

THE HONOURABLE MAN

This narrative was inspired by my mother's journey, in 1943, from Cape Town to Nairobi to marry my father.

'Do you know what you are doing?' George asked.

I had met George, an Egyptian and older than me at the start of my journey. Now he was a regular visitor to my carriage and very helpful.

'Are you so naive?' George continued.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'The Major; silly.'

'But he's very charming.'

'Charming, he may be Daphne, but you're young, and he doesn't even know you are getting married.'

'Really George, you sound like my mother.' I replied.

Feeling a little embarrassed I turned to glance out of the window.

During the past fortnight, I had traveled over five thousand kilometers and through many border crossings. Fortunately, George spoke fluent French, and he organised the immigration papers and forms that needed signing especially in the Congo. He was a considerate and reassuring companion, with many tales of his travels all around Africa and Europe. We whiled away the time reminiscing about Cairo and Alexandria where I had spent a carefree childhood.

Leaving Cape Town seemed so long ago now when I leaned out of the train window, coal smoke stinging my eyes. I had waved to my dear mother on the station platform until my arm ached and she was out of sight. We journeyed through Southern Africa for five days of monotonous, flat, dry country on a train that felt like it was on its last trip. It wheezed and clattered, rattling its way past dusty, forgotten outposts and poor villages. Every time the train stopped to refuel the local people would crowd around the carriages holding up baskets of things to sell. Live chickens, a goat, vegetables from the

scrubby gardens that lined the tracks. The people were desperate to sell something, but I had to count every penny.

Since then I had traveled on a ferry up the Lualaba River, another train and now this one. I was so far from my mother, my home, my friends and all that was familiar. I had been so sure about my decision, but doubts had crept into my mind and the war hung ominously over everything.

‘Why am I feeling like this? I know I love John...’

At that moment the train jolted violently and shuddered to a stop, brakes squealing, choking steam from the engine filling the carriage. It was the second time that day the train had stopped and I was beginning to wonder if I would ever get to Nairobi.

‘I’ll go and see what’s happening’ said George.

Sitting in the now silent carriage, I remembered that dance in Kampala where I met John. We danced all night and from then on had written letters weekly, becoming closer with each one. He asked me to marry him, but I was only 19 and not sure if I was ready to take such a step. However, by 1943, my parents had divorced, and mother and I had moved to Cape Town; John asked me again. I knew now he was the one for me, and I felt so happy, but the war still raged on.

There was much activity around the train engine, trying to get it going again. Outside, groups of soldiers were talking and smoking, taking advantage of the breakdown to stretch their legs. They were heading to join the fighting in North Africa under the command of the very dashing and handsome Major Wilson.

The train whistled; men scrambled back on board.

‘Daphne, get your things ready, we’ll be at the station soon,’ said George returning to the carriage.

‘M’Wanza and Lake Victoria, at last!’

I'd been looking forward to this stretch.

'Maybe we'll see some hippo's.'

'More likely, crocodiles' said George.

We boarded the ferry, and I had come on deck to savour the fresh air from the lake. It was dark, and I was near a lifeboat, leaning on the ship's railing. I had changed for dinner into my one pretty cotton dress and had on my new high heel shoes. Even though George's comments still irritated me, I knew he was right; I had been a bit flirty. Suddenly, I felt a strong hand on my shoulder, and I found myself between the lifeboat and the side of the ship. A voice whispered to me,

'I can't help myself; you're so perfect.'

Oh, God! It was the Major. He was holding onto me and he was shaking.

'Let go of me' I said, as I struggled to turn and look at him.

'Daphne, I haven't seen such loveliness for so long...'

His hand dropped, his face crumpled and he burst into uncontrollable sobs. I was shocked to see this decorated soldier in such a state, but I helped him back to the railing and waited until the situation calmed.

'Sorry. I'm so sorry, forgive me. Seeing you reminds me how beautiful life was.'

'I think I understand' I replied.

'I'll be back to the fighting in a couple of days...God; this ghastly war!'

Then he straightened up, squared his shoulders, turned and walked away down the deck.

I've never forgotten that man's anguish, but I prayed he returned safely.

Next morning, the ferry docked at Kisumu; the last leg of the journey began on yet another train. Tomorrow we reach Nairobi and my new life.

There he was, waiting for me on the platform. I ran into John's open arms.

'I can't believe you're here,' he said.

I flung my arms around him and kissed him so deeply that I made myself breathless.

'Steady on, old girl. Plenty of time for that!' said my father-in-law to be.

A week later, I was outside the church, waiting to walk down the aisle. Neither my mother nor my father was here for my big day, but I had invited George. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw him, ran over to him and held him close.

'George, thank you so much for being here and thank you for being such an honourable man.'