

Going Solo – Roald Dahl - Episode 1

At the end of 'Boy', the story of Roald Dahl's childhood and schooldays, he left Repton public school and got a job with Shell Oil with dreams of working abroad. After his training period, to his joy he got the job in East Africa that he wanted.

Dar es Salaam

The temperature in the shade was around 120 degrees F on board the SS *Mantola* as she crept southwards down the Red Sea towards Port Sudan. Sweat ran down our faces and necks and arms and dripped from elbows on to the deck. It was even too hot to read.

During the second day in the Red Sea, the *Mantola* passed very close to an Italian ship which, like us, was going south. She wasn't more than 200 yards away and her decks were crowded with women! There must have been several thousand of them and not a man in sight. I couldn't believe my eyes. 'What's going on?' I asked one of the ship's officers. 'Why all the girls?' 'They're for the Italian soldiers,' he said.

'What Italian soldiers?'

'The ones in Abyssinia,' he said. 'Mussolini is trying to conquer Abyssinia and he's got a hundred thousand troops in there. Now they are shipping out Italian girls to keep the soldiers happy. One girl for every soldier in the ranks, two for each Colonel and three for a General.'

'You're pulling my leg. Be serious.'

'They really *are* for the soldiers,' he said. 'It is such a rotten pointless war and the soldiers all hate it and they are fed up with massacring the wretched Abyssinians. So Mussolini is sending out girls to boost their morale.'

I waved to the girls on the other ship, and about 2000 of them waved back at me. They seemed very cheerful. I wondered how long they would be feeling that way.

At last the *Mantola* reached Mobasa, and there I was met by a man from the Shell Company who told me I was to proceed at once down the coast to Dar es Salaam, in Tanganyika (now Tanzania).

I transferred to a little coastal vessel called the *Dumra* and it sailed the same day. When I woke up the next morning the ship's engines had stopped. I peered through the port-hole. The whole of that amazing tropical scene has been photographed on my mind ever since. We were anchored in the middle of a vast blue-black lagoon, rimmed with pale-yellow sandy beaches, almost white, and coconut palms were growing on the beaches. And behind was what seemed to me like a jungle, a great tangle of dark-green trees, full of shadows, and almost certainly teeming, I told myself, with rhinos and lions. Over to one side lay the tiny town of Dar es Salaam, the houses white and yellow and pink. To me it was all wonderful, beautiful and exciting. And so it remained for the rest of my time in Tanganyika.

Only three young Englishmen ran the Shell Company in the whole of that vast territory, and I was the youngest and the junior. When we were not 'on the road', we lived in the splendid large Shell Company house perched on the

cliffs outside Dar es Salaam, and we were treated like princes. There was a male native cook, a gardener, and a personal 'boy' for each of us. Your boy was really a kind of valet and jack of all trades. He was expert at sewing and mending and making sure there weren't scorpions in your boots before you put them on, and he became your friend. He looked after nobody else but you and there was nothing he didn't know about your life and your habits. In return, you looked after him and his wives (never less than two) and his children who lived in their own quarters at the back of the house. My boy was called Mdisho. He was tall and graceful and soft-spoken, and his loyalty was absolute. I hope, and I believe, that I was equally loyal to him.

The first thing you had to do was to learn Swahili, otherwise you could not communicate either with your own boy or with any other native of the country. In those benighted days of Empire it was considered impertinent for a black man to understand English, let alone speak it. The result was that none of them spoke a word of our language, so we had to learn theirs. Swahili is a relatively simple language, and with some hard work you could become pretty fluent in a couple of months. Then you took an exam, and if you passed it the Shell Company gave you a bonus of a hundred pounds, which was a lot of money in those days when a case of whisky cost only twelve pounds.

Sometimes I would have to go on safari upcountry and Mdisho always came with me. The purpose of these trips was to visit our Shell customers. These customers ran diamond mines and gold mines and sisal plantations and cotton plantations and goodness knows what, and my job was to keep their machinery supplied with the proper grades of lubricating oil and fuel oil. I loved that life. We saw giraffe standing unafraid right beside the road nibbling the tops of trees. We saw plenty of elephant and hippo and zebra and very occasionally a pride of lions. The only creatures I was frightened of were the snakes.

Wherever there was a British District Officer in Tanganyika, the Shell man on safari was welcome to stay the night in his house. The District Officers were a breed I admired. They were all university graduates with good degrees, and in their lonely outposts they had to be all things to all men. They were the judges whose decisions settled both tribal and personal disputes. They were advisers to the tribal chiefs, often the givers of medicines and the saviours of the sick.

The DO in Tabora, some 450 miles from Dar es Salaam, was called Robert Sanford, a man in his early thirties who had a wife and three very small children.

One evening I was sitting on the veranda having a sundowner with Robert and his wife Mary. Suddenly, the voice of a man yelling in Swahili exploded into the quiet of the evening. It was my boy, Mdisho. 'Bwana! Simba, bwana! Simba!'

Simba is Swahili for lion. Mdisho came tearing round the corner of the house yelling at us, 'Come quick, a huge lion is eating the wife of the cook!'

That sounds pretty funny back here in England, but standing on a veranda in East Africa, it was not funny at all.

Robert flew into the house and came out again holding a powerful rifle and ramming a cartridge into the breech. As we came running round the corner

of the house, we spotted the massive sandy-coloured lion not more than eighty yards off. In his jaws he was holding a woman by the waist so that her head and arms hung down on one side and her legs on the other. The lion was loping away from us in the calmest possible manner, and behind the lion ran the cook himself, running most bravely and waving his arms, shouting 'Simba! Simba! Let go of my wife!'

Oh, it was a scene of great tragedy and comedy both mixed up together, and now Robert Sanford was running full speed after the cook who was running after the lion. He was shouting 'Pingo! Get out of the way, Pingo! Lie down on the ground so I can shoot the simba! You are in my way, Pingo!'

But the cook ignored him and kept on running, and the lion ignored everybody, loping along with his head held high and carrying the woman proudly, rather like a dog who is trotting off with a good bone. As for me, I didn't know what to do to help so I ran after Robert Sanford. There was no way that he could take a shot at the lion without risking a hit on the cook who was still right in the line of fire.

The lion was heading for one of those hillocks that was densely covered with jungle trees and we all knew that once he got in there, we would never be able to get at him. The incredibly brave cook was actually catching up on the lion and was now not more than ten yards behind him and Robert was thirty yards behind the cook.

Then Robert stopped and raised his rifle and took aim. There was an almighty *crack* as the gun went off and I saw a spurt of dust just ahead of the lion. The lion stopped dead and turned his head, still holding the woman in his jaws. He saw the arm-waving, shouting cook and he saw Robert and he saw me. He must have thought an army was coming after him because instantaneously he dropped the cook's wife to the ground and broke for cover. I have never seen anything accelerate so fast from a standing start. With great leaping bounding strides he was in among the trees on the hillock before Robert could ram another cartridge into his gun.

The cook reached his wife first, then Robert, then me. I couldn't believe what I saw. I was certain that the grip of those terrible jaws would have ripped the woman's waist and stomach almost in two, but there she was sitting up on the ground and smiling at the cook, her husband.

'Where are you hurt?' shouted Robert, rushing up.

The cook's wife looked up at him and kept smiling, and said, 'That old lion he couldn't scare me. I just lay there in his mouth pretending I was dead and he didn't even bite through my clothes. He carried me as gently as if I had been one of his own cubs.' She stood up and smoothed down her red and white spotted dress which was wet with the lion's salive, and the cook embraced her and the two of them did a little dance of joy in the twilight out there on the great brown African plain.

We walked slowly back. The cook ran into the kitchen clapping his hands and jumping for joy. 'I don't believe anything like this has ever happened before,' Robert said as he sat down again in his cane armchair. 'In the first place, lions do not attack people around here unless you go near their cubs. They can get all the food they want. There's plenty of game on the plain.'

'Perhaps he's got a family in that patch of wood on the hill,' Mary Sanford said.

'That could be,' Robert Sanford said. 'But if he had thought the woman was

threatening his family, he would have killed her on the spot. Instead of that, he carries her off as soft and gentle as a good gun-dog with a partridge. If you want my opinion, I do not believe he ever meant to hurt her.'

We sat there sipping our drinks and trying to find some sort of explanation for the astonishing behaviour of the lion.

'Normally,' Robert Sanford said, ' I would get together a bunch of hunters first thing tomorrow and we'd flush out that old lion and kill him. But I don't want to do it. He doesn't deserve it. In fact, I'm not *going* to do it.'

'Good for you, darling,' his wife said.

The story spread in the end all over East Africa and became a bit of a legend. And when I got back to Dar es Salaam about two weeks later, there was a letter waiting for me from the *East African Standard* asking if I would write my own eye-witness description of the incident. This I did and in time I received a cheque for five pounds from the newspaper for my first published work.

2009 words including intro.