert Einstein (1870–1955)

Aged twenty-six, I settled into a period of great happiness, married to the man I loved passionately and who was my perfect soulmate. Our honeymoon in Lake Manyara National Park was blissfully romantic. David was such an intuitive interpreter of all that was taking place, and we spent hours watching the animals as they went about their daily lives. He opened my eyes to the body language of the wild animals – the meaning of different stances and nuances. All these years later, I can still feel his presence as we sat close to each other, still and quiet and uninterrupted. Our body language told the story of love throughout our married life.

I did not want the week to end, but the sands of time never stand still and all too soon it was time to go home. I had missed Jill hugely, and was looking forward to picking her up from my parents. As it turned out, I was glad she was not in Tsavo, for there was news that would have upset her – Fatuma and Kanderi had gone. Piglet’s recent departure – the Warden of Nairobi National Park had kindly offered to look after him – had plunged Fatuma into inconsolable grief, and soon afterwards she and Kanderi had joined up with a wild herd and had not been seen since. Fatuma was Jill’s favourite and Kanderi such an impish elephant, who made us laugh at his antics. At least he was old enough to survive out there in the wild.

Sensing my sadness, David gently reminded me that every wild orphan was ‘on loan’ and could never ‘belong’ to us. We were merely custodians for the period that they were dependent and needed our

help, but after that their place and quality of life lay not in semi-captivity for the benefit of humans, but with their wild kin. The fact that Fatuma and Kanderi had graduated from our care to become wild elephants again was a cause for celebration, irrespective of how much we humans would miss them. Of course, I knew this from way back when Bushy had left me, but any parting from a loved one is emotional. I thought carefully about how I would tell my little daughter when we were reunited.

At least Jill would be able to find some consolation in 'Rufus', a newly-born rhino calf that Dennis Kearney, the new Assistant Warden, had found one dawn outside my old home. There had been no sign of the mother, but a search party later came across the spot where she had given birth, so it was assumed that she had taken fright and abandoned the calf when people had begun to appear in the morning. For the time being Dennis and his wife were happy to raise this newly orphaned rhino alongside three recently arrived buffalo orphans. When I told Jill about Fatuma, she looked at me gravely, saying: 'That's OK, Mummy. She will help look after other baby elephants now and have lots of new friends.' At five, she was already far more astute than I had been at that age.

I knew too that she would be captivated by a very different orphan that had been brought in by one of the rangers – a bedraggled little mongoose that had clearly suffered a painful head injury. I remembered Ricky-Ticky-Tavey of my childhood days and just how endearing members of the mongoose family were. While this tiny creature could now fit into the palm of my hand, as a banded mongoose he would grow to be about half the size of a cat, a lot larger than Ricky-Ticky-Tavey, who had been no bigger than a large rat. Covered in brown grizzled fur with thin black bands over his back, we named him 'Higglety' because he moved in a 'higglety-pigglety' fashion.

In time, Higglety made a full recovery from his head wound, though it was several weeks before he was able to stand without toppling over and thereafter retained a slightly lopsided look, holding his head at a jaunty angle. He was clever and fearless, with an insatiable curiosity, and when displeased made his feelings known by

erecting the hairs on his tail like a bottlebrush. We always knew where he was by the characteristic birdlike ‘peep’ of mongooses, and the only time he was silent was when he was fast asleep. At mealtimes he bustled up, sat on his hind legs with his little black nose twitching to savour what might be on offer, jumped up on to a lap and for the rest of the meal laid his little paws on the table, every now and then hooking a morsel off a plate. Being mainly carnivorous, insects and meat were his staples but unusually Higglety became obsessed by cheese, so much so that the mere mention of the word brought him scampering along, growling in anticipation.

Higglety quickly became so attached to us – as we to him – that soon after his arrival he came with us to Ndiandaza, on the lower reaches of the Tiva River, in the northern area of the Park where David was supervising the construction of a borehole. It was urgent to provide a source of water that would open up a vast stretch of country during the dry season and also enable the Field Force anti-poaching patrols to operate further afield. A contracted drilling rig had already begun work on this project and now we were set to follow. Along the way, we passed Rudolf, the old rhino who still lived in the Mopea Gap just across the causeway at Lugard’s Falls, relieved to find him still alive and in good shape, but a while later we witnessed a pack of African hunting dogs tearing chunks of twitching flesh from the belly of a living impala. Jill and I were distraught because the impala was literally being eaten alive, but David was consoling, telling us that at such times the animal is in deep shock and feels nothing, since the brain releases endomorphins, substances to numb the nerves and extinguish all feeling. He told us how he had seen soldiers suffer terrible injuries during the war and that they sometimes had not even known they had been wounded until they noticed blood. The pain came much later. In the future I would experience this myself and understand the truth and wisdom of his words.

It was surreal to be in the northern region, this time as the legitimate wife of David. It evoked memories of an aching longing for things that then I had believed could never be. I was now able to indulge myself, bringing feminine touches to our camp – a little vase

of wild flowers on the dining table, the bedlinen turned back at night – and with the help of Frederick provide the dishes David enjoyed, accompanied by freshly baked bread and cakes. Great-Uncle Will's cast-iron kettle was always on the go for much-needed tea for the team.

Our camp was pitched close to the scene of the drill and the Rak-oub Camel Section of the Field Force, a recent innovation at a point when as yet we had no access to an aircraft. The object was to enable the rangers to become much more mobile and operate further afield, since camels could carry a supply of water. The camels appeared to be a disgruntled and temperamental lot who lay down with bad grace to have their loads strapped on to their backs, groaning and roaring in protest. Apparently this was nothing compared to the noise they made when given their regular injections against the dreaded tsetse disease of trypanosomiasis. When not on patrol, they were kept in a thorn enclosure that Higglety was quick to discover and he instantly became fascinated by these noisy 'ships of the desert'. Every morning he dashed across the open plain to be with them, risking being scooped up by a bird of prey. Thankfully, however, he survived such hazards and was happy to spend the rest of the day scrabbling in the thornbush fence, fascinated by his new friends.

There was much wild activity around the camp to keep Jill and me busy. Every morning at eight, flocks of sand grouse swooped in to drink at a shallow puddle near the rig. Their timing was so precise that we could accurately adjust our watches by their arrival. They came from far and wide, leaving their tiny speckled eggs or fluffy baby chicklets exposed on the bare baking ground, banking entirely on the chicks' camouflage for them to survive. Only the male birds were equipped with the special quill feathers capable of holding the water that had to be carried back to the flightless young, sometimes over great distances. As soon as their father landed the babies would suckle his feathers to get the moisture they needed. Curiously these water quill feathers were absent in the female birds, so if some mishap befell the male, the tiny chicks were doomed to die a miserable death of thirst. This troubled me greatly, knowing full well how sand grouse were slaughtered in droves by shotgun-wielding 'hunters' for

sport. I found it shocking that people could derive pleasure from killing a tiny bird, or any living creature for that matter, but the killing of sand grouse was particularly abhorrent in view of the vulnerability of the tiny chicks that had to battle so hard to survive under such harsh and adverse conditions.

We also became intrigued by a female hornbill who, entombed in a tall acacia tree, was wholly dependent on her mate to feed her while she was sealed inside naked until she grew another feathered dress. The proximity of the nest to the drilling rig placed her mate in a quandary. He was understandably frightened of bringing food and could be seen hopping around trying to pluck up the necessary courage to approach his nest, so for the first few days Jill and I relieved him of this responsibility and offered Mrs Hornbill juicy grasshoppers, which she gobbled down with relish. However, her mate soon took over from us, sailing down in spite of the thumping of the rig to push a titbit into the nest for his wife. The Peter's gazelles also plucked up courage to come and feed on the nutritious twisted pods that rained down from the *Acacia tortilis* trees shading our tent. Because of them the antelopes of Tsavo were usually in better condition during the dry season than in the wet, their coats sleek and shiny and their bodies lithe and well-covered. The superb starlings also became tame, enjoying the breadcrumbs we threw down for them each day and splashing about in the hollowed-out stone that served as a birdbath just outside the mess tent. They hopped around screeching rudely at Higglety, trusting and unafraid, and Jill loved looking at the starlings' iridescent breasts, which, in the bright sunlight, took on all the colours of the rainbow.

At last the day came when the rig struck water at a depth of 170 feet, and there was great rejoicing in the whole camp. We all went along to see the first water being heaved up from the bowels of the earth, and sampled it as we waited impatiently for the results of the test pumping that would reveal the quantity the hole could yield. Unfortunately it wasn't quite as much as we had hoped, but we were relieved that a supply had at least now been secured. When the rig hauled up a bucket of dark grey mud, David said, 'How about a celebratory mud pack, Daph?' I laughed: 'Well, it does the elephants no

harm, so why not!’ and much to the amusement of the workers, David then set about plastering my face with the grey ooze from the depths of Tsavo. Soon it hardened into clay and it occurred to me that rather than easing my wrinkles, it would probably create a few more, but it felt good and after all, here I was – the first woman to have a mud mask from the first borehole in Tsavo East. It took time to peel it all off, and I doubt that anyone has had a Tsavo mudpack since.

The mood was buoyant in the camp that evening but over the noisy chatter came an extraordinary sound of a distant booming, rather like a muffled explosion. We were puzzled, for there were no humans around for hundreds of miles. Within a couple of minutes one of the Samburu rangers came running up to us exclaiming, ‘Elgubu, Elgubu!’ and announced that this was the sound made by the yellow-legged Kori bustard bird as it predicted exceptionally heavy rain. He told us that when his people heard this sound, they would begin to move their cattle into the area, knowing surely that there would soon be fresh grazing for their herds, and he added that the bird was never wrong. It was difficult to believe that this sound could emanate from a bird, even one as large as a Kori bustard, which was, after all, the largest bird with the ability of flight. Curiosity soon got the better of us and David suggested we went to investigate. Sure enough, some distance away was a Kori bustard, puffing out his grey-white fluffy chest as he thundered his rain song to the heavens.

For two more days the skies remained clear, but around midday on the third day, large brooding black clouds gathered in the sky as if from nowhere and the air turned humid and hot. It was breathlessly still as a hush descended, every living creature seemingly waiting for something to happen. Even Higglety tore himself away from the camels and came dashing back to seek shelter in the tent. And then came great claps of thunder and the first drops of rain fell from the sky – big, heavy droplets, hesitantly at first, sending up tiny puffs of dust as they hit the dry powdery soil of the ground. It wasn’t long before we found ourselves in the midst of a monumental tropical downpour, so heavy that the afternoon became as dark as dusk and the roar of the rain on the tent deafened all other sound. The tent

began to sag under the strain, and we had to continually heave up the canvas to release a waterfall that gushed down the sides and seeped beneath the groundsheet.

At first, we savoured the refreshing scent of newly dampened earth, our spirits uplifted, but then with rising alarm we watched the parched earth rapidly becoming saturated and turning into a sea of mud. Little rivulets were forming, tentacles spreading out in all directions and racing off to swell the Tiva watercourse. Once this flooded, we could be cut off completely, isolated in this remote corner of the Park for months. Meanwhile, as we were harbouring mixed feelings about this unexpected downpour, the camels, who had probably never experienced anything like this before, were the epitome of misery, as was Higglety, who had curled up into a shivering little ball beneath the blankets at the foot of David's bed.

The fury of the storm abated and the next morning we awoke to a newly wet world – a tinge of green rising from the enlivened vegetation and the air vibrant with the joyous chorus of innumerable birds. The fallen gossamer wings of countless flying ants carpeted the ground outside our tent, and those termite queens that had not fallen prey to birds were scuttling around with their tails in the air, sending their scent out to suitors. I had seen this before, of course; when joined in tandem, the queen and her mate would disappear to a lifetime underground, where her sole role would be the laying of eggs to create and sustain a new colony of termites, while he would be condemned to a life of imprisonment – the proverbial 'drone', seemingly with no other function than keeping the queen company once their union had been consummated.

The sudden appearance after rain of these insects in their billions presented a welcome banquet for all, so on this wet morning the camp was abuzz with activity. Mr Hornbill feverishly embarked on a rapid shuttle service back and forth to his wife with a beak full of wriggling victims, while Higglety stationed himself on the nearby termite mound and crunched up the insects as they emerged. Other birds swooped and dipped, taking them on the wing, while Agama lizards devoured them in pairs before they could dig themselves into the ground. The rangers were busy feasting on the termites, roasting

them over the coals, enjoying what they said was their delicious nutty flavour. I knew from my childhood days on the farm that like the locust, flying ants were a delicacy to most African tribes. Indeed, some tribes from the Nile region had even perfected the art of inducing the would-be termite queens to emerge out of season, simulating the sound of falling rain on their nests by the tapping of sticks and pouring of water.

There was so much to watch that Jill and I could have stayed there all day, but David decided it would be unwise to dally at Ndiandaza in case the region flooded, so later that morning we packed up camp. It turned out that the Kori bustard had been correct, for this storm heralded the onset of a pluvial decade of plenty, and in honour of this prophetic bird we named the borehole 'Elgubu'. Now, over fifty years later, a windmill above it draws up the life-giving water for the Field Force rangers who still patrol this sensitive region of Tsavo.

Arriving home, we were presented with a box containing a mate for Higglety. I was getting used to the ongoing appearance of wild baby orphans in my life at Tsavo, gaining in confidence about how to rear each species based on knowledge of their wild habits. It was a steep learning curve, but I enjoyed every moment nurturing the orphaned young. Combined with David's patient tutoring, each one taught me so much, laying the foundation of all I know today. Needless to say Higglety was frantic to investigate the contents of the latest box, chirruping away with his tail in bottlebrush mode. Knowing how fraught the introduction of wild creatures could be, I had doubts about Higglety's good intentions, but David insisted that they had to meet and opened the lid of the box. Instantly the little orphan shot out and tore underneath an armchair, pursued by Higglety, who had a dangerous glint in his eye. Fortunately he had been eating so much cheese that he was now too rotund to follow, so he busied himself prowling ominously around the chair, from which squeaks and angry growls emanated. I couldn't bear the thought of a mongoose fight, so I left David to it, only venturing back about an hour later, expecting to find a mangled corpse. Instead I was amazed to see Higglety and his new companion walking round and round each other, well on the way to establishing an amicable friendship,

and by nightfall they were quite obviously delighted with each other and slept curled up together.

Thereafter Pickle and Higglety were inseparable. Higglety was becoming increasingly independent from us and started taking Pickle off with him, sometimes two miles from home each day, to his favourite spot at the main Voi entrance to the Park. At first I doubted Higglety's homing ability and went to retrieve them in the car, but I soon discovered that he knew his way around very well. Nevertheless we were concerned that Pickle was still far too young for such adventures, but Higglety was determined that she should accompany him everywhere he went and was most persistent in his persuasion, running off chattering away, then stopping to look around to see whether she was following, and if not, returning to prod her with his nose, before repeating this strategy all over again.

We decided that since it was company that Higglety craved, we should try to introduce him to his wild cousins down on the Voi River circuit. A resident pack of banded mongooses lived there and it seemed an ideal place – plenty of cover, no shortage of food, water nearby – in fact, a mongoose paradise. That evening, feeling like Judas, we took him to the river and placed him on the ground beside the car. For a few moments he looked rather confused, regarding us with his baleful lopsided look, but soon he set about busying himself with an interesting hole in the grass and while he was so engrossed, we slipped away. Taking one last backward glance, I could see Higglety gazing at the departing car. We drove away in silence, feeling very guilty. 'I feel an absolute cad,' said David. Back at home, we poured ourselves a drink and sat miserably on the front verandah as darkness closed in. Pickle lay in my lap, dejected and still, and as I stroked her I was overcome with remorse, picturing Higglety confused and alone in a strange place, without even the comfort of his nest and the bedclothes he snuggled up to as he fell asleep each evening. Even David looked anxious as he sat contemplating his drink. Jill was already in bed. I had no idea how I was going to tell her the next morning.

All of a sudden Pickle began to chatter, leaping off my lap and heading out of the front door. We followed her and there, hurrying

up the stairs, was Higglety, every hair on his tail standing at right angles in mongoosian outrage. With enormous relief, I rushed up to him, intending to pick him up and welcome him home, but he made it clear he wanted none of it and nipped me sharply on the toe. Ignoring David and Pickle, he refused all food – even cheese – plonked himself in his bed, wrapped himself in his cuddle blanket and lay down to sleep in an offended huff. Over the coming days we tried to ingratiate ourselves with him but he remained aloof for ages, obviously not prepared to forgive our treachery, although actually he couldn't stay mad at Jill for too long. Eventually his animosity vanished and life returned to normal.

One evening, a few weeks later, when Higglety and Pickle failed to return from their daily excursion, I drove down to the main gate to see if anyone had seen them. I had only gone a short distance when I caught sight of a large martial eagle sitting on the ground, devouring a small animal. I left the vehicle in order to investigate, and as I approached, the eagle took off into the sky carrying what I recognized as Pickle's little corpse in its talons. Stumbling through the bush, I clapped my hands and shouted in an attempt to make the eagle release its hold, but it was too late and it soared off into the sky with Pickle in its talons. Putting my face in my hands, I sat down in the bush and sobbed. After a while I became aware of something rubbing against my back, and remarkably, there was Higglety. At least he was still alive. I held him tight and carried him back to the car.

I knew that for Pickle it had been a natural end, but her death haunted me for days. I hoped that the endomorphins released by the brain had made it painless and swift. Higglety was terribly subdued, staying close to home for a few days, keeping one eye directed skywards. Inevitably, though, the call of the wild returned and once again he took to disappearing, sometimes spending a night out and then days on end until he disappeared entirely, and we never saw him again.

When caring for animals, whether domestic or wild, one experiences a whole range of emotions from love to grief. I had known both many times. Parting was always painful and never became easier. Of course, Higglety had returned to where he rightfully

belonged, and as David reminded me, this was cause for celebration, not self-pity. It was the quality of life that counted, he said, not the duration, and our orphans, irrespective of their end, had enjoyed a second chance of life that would otherwise have been denied them.

David loved me to massage his scalp and in the evenings, when Jill was asleep and the day had settled, he would sit at my feet as I rubbed his head, mulling over the events of the day. These were precious moments and we discussed a great deal – David’s philosophy playing a very important part in my understanding and interpretation of animal behaviour. He believed that wild animals were, in many ways, more sophisticated than us humans, more perfect in terms of Nature, honed by natural selection over millennia and specially adapted for the environmental slot they occupied, contributing to the wellbeing of the whole. He was intolerant of those who viewed animal ‘intelligence’ as inferior to that of the human animal, for in his view, each species had evolved along a different branch of life in a way that suited its purpose; there were bound to be things that we humans would never fully understand about animal ‘intelligence’, and those who claimed that they did merely illustrated ignorance. ‘The more you know, the more you know you don’t know,’ he said. We should never be so arrogant as to believe that we had all the answers.

David was of the firm belief that all animals possessed powers of communication, mysterious and hidden to human ears – for example, telepathy and the infrasound of the elephants and also probably the language of giraffes, animals that were believed to be mute. He had already taught me how to observe the body language of many animals, and that chemistry played an extremely important part in daily rituals – the footprints that left more than a mark on the ground, a whiff of scent on the wind that gave advance warning of impending danger. He understood that identity was a subconscious quest of all male mammals, mankind included, and inherent to a lesser degree in the females as well. How one was rated among one’s peers had a bearing on self-esteem, and the confidence that brought peace of mind. ‘Mammals require three essentials in life,’ he said, ‘identity, stimulation and security, and by far the most important of these three psychological cornerstones is identity.’ No doubt he was right, but

during these tender moments, I was secretly convinced that love was the source of all wellbeing.

David was openly contemptuous of those who viewed animals as a mere commodity placed on earth for the benefit of mankind, as well as of those who had the ‘anthropomorphic block’ which prevented them from accepting that animals were endowed with the same emotions as humans. After all, we humans in terms of Nature were also ‘animals’, and since Nature often repeats certain basic blueprints for mammals, such as warm blood and mammary glands, why not psychological and emotional parallels as well? Like us, each animal is individually unique. They can be happy and joyful, or depressed and sad. Furthermore, he often voiced the opinion that in terms of Nature we humans were arguably the most endangered species of all, having become so alienated from the natural world. We ran the risk of imploding, said David. And this was in the 1960s!

Life in Tsavo was becoming hectic. David and I were rarely at home for very long, for the distances involved in supervising development work in remote areas of the Park usually involved camping out, sometimes for extended periods, often accompanied by Jill if she was not spending time with Bill and Ruth. When Jill turned six, Bill and I decided to send her to the Government Primary School north of Nairobi in Nyeri, a well-respected boarding school not far from Bill and Ruth’s Mweiga home at the foot of the Aberdares. Boarding school in those days was the only option for parents who lived far from suitable schools, and since my siblings and I had always been boarders, I thought nothing of it, knowing that when the time came Jill would have to do the same. As usual, it was the parting that was the difficult and always tearful part. Jill accepted her lot stoically, and during term time Bill and Ruth visited her regularly, keeping me updated on her progress. David and I would join her at the half-term breaks, taking the opportunity to also visit his mother and see Bill and Ruth, and I consoled myself that the terms were relatively short.

David was always eager to head out into the field. There was an urgent need to utilize the Water for Wild Animals grant – allocated to us to produce watering points for wildlife in arid areas such as

Tsavo – before up-country rains rendered the causeway at Lugard's Falls impassable and cut off the northern area entirely. Following the 1960 drought, a new pumping station was being installed at the Athi section of the Galana River near the Thabangunji Pass in the Yatta Plateau, along with a huge holding tank on top of the plateau itself, the idea being that water from the river would be pumped to the Yatta holding tank and then gravity-fed to a series of natural water-holes in the arid country beyond, thereby avoiding another rhino catastrophe. This entailed complex engineering that necessitated David's presence, so we established our camp at a place called Kitani ya Ndundu, higher upstream.

I had a new, rather unusual, orphan to nurture on this safari – a civet cat that we named Old Spice. He was a kitten-sized nocturnal creature, who when brought to me looked more dog than cat, since he lacked retractile claws, but as an adult would be about the size of a small bull terrier and resemble a raccoon. His body was covered in coarse grey hair with black blotches and his long sturdy tail was marked with prominent black bars. His most striking feature, however, was a crest of long black hairs along his back, which were the barometer by which you could gauge his mood. When angry or alarmed, he would erect this crest and suddenly appear twice his normal size.

He acquired the name Old Spice because just a whiff of David's Old Spice aftershave lotion sent him into a rubbing and jumping frenzy. My own precious perfume had an even more electrifying effect, but since it was an expensive luxury that did not come along too often, I was reluctant to let him have any. David wasn't all that keen to share his aftershave either, but when Old Spice began to return from nights out reeking of a rotting carcass or worse, we decided it saved a lot of trouble if we gave him the scent of our choice rather than leaving the selection to him. After only a brief altercation, it was decided that it was David's Old Spice that had to be sacrificed.

Because Old Spice was a nocturnal animal, he found us rather dull company. Invariably, just as he was beginning to wake up, we were about to go to bed. Thereafter, throughout the night in an attempt to

make us play with him, he would jump on our bed and nuzzle our arms with his rubbery nose while kneading us strongly with his front paws, until our arms felt as though they had been pulped. When he realized we were falling asleep, he would jump off the bed and pad his way out into the night, crunching up the beetles attracted by the verandah light and pouncing on any hapless millipede, which was obviously a civet delicacy.

I didn't know much about civets, having never had contact with them before. David told me that they were battery farmed in Ethiopia and North Africa, where they were cruelly confined in small hutches stacked one on top of the other for the perfume industry, their anal scent gland 'milked' and the pungent contents collected for use as a base to make perfume linger longer on the wearer. It troubled me greatly knowing that these wild, gentle creatures should have to suffer so for the vanity of women. Jill was so upset when she learned of this practice that to this day, some fifty years later, she refuses to wear expensive perfumes that might include a product derived from the suffering of an animal, choosing instead the essence of flowers and essential oils.

Old Spice was secretive and reclusive. Whenever there was a stranger in the house, he would not appear until the dead of night. He underwent a marked mood change at the first hint of daylight, becoming tense and eager to retreat into hiding, seeking out the densest thicket around. We learned that this secluded spot had to be his secret alone, for if he so much as suspected that anyone had seen him entering it, he would become agitated and instantly move house. I always felt more comfortable knowing where he was during the day, but in order to do so I had to resort to subterfuge methods, spying on him with my back turned, using a mirror to monitor his movements.

The water project, both planned and designed by David, was important to bring a large stretch of once waterless country into production, the aim being to relieve the impact of the elephants' browsing on the river's vegetation so that the rhinos in the area had more food and water. The recent death of over 300 black rhinos had been attributed by many to 'elephant damage', but as sizeable

numbers remained, David concluded that the recent catastrophe might simply be due to an over-population of territorial black rhino along this particular stretch of the river. The engineering was challenging, since it entailed diverting the river at a point near Thabangunji where it was swift-flowing and took a sharp bend. There, a concrete wall had to be built against a bank to which the pumps could be anchored. The construction of the large circular holding tank at the very top of the Yatta Plateau – the idea being that the pumps would feed water to the tank, which would in turn feed the water out to waterholes or depressions on the other side of the river that had no surface water but good pasture – was also no easy matter, for all the building materials had to be manually hauled up the rugged steep sides of the escarpment in punishing temperatures of over 35 degrees, and since work was happening at both sites, David underwent a good deal of enforced exercise going up and down in order to be present at both. I supervised the cooking for the team back in camp, where I had an opportunity to observe the curious symbiosis between birds and crocodiles, the birds picking the crocodiles' teeth clean, sometimes even venturing right inside open jaws that could have swallowed them whole with just one snap.

As the onset of the rains became more imminent, it became a race against time to get the work at the pumping station done before the river flooded. Generators that would eventually power the pumps were wired up to provide floodlighting so that the men could work in shifts around the clock, David leading by example and working long into the night. Meanwhile, my work was cut out for me, having to ferry meals from the camp to the construction site several miles away. Arriving at the site, I would rest beneath the shade of a huge baobab festooned with the untidy nests of a noisy flock of buffalo weavers. The tree was a hub of constant activity and chatter, the nests buzzing with life. Clustered along the branches, the birds had carefully laid barricades of thorns to deter arboreal snakes. It was easy to become absorbed in the hustle and bustle of buffalo weaver life, watching the little black males with their bright white shoulder flecks reinforcing the nests by jabbing in twigs and grass stems, while others popped in and out with offerings of food for the young.

One morning, I spotted two tiny bald chicks covered in a few prickly feather buds, all head and gape, squeaking feebly. They had fallen out of their nests and as I stroked them tenderly in my palm, one of them went limp and died. I knew the other would follow if I didn't do something about it, so I consulted David, who immediately asked one of his workmen, a proficient baobab climber, to take the chick back up. Cutting each foothold with an axe as he went, in no time at all he managed to pop the chick back in the nest, but as he began his descent, the chick rolled out and fluttered down again. Fortunately, I managed to break its fall by catching it in the folds of my dress.

'You've got your work cut out now,' laughed David, and I soon found out that he was right. 'Hopgrogging', as it became known, instantly became a full-time preoccupation for me in between the meal runs. From dawn to dusk I was at it, armed with a long whippy stick, stalking every grasshopper in sight and then decapitating it before stuffing it into a jam jar. We named the tiny chick 'Gregory Peck' and he thrived, growing quickly and soon recognizing his name, answering the Peck part with a loud squawk.

Eventually the day arrived when the concrete wall in the river was keyed to the rock of the riverbank and the pumps could be installed at the Thabangunji site. This was not a moment too soon, as two days later the river became noisier and began to rise, swelled by rain up-country. Tsavo remained parched and unspeakably hot, as though it would never ever rain here again, but the expression on the faces around me became increasingly anxious as the river level rose to the point where the newly laid concrete was no longer visible. The fear was that weeks of hard work might be lost should the cement not have time to harden and simply get washed away.

And then, one night, the wind dropped and the air was still. The stars disappeared behind a dark black curtain lit by flashes of forked lightning, thunder boomed, and we could hear the hiss of the coals as the rain began to fall, dousing the flames and sending up wisps of smoke. The whole camp remained seated round the dying embers of the campfire, enjoying the cool luxury of the rain and the refreshing scent of the newly dampened earth, but as the raindrops gathered

momentum and turned into a steady downpour, we were forced to retreat to the mess tent. David turned on the radio and against the backdrop of thunder we picked out the news that the main railway bridge across the Athi upstream had been swept away and that there was every indication that more torrential rain was on the way.

‘I think we should move the camp to higher ground,’ said David, ‘right now, before the river rises.’ So, in the midst of a blinding rain-storm, we set about dismantling the camp, hurling drenched canvas that weighed a ton on to the back of the Land Rover and ferrying it to higher ground just below the Yatta escarpment. There we took shelter in the hurriedly erected mess tent, chaos prevailing as everyone groped around in the light of a feeble torch trying to locate their belongings and heaving up the sagging canvas of the roof to release a cascade of watery mud down the sides. Finally, having excavated a clearing in the midst of all the kit, we curled up in the middle, wet and weary, but elated that substantial rain was falling in Tsavo, which was always cause for celebration, even though the timing could have been better! I cradled a shivering Gregory Peck to my chest, anxious about Old Spice, who had sequestered himself that morning somewhere on the banks of the river, where he would be very much at risk of being swept away. The roar of the river grew louder as the night progressed, and when I finally fell into a fitful sleep I dreamed of Malindi and the sound of the surf at high tide. By the time a watery dawn lit the sky, the rain had stopped and we stepped out to view a transformed landscape. The river was a chocolate torrent swirling angrily over where our tents had stood just hours before, already lapping halfway up the palm-fruited duoms and acacias, many of which had been uprooted and swept away. Fortunately the men discovered that their wall had withstood the might of the flooded river.

When David came back from the construction site in the late afternoon we went off in search of Old Spice. Our old campsite was now just part of the river itself, but we walked along the water’s edge calling out for him as loudly as we could over the noise of the water, imitating his clucking sounds. Darkness set in and by torchlight we picked up plenty of pairs of eyes glowing like embers in the dark,

some red – predators – and some green – herbivores – but none that belonged to Old Spice.

As we made our way back to camp, I heard the pattering of feet behind us and lo and behold, there he was. The joy of this reunion was mutual – he purred and nuzzled and we took it in turns to carry him to our new home. There, I rummaged around to find the all-important aftershave, and from then on, he returned at dusk as usual to be anointed and have a cuddle before hurrying off into the night. Now that the rains had come, there were interesting puddles to inspect and a regular nocturnal banquet of insects that crash-landed around the light we had erected outside the mess tent.

Meanwhile, the rain continued unabated up-country, making 1961 a truly memorable year. Wild flowers sprang up as if from nowhere – delicately scented snowdrops, tiny blue and white African violets and the pure white convolvulus creeper. Butterflies fluttered around the flowers and gathered at moist elephant dung-balls. During the daily ‘hopgrogging’ chore I would pick a pretty bunch of wild flowers for the mess tent, and often when I went to bed I would find a beautiful orchid-like delonix blossom on my pillow, as a token of David’s love.

We were sandwiched between two flooded rivers, the Galana and the Tiva, responsible for sixty workmen and cut off from base. A runway was cleared nearby so that supplies could be ferried in by air and sick men taken out if necessary. In many places the river had widened its course by 100 yards or more, and the roar of the water was punctuated by loud crashes as huge trees fell, adding to the unbelievable amount of debris that was already being carried down the swollen torrent. Many of the baboons roosting in trees along the riverbanks at night were being swept away when the trees went down, and we also saw the carcasses of livestock that must have come from beyond the boundaries of the Park.

It was essential to maintain contact with the south bank of the river so that supplies of food and fuel could be ferried across to us. Eventually a cable was dragged and anchored across the river, providing a lifeline to civilization and enabling supplies to be winched across. It wasn’t exactly a safe means of transport while the river

remained in spate; it was far too risky to ferry the workmen across, many of whom could not even swim, so there was nothing for it but to sit it out and wait for the river to subside. However, now that cement and supplies could reach us, work was able to continue, and for three more months, while the Lugard's Fall causeway was flooded, we lived in our little camp beneath the Yatta Plateau. David kept in radio communication with both the Nairobi Headquarters and Park HQ at Voi and I must admit that I rather enjoyed being away from the usual demands on his time. I wrote long letters to Jill, the musings of a marooned mother!

Old Spice had pretty much grown up in camp and by now was spending more time away from us, ever more secretive and increasingly independent. Sometimes we didn't see him for days at a time, and then he would reappear in our tent in the dead of night. Gregory Peck had, by contrast, turned out to be gregarious and outgoing, sitting on my shoulder as I went about my daily chores. He even participated in the grasshopper hunts, hopping alongside me and quivering with excitement whenever we nailed the quarry. One morning I was carrying him on my hand when he started exercising his wings, flapping them frantically, and the next moment he was airborne, swooping downwards at first and then gaining height and fluttering unsteadily to the top of a tall acacia where I could just make him out at the very top, a long way up for a maiden flight. I called him and he replied with his usual cheep after the Peck, but he appeared to lack the confidence to come down. Just as I was steeling myself to accept that this could be the parting of the ways, he fluttered from his perch and landed squarely on my shoulder, to be rewarded by the fattest grasshopper in the tin.

Gregory Peck was happiest when embroiled in a great deal of activity, so we decided that it was time to introduce him to the car, a trip north to the Tiva having been planned to assess the damage caused by floods there. Rain had transformed the northern area of the Park. Grass was now waist high, the road barely visible. It was as though we were driving through a field of wheat, and every now and then we had to stop to remove the grass seeds that choked the radiator grille and caused the temperature gauge to reach boiling point.

We passed several healthy-looking rhinos who trotted off with a spring in their step, tails held high – a treat to see them thus, after the die-off of the previous drought year. When we reached the Tiva, we could see that the devastation was severe – great trees uprooted, lying amid piles of driftwood on both banks of the river, the crossing at Makoka blocked by enormous sand bars as high as a house. One look told us that the blind at Kathamulla must surely have been demolished.

Gregory became a seasoned traveller, accompanying us everywhere we went, perched on David's shoulder. Occasionally he would be blown off and out of the window, so we would have to pull up and wait for him to catch up with us. On one occasion we inadvertently chose to take a break beneath a noisy colony of buffalo weavers, and I was interested to see how Gregory would react to his own kind. Surprisingly he merely ignored them, and David explained that birds raised by humans tended to imprint to such an extent that they might never recognize their own kind again. Certainly Gregory's rendering of a buffalo weaver's sound was not quite as it should be, more just a raucous squawk. However, he seemed happy enough with it, announcing each new dawn with that lusty screech.

Back down south, the Athi River eventually abated. I was by now anxious to get back for Jill, who would be returning from school for the Christmas holidays. However, at the causeway the approaches had been completely swept away, with just a yawning chasm between the concrete and the bank, the river having extended its width by some 300 yards. David waded in to assess whether there was any chance of getting a vehicle across but decided that it was out of the question. There was no alternative but to risk a crossing in the Aruba dinghy before more rain up-country swelled the river again. I packed an angry Old Spice and a flustered Gregory Peck into their boxes, said goodbye to the people with whom I had shared this peculiar time, strapped myself into a lifejacket and headed for the river. We set off in the dinghy, not without trepidation, for I was very aware that should the boat tip up, I would not be able to save either Gregory or Old Spice in their respective boxes. I was relieved when we all landed safely on the other side without mishap. David remained behind to repair the Galana causeway so that the bulk of the equipment and

staff could follow by road. I couldn't wait to see Jill along with the rest of my family, who planned to spend Christmas with us.

The three months stranded in camp had been an adventure, time suspended from the hustle and bustle of Park HQ. Little did I know how busy it was all going to get on our return.