

Africa ~ My Memories

By Alison McLennan (nee Tomkins)

“Oh Happy, Happy Africa” that’s what my Mother used to say anyway. I think of all the countries we visited Africa was Mam’s favourite she talked constantly about it up until the day she died.

Dad was posted to Nyasaland with the Colonial Police Force in 1961. He went ahead to get organized and we followed about two months later. I was nearly 10 and remember how excited we all were and we had no idea of what to expect. The planes in those days were small and couldn’t fly long haul so we landed in Nairobi and were taken by bus to a hotel for the night. It was dark and as we drove along the road to the city Greg, my brother, kept thinking he could see Giraffes and Rhino at the side of the road but I think it was just the shadows of the city buildings and trees! The next day we flew on to Nyasaland and I remember the wheels on the plane wouldn’t come down and we had to circle and dump fuel for ages, but then they did come down and all was good. Dad was there to meet us and was visually upset having watched all the drama from the ground.

Dad was an Inspector in charge of traffic and he had four wonderful African Police Officers working for him. They all, including Dad, looked so smart in their Khaki Uniforms and these officers just idolized him and he also had a lot of respect for them for they were great workers.

Anyway, we went straight to our new house which was fantastic. Very big and open and on a huge plot of land with loads of trees and bushes and this fantastic grass hut it typified everything I had seen and imagined how Africa would be. Dad had already employed three local men, a cook, a houseboy and a gardener. Mam didn’t want a bar of having servants but Dad explained that it was the done thing there and we would be helping them by giving them work, so Mam was happy then. The three men were lined up waiting to greet us there were Hadgie and Kambani but I can’t remember the gardener’s name. The garden boy didn’t last long because he was lazy and I think he stole from us, so Dad had to let him go.

As mentioned the garden was huge and full of corn, vegetables, banana and mango trees and down past the corn there was a path leading to some stone huts and that was the houseboys quarters. Greg and I spent many a happy time down there sitting around their campfire singing and listening to Hadgie play the guitar, they were magic times. Hadgie and Kambani had a couple of children a bit younger than us so we were thrilled to have someone to play with. The houseboys and their families all became part of our family and I remember our first Christmas in Africa was magic. Mam invited Hadgie, Kambani and all their families up to the house for food, drinks and presents. Of course being African they could all dance and play instruments and they brought drums and guitars and we were all out in the garden dancing and singing - it was fantastic and a Christmas I have never forgotten.

At night we slept under mosquito nets and the windows had square bars on them for protection. One night Dad woke up and saw a long pole with Mam’s handbag on the end of it disappearing through the window. He jumped out of bed and gave chase down the road in his underwear. Dad was quite big in those days and must have looked quite frightening to the couple of Africans walking down the road, they were charcoal burners and on their way down to the river to burn charcoal to sell, they had all their goods and chattels on their heads and when they saw Dad running towards them in his vest and underpants they dropped everything and ran screaming into the night. Dad never did catch up to the thief but he was pretty sure it was the garden boy. That’s probably why he got the flick.

Hadgie was next to go for being a naughty boy. He was always tending to the vegetable garden and even bragged and showed Dad his spectacular tomato plants and Dad duly praised him for his good work. Then one day the police came to arrest Hadgie for growing Indian hemp in our tomato patch. Dad was so embarrassed being an Inspector in the Police force and oblivious to

these strange plants! So that left good old Kambani, he took over running the whole house, he got a pay rise and remained a loyal servant and very good friend until we left.

One day Mam and Dad arrived home with a baby Baboon. Mam had always said we wouldn't be getting a pet in Africa because we would get too attached and wouldn't be able to leave it when it was time to go back to Wales. However - this was different!!! Mam had come across an African in the street selling this baby baboon, it was only about a week old and he had shot the mother so he could sell the baby. She was so upset by it so she bought it and brought it home. We named him Chippy and from then on he took over our lives completely. I remember Dad's time was consumed with containing Chippy to the confines of the garden he managed to escape from numerous compounds Dad had constructed. The last resort was for him to be chained up. Other monkeys we had seen in captivity wore a collar around their hips and that seemed quite comfortable and the norm for them so Dad set up a really long chain and attached it to one of the big trees in the garden that seemed to work well. Chippy got used to it and one of his pleasures was to climb the tree and wrap the chain around one of the branches and he would just hang there swinging away having a great old time, however one day the chain broke and down he came and broke his leg. So then there was a visit to the vets and he came home with his leg in plaster but he still managed to get around and cause chaos.

His tree was alongside the path that led to Kambani's house and Chippy would hide and ambush Kambani on his way home at night, he never hurt him but would pounce on him, rip the shirt off his back and Mam was forever buying replacement shirts. Chippy really was very hard work but we all had such a laugh with him that everyone persevered. In fact we all got so attached to him that when it came time to go back to Wales we couldn't bear to leave him plus the fact that he would never have survived if we had let him go in the wild so he came back to Wales with us, and that's another story for later.

Doctor Hastings Kamuzu Banda was the President of Nyasaland. He was African and always travelled in a motorcade. He would sit in the back of his limousine with a fly whisk and if you happened to be on the road when he came along behind, you had to pull over and let him pass. In 1964 Nyasaland became independent from Britain and was then renamed Malawi. I remember going to the Independence Day ceremony and Dad was on duty there. There was a lot going on at that day and I recall standing with Mam in the crowd watching an African with a giant snake around his neck, he then asked for volunteers to come and hold the snake. To Mam's horror Greg stepped up from the crowd and had the snake put around his neck. Afterwards Dr Banda shook Greg's hand to congratulate him and Mam was thrilled with that.

Our holidays and occasional weekends were spent camping at Lake Nyasa. It was a brilliant spot about three hours drive from home. Dad bought a Thames Van. He fitted it out with four beds and off we would go. Of course we would take Kambani and so we still had someone to look after us - how spoilt were we? Lake Nyasa was a brilliant spot we were able to set up our campsite right on the sandy shore. Kambani would get a fire going and do all the cooking. Baboons would be roaming free, they were harmless but you had to watch they didn't come in and steal all our food. And of course there were crocodiles in the lake so we had to watch out for them also, many dangers I suppose but we would swim anyway. We still had to take our mosquito nets because there were thousands of the things there, they really drove me and Dad nuts and they seemed to target us two.

And so our Happy Days in Africa came to a close. After two years it was time to go back to Wales. Now came the dilemma of what to do with Chippy. As mentioned we couldn't let him go into the wild because he was too tame and wouldn't have survived so there was only one thing for it and that was to take him back to Wales!

There was a lot of preparation for this epic journey. The plan was to drive down to Cape Town to catch our liner (The Transvaal Castle) which would take us to Southampton. Dad had booked our passages which included a place on board for Chippy. Surprisingly there was no

quarantine for a baboon, we could never understand that but we were all happy that we would all be able to travel together. So Dad set about building a cage to put on the roof racks of our car for the drive to Cape Town. On the day of our departure Kambani was very upset and he even cried. Dad presented him with a gold watch to remember us by and we were all very sad to leave him. And so the journey began.



*With Chippy on the roof rack it's Kambani, Greg, Mam, me and Dad ready to leave Blantyre.
On the right it's Mam and Greg with Chippy by the river at Lilongwe .*

It started off OK with Chippy up on the roof rack and Greg and I would hand bananas and mangos up to him as we drove along. However there was a problem when we got to our first overnight stop. The Hotel wouldn't allow Chippy to stay. Mam and Dad were very annoyed and upset and I remember we drove to the Lilongwe River nearby to decide what to do. Clearly we couldn't continue as planned so Mam and Dad found a place in town that would look after Chippy until we arrived in the UK then they would send him on by plane. This I suspect must have cost a lot of money but that's how Mam was with animals, she really didn't want to leave him behind so that's what we did, reluctantly leaving Chippy for the time being.

We continued on to Cape Town and on arrival in the magnificent harbour town saw our beautiful ship that would take us home. We were sad to leave Africa but at the same time we were excited to be going home to see our family again.

And so after a wonderful two and a half weeks at sea we arrived in a cold, bleak Southampton, but we were happy as another adventure was about to begin.

Footnote:

Chippy did arrive safe and sound about three weeks after we arrived back in Wales. He was the talk of the Valleys and the Local Newspaper came and did a story on him. Obviously it was impossible to keep him at home and so we gave him to the Barry Zoo. He was their star attraction, we visited him every week and he always recognized us which was comforting for my Mother. He remained at the Zoo until he died of old age about 20 years later.

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