Boy 16 – final episode

And now, after schooldays made happier by unexpectedly turning out to be good at games and photography, Roald Dahl is 17 and about to leave school.

Goodbye school

During my last year at Repton, my mother said to me, 'Would you like to go to Oxford or Cambridge when you leave school?' In those days it was not difficult to get into either of these great universities so long as you could pay. 'No, thank you,' I said. 'I want to go straight from school to work for a company that will send me to wonderful faraway places like Africa or China.'

You must remember that there was virtually no air travel in the early 1930s. Africa was two weeks away from England by boat and it took you about five weeks to get to China. These were distant and magic lands and nobody went to them just for a holiday. You went there to work. Nowadays you can go anywhere in the world in a few hours and nothing is fabulous any more. But it was a very different matter in 1933.

So during my last term I applied for a job only to those companies that would be sure to send me abroad. They were the Shell Company (Eastern Staff), Imperial Chemicals (Eastern Staff) and a Finnish lumber company whose name I have forgotten.

For some reason I wanted most of all to get into the Shell Company. When the day came for me to go up to London for this interview, my Housemaster told me it was ridiculous for me even to try. 'The Eastern Staff of Shell are the *crème de la crème*,' he said. 'There will be at least one hundred applicants and about five vacancies. Nobody has a hope unless he's been Head of the School or Head of the House, and you aren't even a *House* Prefect!'

He was right about the applicants. There were one hundred and seven boys waiting to be interviewed at the Head Office of the Shell Company in London. And there were seven places to be filled. Please don't ask me how I got one of those places. I don't know myself. But get it I did, and when I told my Housemaster the good news on my return to the school, he didn't congratulate me. He turned away muttering, 'All I can say is I'm damned glad I don't own any shares in Shell.'

I didn't care any longer what my Housemaster thought. I was all set. I had a career. I was to leave school for ever in July 1933 and join the Shell Company two months later in September when I would be exactly eighteen. I was to be an Eastern Staff Trainee at a salary of five pounds a week.

That summer, for the first time in my life, I did not accompany the family to Norway. While still at school during my last term, I signed up to spend August with something called 'The Public Schools' Exploring Society', to explore the interior of Newfoundland. It sounded like fun.

Without the slightest regret I said goodbye to Repton for ever. I had only two days at home before I was off by ship from Liverpool to Newfoundland with thirty boys of my own age and four experienced adult leaders. But I soon found out it was not much of a country. For three weeks we trudged over that desolate land with enormous loads on our backs . We carried tents and groundsheets and sleeping bags and saucepans and food and axes and

everything else one needs in the interior of an unmapped, uninhabitable and inhospitable country. My own load, I know, weighed exactly one hundred and fourteen pounds. We lived on pemmican and lentils, and experimented with boiled lichen and reindeer moss to supplement our diet. But it *was* a genuine adventure and I returned home hard and fit and ready for anything.

There followed two years of intensive training with the Shell Company in England, being carefully prepared to uphold the majesty of the Company in one or other remote tropical country. We spent weeks at the huge Shell Haven Refinery learning all about fuel oil and diesel oil and gas oil and lubricating oil and kerosene and gasoline.

After that we spent months at the Head Office learning how the great company functioned from the inside. I was still living in Bexley, Kent, with my mother and three sisters, and every morning, six days a week, Saturdays included, I would dress neatly in a sombre grey suit, and with a brown trilby on my head and a furled umbrella in my hand, I would board the eight-fifteen train to London with a swarm of other equally sombre-suited businessmen. Most of my companions wore bowler hats, and a few like me wore trilbys, but not one of us went bareheaded. In 1934 it wasn't done. And none of us, even on the sunniest days, went without our umbrella. The umbrella was our badge of office, a sign of respectability. Roadmenders and plumbers never went to work with umbrellas. Businessmen did.

I enjoyed it, I really did. I began to realize how simple life could be if one had a regular routine to follow with fixed hours and a a fixed salary and very little original thinking to be done.

The Shell Company did us proud. After twelve months at Head Office, we trainees were all sent away to branches in England to study salesmanship. I went to Somerset and spent several glorious weeks selling kerosene to old ladies in remote villages.

Then suddenly, in 1936, I was summoned back to Head Office in London. One of the Directors wished to see me. 'We are sending you to Egypt,' he said. 'It will be a three-year tour, then six months' leave. Be ready to go in one week's time.'

'Oh, but sir!' I cried out. 'Not *Egypt*! I really don't want to go to *Egypt*!'

The great man reeled back in his chair as though I had slapped him in the face with a plate of poached eggs.

'Egypt,' he said slowly, 'is one of our finest and most important areas. May I ask why you do not wish to go there?'

I knew perfectly well why. What I wanted was jungles and lions and elephants and tall coconut palms swaying on silvery beaches, and Egypt had none of that. It was bare and sandy and full of tombs and I didn't fancy it at all.

'It's … it's… it's…. too *dusty,* sir.'

'*Dusty!*' he shouted. 'I've never heard such rubbish!'

There was a long silence. I was expecting him to tell me to leave the building for ever. But he didn't. He gave a deep sigh and rubbed a hand over his eyes and said, 'Very well then, if that's the way you want it. Redfearn will go instead of you and you will have to take the next posting that comes up. If the next vacancy happens to be Siberia you'll have to take it.'

'I quite understand, sir,' I said. 'And thank you very much.'

Within a week he summoned me again. 'You're going to East Africa,' he said.

‘Hooray!’ I shouted. ‘That’s marvellous, sir! That’s wonderful!’
The great man smiled. ‘It’s quite dusty there too,’ he said.
I was twenty years old. I was off to East Africa where I would walk about in khaki shorts and wear a topi on my head! I was ecstatic. I rushed home and told my mother. ‘And I’ll be gone for three years,’ I said.
I was her only son and we were very close. Most mothers would have shown a certain amount of distress. Three years is a long time, and Africa was far away. There would be no visits in between. But my mother did not allow even the tiniest bit of what she must have felt to disturb my joy. ‘Oh, well done you!’ she cried. ‘It’s just where you wanted to go, isn’t it!’
The whole family came down to London Docks to see me off on the boat. Although I didn’t know it at the time, I was sailing away for a good deal longer than three years because the Second World War was to come along in the middle of it all. But before that happened, I got my African adventure all right. I got the roasting heat and the crocodiles and the snakes and the long safaris up-country, selling Shell oil to the men who ran the diamond mines and the sisal plantations. I learned to speak Swahili and to shake the scorpions out of my mosquito boots in the mornings. I learned what it was like to run a temperature of 105 degrees F for three days, and when the rainy seasons came and the water poured down in solid sheets and flooded the little dirt roads, I learned how to spend nights in the back of a stifling station-wagon with all the windows closed against marauders from the jungle. Above all, I learned how to look after myself in a way that no young person can ever do by staying in civilization.
When the big war broke out in 1939, I was in Dar es Salaam, and from there I went up to Nairobi to join the RAF. Six months later, I was a fighter pilot flying Hurricanes all round the Mediterranean. I flew in the Western Desert of Libya, in Greece, in Palestine, in Syria, in Iraq and in Egypt. I shot down some German planes and I got shot down myself, crashing in a burst of flames and crawling out and getting rescued by brave soldiers crawling on their bellies over the sand. I spent six months in hospital in Alexandria, and when I came out, I flew again.
But all that is another story. It has nothing to do with childhood or school or Gobstoppers or dead mice or Boazers or summer holidays among the islands of Norway. It is a different tale altogether, and if all goes well, I may have a shot at telling it one of these days.

Love from
Boy

1707 words including intro