

# *The Flame Lily and the Rose*

*Raymond Foster*

## *1 Embroilment*

Rosalia was awakened early in the morning by a loud, raucous cawing near her ear, and opened her eyes to see an enormous raven, its great pickaxe of a beak agape, perched on a rock not three feet from her face. Its glossy black plumage bore a neat white collar-marking giving the bird the appearance of a parson; but Rosalia had the distinct impression that it had been just about to take a most irreligious peck at her eyes. She sat up in alarm, waving her arms, and the great bird flew away, cawing loudly.

It was already well past dawn, and the sun was just about to rise over the plains to the east. The highest peaks of the mountains behind her were already touched with a rosy glow and, as she watched, the scarlet rim of the sun began to show through the low-lying mist in the distance. The sun rose visibly, compressed and distorted at first, seen through the stratified vapours of an African morning. Then clear of the horizon, it expanded, tangerine-red and immense, silhouetting the distant trees and koppies.

She shivered. The night had been very cool at this height; the air was clammy, and she was feeling rather chilled. Stiffly, she leaned spreadeagled against a smoothly sloping rock, allowing the steadily strengthening rays of the sun to warm her slowly, basking like a lizard. How much would she give now, she thought, for a nice cup of tea. She might even settle for coffee. What if she really was stuck here for ever. Was it really the end?

For a moment she wished she were back in her comfortable little flat above the flower shop. Memories of all that had happened since those days only made her homesickness the more insistent. She closed her eyes again and imagined herself back there, in the old days, reliving the chain of events that had ended up on this remote African mountain top.



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Rosalia Green's flower shop was usually a mass of bloom, and that day was no exception. A substantial display of roses, just opening from the bud, formed the centrepiece; on the side shelves a tamed jungle background was provided by rows of foliage houseplants, their tropical effect accentuated by a boxed display of corsage orchids for the extravagantly opulent. For the less affluent, apart from the ubiquitous chrysanthemums, were irises, and barely opening spikes of gladioli in discreet shades of apricot, yellow, and woodpecker green.

Rosalia herself was working on her accounts in the back room, and finding it a depressing job. Her two assistants were in the shop, but, sadly, customers were lacking. There was nothing else the girls could usefully be doing, and as soon as any kind of rush started, three people were really needed to cope. But common sense, and the chill reality of the figures Rosalia was working on, told her that one of the girls at least would have to leave before too long.

The sound of Petula Parry's silly giggle came to her ears, and she winced with annoyance. How that girl's giggle aggravated her! Especially when she was worrying over the accounts. Petula was not the most stable type of employee. anyway. She was a flighty girl who seemed unlikely to stay long, even in the best of jobs.

Felicity Gray, her other assistant, was exactly the opposite – although, as Rosalia had to admit, the two girls seemed to get along together all right without quarrelling. Felicity was a studious, serious-minded person who knew the trade, and always seemed to know instinctively what the customers really wanted.

Just then the harsh sound of a motorbike engine, revving furiously just outside the front entrance, made her throw down her pen in annoyance, and her anger boiled over when she heard Petula's voice, laughing.

"That's her stupid boyfriend again," she muttered. "Well, that's *all* I need!"

She peered into the shop. Petula had gone outside onto the pavement where her boyfriend – a swaggering youth – was astride his motorbike by the kerb. He got off his bike and the two started chatting outside the door, ignoring the fact that the street was thronged with Saturday shoppers, and they were causing an obstruction. To make matters worse one or two potential customers were trying to come into the shop and finding it difficult. Really, it was too bad.

She walked over to the door and called the girl in. She simply could not afford to risk passing customers up in this manner. Petula came back sulkily and began to serve offhandedly, as though offended at being obliged to leave her private conversation, and it was all Rosalia could do to refrain from shouting at her, in front of everybody. Petula had her uses, of course. Younger customers in particular often preferred to be served by somebody like her – but, unfortunately, very few people in that category tended to buy flowers.

To Rosalia's intense annoyance, Petula's boyfriend came into the shop too, and was lounging over the counter, his shoulder brushing against a vaseful of very expensive strelitzias. He was an arrogantly handsome youth – a fact that did nothing to

assuage her temper. She reached out quickly to save the flowers from being crushed.

"Oh, do be careful," she said. "Do you want to buy anything?"

The youth picked up his crash helmet from the counter and looked at her coolly. "Oh, sorry, madam. No thank you, madam," he said, the sarcasm heavy in his voice.

Petula looked at her too, defiantly, a faint smile on her lips as she chewed her wad of gum.

Rosalia's patience finally snapped. "I wish you'd get out of here," she shouted. "And take your boyfriend with you!"

She had issued a challenge, and Petula accepted it. She took off her overall coat and threw it on the floor, rudely. "Don't worry, I'm going," she said with contempt in her voice. "I'm just about fed up with your tantrums anyway. You know what you can do with your job, Miss flipping Green! Come on, Percy." And the two of them went out, laughing together as though they had scored a victory, leaving Rosalia fuming.

"Excuse me, Miss Green..."

It was Felicity's voice, and Rosalia turned round, still white with rage, ready to snap at Felicity too. But then she was blushing in confusion as she realised that they were not alone in the shop. The girl had been trying to serve a customer while the very undignified quarrel was going on in the background.

"This gentleman wants to see you..."

He was a tall man, little more than her own age, with strikingly aristocratic features. There was something vaguely Mediterranean about the arch of his dark eyebrows and his expensively styled wavy dark brown hair. The newcomer smiled. "It seems Miss Green is a little preoccupied at the moment," he said, turning back to Felicity. "Does your employer usually lay on exciting incidents like that to keep her customers amused?"

Rosalia's lapse had been inexcusable, but now she felt annoyed at him for daring to intrude whilst her public face had been momentarily mislaid, though it was scarcely his fault. But she knew she was in the wrong, so she smiled weakly.

He spoke now to Felicity. "I would like a rosebud buttonhole, if you please, while I'm waiting."

Felicity selected one of the blooms, holding it out for his approval. He nodded, and she prepared the buttonhole deftly, sealing the stem into foil with a piece of maidenhair fern before slipping it expertly into place on his lapel. The yellow of the newly opened bud went perfectly with his expensive charcoal grey suit, and matched his shirt – the palest lilac, a colour which on most men might have seemed slightly effeminate, but on that broad chest merely stressed his masculinity.

The man extracted a business card from his wallet and held it out. "Please take

my card, Miss Green," he said. "I had intended to discuss business with you, but plainly this is not the best of times. I shall be in touch later."

Rosalia was about to make some protest when his eyes caught hers, and held them with a look so disconcerting that she took the card meekly, and said nothing.

He paid for his buttonhole, glanced at Felicity with a smile and murmured "Thank you, my dear." Then he turned on his heel and strode out.

Hiding her confusion, Rosalia retreated to the office-storeroom, glad for once that the shop was empty of customers. Out of Felicity's sight she studied the business card, then gasped. "Paul Latrille," she murmured. His was one of the best-known names in the flower business, both among growers and retailers. Of course! She remembered him now: that noble profile had seemed vaguely familiar. He was the owner of an extensive chain of floristry shops, renowned for its links with growers abroad.

Paul Latrille's visit had made her feel unaccountably restless, and after locking up the shop that evening she toyed with the idea of going out to seek companionship, and perhaps have a drink. She felt as though she deserved some sort of consolation prize following the upsets of the day. She took off her overall coat and kicked off her shoes, then grabbed something to eat without bothering to lay the table, and sat down, still trying to decide what to do.

Idly, she flicked through the pages of the trade magazine that had arrived with that morning's post. In the centrespread was an illustrated feature on the Latrille flower empire – and there was a photograph of Paul Latrille himself, probably the most eligible bachelor in horticulture and floristry, staring out at her accusingly, as though about to make some sarcastic remark.

Rosalia threw the journal down in exasperation, all her tenseness returning. He had said he would be in touch, and she did not doubt that he would. The man seemed to possess a magnetic personality that could not be ignored. She picked the magazine up again and could not resist looking at his photograph, over and over, annoyed with herself for doing so, and she spent the rest of the evening on edge, half expecting him to telephone. She wished now that he had told her what he wanted straight away, rather than leave her in suspense like this. She went to bed late, feeling quite peeved.

Sunday morning saw Rosalia idly reading the paper and toying with the crossword. Her heart skipped a beat when the phone rang. She knew it would be him on the other end of the line.

"Good morning, Miss Green."

Despite her relief, Paul Latrille's smooth voice in her ear sounded quite irritatingly urbane.

"Mr Latrille?"

"Now, I shan't beat about the bush, Miss Green. I don't want to spoil your day by talking shop – but I'm a busy man myself, and I dare say we both have to fit these things

in as best we can ... Would you care to have dinner with me tonight?"

Rosalia held the receiver at arm's length for a moment, deciding what to say. She did not much care for the implication that her life may not be as busy as his – but at least he was about to end the suspense. It must be something pretty important, she reasoned, otherwise why not come out with it there and then, over the phone. Okay, so she could be urbane too. She was still in dressing gown and slippers, and her hair was a mess, but at least he could not see her. She made her voice sound brisk and confident as she replied.

"This evening? Let me see ..." She pretended to consult a non-existent diary. "Er ... yes, I think that will be all right."

"Good. Shall we say seven o'clock? I'll pick you up at your place. Until then, Miss Green!"

Rosalia ran a bath and lay back in the warm water, wondering what exactly the flower tycoon had in mind. Was it bad news, or good? Indeed, she could think of little else all day. She ate a frugal lunch, cleaned up the little flat, and then spent ages trying to decide what to wear – not that her wardrobe offered her as much choice as she would have liked.

In the end she chose her black suit with a cyclamen-pink blouse, reasoning that this would strike a practical balance. After all, she had no idea what sort of eating place he had in mind, the local bar-counter, or the Ritz.

At seven o'clock precisely, Paul Latrille arrived in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce. She noticed with some satisfaction that his dark suit complemented her ensemble admirably. His choice of venue was not the Ritz, but it was certainly one of the smartest hotels in town, with a magnificent cuisine.



Rosalia winced at the prices on the menu, thankful that she would not be paying; but before the meal was over she was seeing the world through a rosy veil, ever so slightly tipsy on perfect wine, expertly chosen. As for Latrille himself, the candlelit venue made him look quite breathtakingly handsome. He spoke little during the meal, limiting his conversation to general, polite topics. Rosalia began to wonder when he was going to get around to talking business.

"Yours is a very pleasant little shop, Miss Green," he said at last.

"Yes, it is. It's always suited me very well," she replied, relieved that he had broached the subject, but still impatient for him to get to the point. But he seemed determined to keep her on tenterhooks a while longer.

"And your assistant ... what's the girl's name? Not the one you were yelling at, of course. I mean the quiet one."

Rosalia blushed at the memory, fearing that she was being mocked, and she toyed with the idea of getting up and stalking out – but of course she did not. She merely said, meekly: "Yes, Felicity. She's a very efficient girl, and she has a pleasant personality, too."

"Well, I think Felicity deserves to be manager, don't you?"

There seemed to be no answer to that remark; what on earth did he have in mind? Surely he would not attempt to lure her assistant away with the offer of increased wages. or something of that sort? The fact that he seemed to read her thoughts only increased her misgivings.

"My dear Miss Green," he said. "I know exactly what you're thinking! Believe me, I wouldn't dream of pirating your staff. Besides, I have a highly trained and perfectly adequate workforce of my own. Why, you can have some of mine, if you like!" His aristocratic features creased in a smile.

"You're teasing me, Mr Latrille! But, seriously – just what do you have in mind?"

The waiter came over just then with the coffee, and gave Latrille an excuse not to answer.. And when he did return to the subject, it was only to tease her again.

"Six days of the week shalt thou labour, Miss Green! Sunday evening is not really the best time for talking business, is it? Which is your quietest day of the week, may I ask?"

"Well ... tomorrow, I suppose."

"Then I shall call in at the shop tomorrow afternoon – about four?"

It seemed his intention was to keep her in suspense for as long as possible. At the back of her mind lurked the suspicion that he was softening her up for something ... some bombshell; she still half expected the worst. But the excellent food and wine had

played their part. Let tomorrow look after itself!"

At the door of her flat Paul Latrille bade her goodnight formally, with old-fashioned courtesy, his deep blue eyes twinkling in the hallway light as she opened the door. Rosalia had the feeling once again that he was stringing her along, teasing her. But she had enjoyed the evening, despite her misgivings.

"Until tomorrow afternoon, then?"

She closed the door and went upstairs alone, her head buzzing a little in the sudden stillness of her own company.

The next morning, to Rosalia's annoyance, she woke with a slight hangover. It seemed a gloomy start to the new week. She rummaged through her bathroom cabinet for a remedy, and then stood in a cold shower, gasping as she gradually returned to life. Then feeling reasonably human once more, she went downstairs and opened the shop before Felicity arrived.

As she had predicted, this Monday morning was certainly not going to break any records for sales turnover. The morning's mail too brought little to lift her spirits: a vicious electricity bill; a nagging letter from her bank manager on the subject of her overdraft. She really did have problems, there was no doubt about it.

By the afternoon Rosalia was starting to feel like her own mistress again, and as four o'clock approached she busied herself in the back room, though there was really nothing to do there. As she expected, Latrille arrived dead on time, and was promptly ushered in by Felicity.

"Good of you to come, Mr Latrille," she murmured.

"So nice to see you again, Miss Green," he said. "I hope you're not too busy to fit me in today?"

Now he was being sarcastic, she thought. Customers were non-existent; even the street outside was deserted.

"Of course not," she assured him, straight-faced. "Won't you come upstairs to the flat?"

As they sipped tea from her best china tea service, Paul Latrille finally got down to business. "Miss Green," he said, "I know you will agree with me that these are hard times, financially speaking."

She nodded. "Yes - everyone knows they are. But I'm doing quite nicely, thank you."

"You may be managing all right for the present," he said. "But I have my ear to the ground - and I dare say that little altercation I overheard you having with your ex-assistant came at an opportune time for you, didn't it? Am I right?"

She could hardly deny it; but she found his intuitive perception of her affairs somewhat perturbing.

"You must have guessed exactly what it is I'm leading up to. In my position, you would probably do the same. The fact is, we need a middle-range outlet in this area. We need you, Miss Green – and I think you need us."

Rosalia waited for him to come to the point.

"You already have a fair idea of what your business is worth to you, in terms of cash. I know exactly what you're worth to me."

Rosalia said nothing, but looked at Latrille expectantly, braced for the disappointment she was sure must come. He watched her reactions closely as he named a figure, and as it sank in she found difficulty in keeping her face expressionless. The sum he mentioned so confidently was quite staggering: at least twice the amount she had thought she might get for it on the open market. She repeated the figure flatly, trying to keep surprise out of her voice. His deep blue eyes caught hers and seemed to twinkle.

"You don't sound very impressed. Are you disappointed? Well, I doubt if you could do better elsewhere – but you can always try, of course. Personally, I think it's a fair offer. It includes the flat, of course – and the fact that it has a flat attached makes it particularly attractive to us." He looked at her with an expression she could only describe as sly. "And as I said, your girl Felicity would make an ideal manager to live over the shop."

Rosalia bit her lip in indecision. "Your offer is generous, Mr Latrille," she said at last. "More than generous. No ... it's not the amount of money that makes me hesitate. The truth is, I've become very attached to this little business – and after all, it is my only livelihood."

"Of course it is. my dear Miss Green. I appreciate that! But your attachment, I think, is an emotional one, isn't it? Surely, you are destined for higher things!" He put his cup down. "At all events, there you have my offer," he said. "But I can't keep it open indefinitely, you will appreciate that, of course. Nothing stands still for long. I shall have to impose a deadline: the offer stays open until the end of the month."

Her pride told her to turn his offer down flat; her common sense told her to leap at the chance. Her little business was perilously close to the rocks – through no fault of her own. If it did nothing else, Latrille's offer would give her at least a fighting chance of acquiring a better business in a more promising area. Yes, it really was the lifeline she needed, and she knew it. As she pondered the offer she had the uncomfortable feeling that the man sitting opposite her was somehow reading her thoughts.

His blue eyes creased into a quizzical smile. "Well?"

Rosalia pulled herself together. "Very well, Mr Latrille," she said. "I shall certainly be considering your offer, and I should be able to let you know my decision well within your deadline."



He got up to go, and Rosalia led him downstairs through the office. In the shop he turned to her and took her hand courteously. There was a strong gentleness in his grasp that she had not expected. She had not been quite so close to him before – not even on their dinner date. He was an extremely handsome man.

Latrille's chauffeur was in the shop, obviously making friends with Felicity. He was a pleasant-looking young chap, with a very fair complexion. Rosalia thought that he and Felicity would be well matched. He put his peaked cap back on and saluted Rosalia smartly as they went out.

It was already time to shut up shop. Upstairs again, she poured herself a drink and relaxed for an hour before preparing a meal for herself. She would certainly agree to Latrille's offer, there was no doubt about that. But she would like to do it on her own terms, in her own time, in her own way.

That night Rosalia was wakened soon after she dropped off, by the frantic clamour of a fire-engine dashing through the night. Then, as she lay awake, she became aware of an orange glow shining through the top of the curtain. More out of curiosity than alarm she got out of bed and drew the curtain aside. The fire looked serious; between neighbouring roofs and chimney pots she could make out the trouble spot, perhaps three or four blocks away.

Early the following morning she was rudely awakened again, this time by the phone ringing. She threw back the duvet and glanced at her watch – six o'clock. Who on earth would be ringing her at this hour?

"Miss Green ... oh, Miss Green ... it's me, Felicity. I'm sorry Miss Green, but I won't be able to come in today. Mother's in an awful state – we're all at sixes and sevens. We've moved in with a neighbour for the time being ... I really don't know what we shall do ... I don't know when ..."

Rosalia tried to piece together Felicity's garbled message. In her mind's eye she recalled Felicity's home – a semi-detached bungalow which she shared with her mother. Sure enough, that would be its exact location – about four blocks away down the side-road.

"It's not burnt to the ground, Miss Green ... but it might just as well be." Felicity's voice sounded despairing in her ear. "Everything's charred and ruined. The firemen are still there, damping it down. I don't know about the insurance ... I don't really know anything just now."

Rosalia had never known her so talkative. "But are you all right personally? And your mother – I hope nobody was hurt in the fire?"

No, apparently they were safe. Well, that was a blessing anyway.

"If there's anything you need straight away, Felicity dear ... anything I can do to help ... anything at all ..."

An offer of help over the telephone is often a meaningless gesture – mere words. But Rosalia meant it on this occasion. Somehow, it was through Felicity's misfortune that the obscure pattern of her own life was taking shape and form.

"Look," she said. "I expect you'll have a lot to do. Give me the number of the place you're staying at; I'll ring you back later on. Don't worry ... just look after your mother." Rosalia noted the number and put the phone down.

Bathed and breakfasted, Rosalia tackled the day's routine light-heartedly. More than one customer was surprised to find her gaily humming to herself; she was usually quite a serious person at work.

That evening she rang Paul Latrille, her confidence overflowing. A woman's voice answered, and Rosalia found herself wondering what she might be disturbing in the Latrille household. Who knows what a man of his type might get up to in the evening! All the same, some part of her wished it had not been a woman on the other end of the line.

"... And who shall I tell him is calling?"

"Rosalia Green".

"Oh, really!" Rosalia thought she could detect a somewhat patronising tone in the speaker's voice. "I'll just fetch him."

Rosalia waited patiently, her mind set coldly now on the business in hand. She could hear the faint murmur of conversation in the background, then Paul Latrille spoke in her ear.

"Hello, Miss Green. I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"I shall come straight to the point, Mr Latrille," she said. "You were kind enough to make me an offer for my business, and now I have a proposition of my own to make..."

"I am all ears."

"I shall want my assistant, Felicity Gray, installed as manager on your payroll, as from next week," she said. "And I shall also want a substantial proportion of the selling price paid immediately as a deposit – say a third of the total. I will accept your offer for the business and flat, lock, stock and barrel, subject to these conditions."

"You certainly drive a hard bargain, Miss Green. But I agree to your conditions." That settled, his voice became more languid. "Look, we shall be having a few drinks here at my place tomorrow evening – just the directors and one or two friends. I should like you to come, if possible, and we can fill in the details then. My accountant will be here too, and he can give you a cheque for the deposit. Is that okay? Good, I'll have my chauffeur pick you up – about seven?"

This suited Rosalia very nicely, and she agreed. The whole affair was becoming rather intriguing; Rosalia had taken the plunge.

The following evening Rosalia shut up shop early and got herself ready in good time. The doorbell rang at seven o'clock precisely, as though the chauffeur had taken a couple of turns round the block, she thought, while he waited for the exact time.

"Good evening madam." The young man saluted smartly, escorted her across to the Rolls and held open the door as she climbed in.

The Latrille residence was right on the edge of town, almost completely secluded down its own silent, leafy lane, surrounded on all sides by wooded common. Rosalia peered out expectantly as the car swung through ornate gates of wrought iron, tyres scrunching on gravel. There were perhaps half a dozen cars already drawn up near the front door – a porticoed entrance surmounted by a spacious balcony.



Rosalia alighted, walked up the steps and rang the bell. It was answered immediately by a discreet man in a dark suit. He enquired her name as he led her indoors, across a parqueted floor, along a hallway with antique furnishings and panelled walls, and finally through the double doors of a drawing room, where he announced her name loudly. Several people were in the room, and Rosalia spotted Paul Latrille immediately. Their eyes met, in fact, before she had even crossed the threshold, and he came striding across the floor to greet her. She had been announced as 'Miss Rosalia Green', and this is how Latrille greeted her, bantering but not unkindly.

"My dear Miss Rosalia Green," he said. "I'm so glad you could make it. What would you like to drink?"

Rosalia took a glass of chilled white wine, and found herself being introduced to some of the guests. Of course, it was only natural that she should have spotted Paul Latrille as soon as she entered, as he was the only person she already knew. Almost simultaneously, however, she had caught the eye of another person – the woman, Rosalia guessed, whose voice she had heard over the phone.

The woman was startlingly striking, with dark creamy skin and velvety dark eyes which belied the blonderness of her hair – hair that was set in tightly coiled Rastafarian-style dreadlocks. Rosalia thought her somewhat vulgar, with her flowing gown, virginal white above the waist, merging into a pattern of gaudy tropical flowers in purple and green, on the lower half.

Paul Latrille introduced her: "This is my personal assistant, Cressida Silk," he said. "Cressida, I'd like you to meet Rosalia Green."

"How marvellous to meet you, darling," she said. "It's so clever of you to find the time. There must be so much to do, running a shop." She looked Rosalia over, as though she were some remnant at a charity sale.

Rosalia kept her cool, and simply said: "How do you do."

Latrille quickly steered her away from Cressida to meet his accountant, who gave her an envelope containing a cheque for the advance payment.

There seems to be a certain degree of urgency over this transaction, Miss Green," he said. "So, if I could come and see you tomorrow afternoon to discuss the details, go over the books, and so forth ..."

Rosalia agreed. "Tomorrow is my early closing day," she said. "It will suit me very well. Any time after two?"

The accountant nodded, then looked at Latrille questioningly. "Has the matter of salary been settled?" he asked, glancing round the room discreetly.

Rosalia waited politely, assuming he was referring to Felicity as the new shop manager.

"We were just about to discuss that," said Latrille, and took Rosalia by the arm, steering her into a quiet corner.

"She's a very efficient girl ..." Rosalia began.

Latrille interrupted her. "Don't worry about Felicity," he said. "She will be getting the usual manager's salary. The accountant was talking about you!"

Rosalia was taken aback. The man was taking a little too much for granted if he thought he could line her up for a job and assume she would take it without question.

Latrille noticed her frown, and patted her arm. "Now please don't be offended," he went on. "We had a director's meeting this afternoon, and I put your name forward as

a new member of the board. You were voted in unanimously. So it now remains for me to ask you formally: Miss Green, will you accept a directorship with my firm? I need your expertise. You have demonstrated in no uncertain terms that you can handle a business transaction, and if you don't mind my saying so, I need a woman with aplomb – your ability to communicate with all types of people without offending them, that's worth a lot to me, you know."

It had not escaped Rosalia's attention that Cressida Silk had been watching them keenly, and she sauntered across now, a tall glass in her hand. The exotic creature came and stood very close to Paul Latrille. "Please don't spend too much time in quiet corners with Miss Rosalia Green," she said sweetly. "Or you might just possibly make me a little jealous, Paul darling!"

Latrille laughed lightly. It was quite amazing, Rosalia thought, how some men seemed to fall for the most blatantly scheming females. Her initial instinct had been to turn down Latrille's offer of a directorship. But now, the Silk woman's action had jolted her into battle. She would take up the challenge and accept the directorship, no matter what salary was on offer.

"It's purely a business matter, Cressida my love," he responded. "Rosalia was just about to accept her directorship, and I don't want her dissuaded."

Rosalia for her part turned to Cressida and said, casually: "If you will excuse us for a moment, Miss Silk ..."

Cressida looked decidedly vexed as she smiled and moved away. Rosalia did not mind annoying her, but she was vaguely puzzled. Could it be that Paul Latrille was trying to make his amorous assistant jealous?"

As Cressida glided away across the room, Latrille gave Rosalia details of the salary and conditions on offer. The sum that he mentioned was far in excess of any pre-tax profit Rosalia could hope to make in the best of years. Cressida or no Cressida, she would be really foolish to turn the chance down.

Latrille's deep blue eyes searched hers, smiling. "I do hope you'll make a few allowances for Cressida," he said. "She is really a creature of the sunshine, you know. She finds the English climate something of a strain on her good nature."

Rosalia watched as Cressida joined a group of lounge-suited sales executives. They had been talking business in hushed tones, but broke off as she approached, their faces lighting up as each vied for her attention.

Rosalia looked back at Paul Latrille, who was still awaiting her decision. "Very well, Mr Latrille. I will accept the post, and thank you for your confidence in me."

They shook hands on it, and he turned briefly to the side-table to replenish their glasses. When he returned and handed her the glass, he continued to hold it, encasing her fingers, just a little longer than was necessary, smiling down at her. Rosalia's heart skipped a beat, despite her confident manner. Some aspects of Paul Latrille she found annoying. but the man was almost irresistibly magnetic.

He released her hand. "Well, here's to your new appointment," he said, raising his glass. "Oh, by the way, there's no reason why you shouldn't spend as much time as seems necessary at your old shop, making sure Felicity can cope. After all, that's what you're paid for," he added. "And of course, you will be looking for somewhere new to live. Those two things will keep you fully occupied for a week or two."

He touched her arm and steered her back towards the centre of the room. "Now, to put you in the picture," he said, his voice cool and brisk. "I shall be flying to Zambezia next month. It used to be a Portuguese colony, as you know. Since their independence the native growers have been trying to organise local co-operatives, producing crops for export. Their plans include cut flowers for the European market, and that's where we come in. I have arranged to go out there and show them exactly what we want – and I'd like you to come with me."

People were starting to drift away in ones and twos now, calling their farewells, and Rosalia thought it time to make her own departure. Latrille did not try to tempt her to stay. He drew a mobile phone from his pocket and spoke into it briefly, then turned back to Rosalia.

"Andrew is bringing the car round for you now," he said, holding out his arm courteously. "I shall probably be in touch in a few days; if not, you have my number. By the way, don't forget to have your passport in order!"

The next morning Felicity walked into the shop as she opened the door, still talkative, still full of her woes.

"The bungalow is a complete write-off, and I don't think we could live there again, even when it's rebuilt," she said. "So now we're looking for another place to live ... it's very difficult. My mother's very upset. But I can come into work, part-time at least, until..."

Rosalia stopped her in mid flow. "Look no further, Felicity my dear," she said. "Your problems are solved." She explained the events of the last few days and passed on Latrille's offer which, at that moment, must have seemed to Felicity like the answer to a prayer. "So you see," she continued, you and your mother can move in here as soon as you like, and I shall move out. I'm looking for somewhere to live myself now, of course. I dare say I shall stay at an hotel for a while. How about furniture ... all yours has gone, I suppose?"

Felicity nodded mutely, too overcome for words.

"In that case you can use mine, for the time being at least, until we get it all sorted out." Rosalia pointed to the telephone. "Ring for a taxi, dear," she said. "Then go and get your mother. I don't suppose you have many clothes and things you need to bring?"

"Just about what we stand up in!"

"Then you must take an advance, or a loan, and buy whatever you need. We can

sort out the financial details later. You'll be getting more money to play with from now on, anyway. Do you have a bank account?"

"Oh no, Miss Green."

"Then you'd better get one. You'll be paid monthly by cheque from now on. We shall have to look around for a suitable assistant for you too."

Felicity was still looking bemused when the taxi arrived, and she went off to give her mother the news, and bring her back to look over their new flat.

Early afternoon saw Rosalia poring over the shop accounts with Latrille's accountant, while Felicity and her mother were settling in upstairs. Eventually he declared himself satisfied, and began packing his brief case.

"Oh, by the way, Miss Green," he said as he was about to leave. "I never found out if you and Mr Latrille were in agreement over the proposed director's salary?"

"Oh yes, thank you. We agreed the sum, as proposed."

Rosalia let the accountant out, then went upstairs to see how mother and daughter were getting on in their flat. She made sure they could operate the cooker and the central heating, then she packed an overnight bag, promised to call in the following day, went out, and booked into a nearby hotel.

Next morning she paid a thoughtful visit to two or three estate agents. She knew more or less what she was looking for, and soon found it: a charming little mews maisonette, set in its own secluded cobbled courtyard. She returned to the agent's office without delay, and set the purchase in motion. Then she returned to the shop to check on Felicity's progress, and was pleasantly surprised to find that the new manager had already acquired an assistant – an acquaintance, apparently – a very efficient, smart girl who was obviously picking up the trade fast.

A couple of weeks later she was able to move into her new home, and a few days after that, a Rolls Royce nosed its way uncertainly into her little courtyard and pulled up outside the door. Latrille got out and looked around with great interest as Rosalia opened the door.

"Absolutely charming," he exclaimed. He was quite effusive in his enthusiasm. "I'm really glad to see you settling in so well, Rosalia," he said as they sat down and sipped coffee together. "And now you have got yourself organised, I suppose you will be free to venture forth into the scheming world of high-powered floristry?"

"Ready and eager," she said.

"Good. We shall be flying out to Africa at the end of the week. Your ticket will be waiting for you. I shall give you a ring the day before we leave, to give you the final details. We can pick you up here on our way to the airport. Cressida will be there too, of course," he added. "You will be company for each other when I'm not around." Then, seeing her cynical look, he added: "Well, I do need a PA, you know, and between you

and me ..." he put his cup down and rose to his feet, "Cressida is a great diplomat. On our trips abroad local dignitaries can sometimes prove obstructive, and she is very good at persuading them to see things from our point of view."

As Rosalia saw him out, she felt that she was seeing things more from Latrille's point of view. As soon as he had gone, she went out to finalise her affairs and do a little shopping. She bought a couple of sensible lightweight safari-style suits, and, so as to be prepared for all exigencies, she chose a beautifully cool off-the-shoulder evening dress in deep purple.

With all the details finally arranged, the morning of their departure saw Rosalia up, breakfasted and fully packed before dawn, waiting impatiently for the car to come and pick her up. Eventually she saw the flash of headlights through the window and heard the expensive purr of the Rolls outside the door. Andrew the chauffeur bustled in to fetch her cases and stowed them on top of the already considerable stack of luggage.

Rosalia took her seat and in a minute they were away, out of the courtyard, and heading through thin traffic into the grey dawn.



## *2 Flamboyant*

As they sat sipping coffee, waiting for their flight to be called, the two women surreptitiously appraised each other's appearance. Obviously, they were both travelling light. On close inspection, Cressida was looking positively lurid, with a revealingly loose blouse sporting a leopard skin pattern, with scalloped neckline and sleeves. Rosalia thought it was like an elfin costume from some children's picture book, but without its innocence. It matched Cressida's eccentric hairstyle perfectly. Both women however were wearing casual jackets over their shoulders against the chill of the early morning. In this, the contrast between them was balanced, so in the event there was not that much difference between them.

Their flight was on time, and soon they were airborne, Paul Latrille occupying the central seat of three, Rosalia on one side and Cressida on the other.

"I must say, you both look quite remarkable," he commented as they unbuckled their seat belts, took off their coats and relaxed. "I feel like the original thorn between two roses."

Rosalia had no objection to being called a rose, but there was no way, she thought, that Cressida could be considered roselike. A tropical orchid, perhaps, or a flame lily. Yes, that was it – a flame lily.

Long flights are not particularly romantic, there is too much tedium for that. Before long they were over the Channel, then their plane touched down briefly at Paris. Up again and across the Swiss mountains, and soon they were circling Rome before landing to take on fuel for the plane and lunch for the passengers. Then it was Athens they could see below them, and then the Greek islands, sun-baked gold amid the peacock blue of the sea.

Next it was Africa that stretched beneath them: mile upon mile of lifeless and arid bush, and the setting of the sun saw their first touch-down in that continent, at Wadi Halfa on the Nile. It was quite dark when they took off again, droning south through the velvet night. Khartoum airport was the next stop, then the lakeside airport of Kampala, another long hop before breakfast at Lusaka, a brief touchdown at Harare, and luncheon in the air during the final stretch to their destination, Mankwala airport in the southern part of Zambezia.

Filing out of the plane and easing their cramped legs down the steps, Rosalia was taken by surprise when they were met on the tarmac by an official welcoming committee. She had not been aware they were to be VIPs in the official view of Zambezia. Even Latrille seemed slightly taken aback as they were whisked away in a cavalcade of enormous black bullet-proof limousines, complete with police motorcycle outriders, sirens blaring and lights flashing.

Their route took them through suburbs ablaze with flower colour, along streets lined with purple jacaranda and scarlet flamboyant trees, to the luxurious home of Manuel Chidagwa, the Minister for Agriculture. He greeted them formally. Chidagwa's wife, Adelia, a tall and handsome woman, welcomed the visitors and very considerably

showed them to their rooms straight away so that they could enjoy a few quiet minutes to themselves after the hustle and bustle of their journey.

Rosalias's room was spacious and airy, expensively though sparsely furnished, its large window overlooking a balcony, the outside walls covered with orange and crimson bougainvillea. Beyond, she could see the blue of the Indian Ocean, its surface riffled with white breakers rolling onto the beach.

As she leaned across the casement to take in the surroundings, Paul Latrille had evidently had the same idea in his adjacent room, for he was leaning out too. Their eyes met across the flowers, and they both laughed involuntarily, setting up a silly little flutter in Rosalia's heart. She felt the colour drain slightly from her cheeks as she withdrew her head. She would not like him to think she had designs on him.

After a welcome wash and smarten-up the three emerged from their rooms and met up again in the main lounge. When they were assembled Adelia Chidagwa led them into the adjoining dining room, where a table was laid with a light meal. This too was welcome after their flight.

"I hope you like Portuguese food," she said as she bade them sit down. "I suppose we ought to concentrate more on African food nowadays, to be properly patriotic – but I don't suppose you are so used to our dishes. The Portuguese culinary style is so much more international, isn't it?"

Rosalia was not too sure about that. The piri-piri prawns were so fiendishly hot they almost took the skin off her throat, and she was obliged to abate their fire with more rice and *pãozinhos* than she would otherwise have eaten; but the desert – a melting *gelado com morangos*, was cool and delicious.

"We've laid on a couple of vehicles for you to visit the market garden co-operatives, and meet the growers themselves," Chidagwa told them as they sat sipping coffee after the meal. But all the relevant areas are quite a long drive away to the north." He frowned thoughtfully. "It would be better if you were equipped with a helicopter. Pilots are the problem: they are worth their weight in gold right now. I'm afraid the government could never spare one from his military duties."

"Well now, I might be of some help there," said Latrille. "As it happens I do have a licence to fly helicopters."

"Well, that's fine," exclaimed the African official. "Just fine. I shall certainly put it to the president when he arrives this evening. Depending on his reaction then, we shall see what we can do."

Latrille looked at him in surprise. "Excuse me," he said. "You mean the president is coming here?"

"Didn't I mention it? Oh, I do apologise! We are holding a reception at this house tonight and yes, certainly the president is coming. He is very interested in meeting you." He beamed at his guests. "And I know he wants to make your stay here as smooth as possible."

Another surprise! Rosalia was glad she had brought that evening dress – it looked as though she would be needing it. The five of them strolled together into the garden, the late afternoon sun cooling now into evening, the air full of the heavenly scent of frangipani blossom. Rosalia noticed that Manuel Chidagwa could hardly keep his eyes off Cressida, and she would have to admit that those dark, silken smooth features and the animal charm of the woman seemed quite at home amid that African scene, luxuriant as it was. She noticed too that Adelia Chidagwa was keeping a very sharp eye on her husband.

As it grew dark, the visitors retired to their rooms to make themselves ready for the reception, and when they emerged, it was to the bustle of white-uniformed servants arranging a buffet table and drinks bar. Then the social elite of Zambezia started to arrive in ones and twos: mostly African, a few Portuguese, some Asian, several a comfortable blend of races. All of them people who had made that part of independent Africa their home, and were thriving on it.

Amongst the many beautifully flowing sari-style dresses, Rosalia's deep purple taffeta was striking. But it was Cressida, of course, who stood out from the other women like a flamingo amongst a flock of ducks. Crowned with those frizzy blonde braids – and where in Zambezia, Rosalia wondered – would she find a hair stylist who came up to her standards? – her conspicuous looks alone rendered her instantly noticeable in a crowded room.

Cressida was in the habit of dressing with the sole object, it seemed, of attracting attention. She had brought with her the *pièce de résistance* of evening creations. It rose in laminated scales, sheathed like the stem of some jungle orchid, with filigree tendrils springing from the hem and framing her bare back, the colour merging from the palest lime green below to a dazzling *mélange* of orange, scarlet and crimson where it encased her coffee-cream shoulders. She looked – and knew that she looked – an exotic orchid in a field of nondescript weeds. Even a flame lily would look pale by comparison.

Paul Latrille was well used to Cressida's excesses, and Rosalia noticed that he barely glanced in her direction; but he took the trouble to compliment Rosalia herself on her appearance.

"You look quite charming, Rosalia," he said as they stood sipping their drinks. "You do us credit." Rosalia looked up at him suspiciously, wondering if he was being sarcastic, but she came to the conclusion that he meant what he said.

A little later several army officers arrived, and then the president himself. All the guests clapped politely as the president entered the room, and the visitors from Britain looked across the floor with interest.

President Fernando Garcia Muchete certainly had charisma. He seemed to fill the room on his own – an enormous man, tall and heavily built, with fierce, hawk-like features. His uniform was ablaze with colour and pageantry, from the scarlet satin stripes of his trouser legs to his chest, crammed with medals and criss-crossed with sashes in purple and crimson; his epaulettes, collars and cuffs embellished with scarlet trimming and gold braid.



The three British visitors were presented and introduced. This giant peacock of a man, Rosalia mused, was a natural match for that bird of paradise that was Cressida Silk. Together, they suggested some garish floral display. And indeed, as the evening wore on and their glasses were replenished time and again, the two seemed to be paying more and more attention to one another. Whenever Rosalia noticed them together they always seemed to be standing a little too close, with Cressida gazing up into his fiercely handsome face. Perhaps, she mused, it was Cressida rather than the president who was really the hawk-like, predatory one.

Rosalia sipped her cocktails, making them last, but even so she was beginning to feel their effect; and so, she imagined, was everybody else in the room. She noticed Latrille animatedly discussing something with one of the government ministers. Nearby the president, with some of his aides and their host, Manuel Chidagwa, had formed a tight circle around Cressida. Rosalia herself had just been talking to Adelia Chidagwa, who was also keeping an eye on the little group. Something told her that Mr Chidagwa might well be in for a spell of nagging that night.

As Adelia drifted away to mingle with some of the other guests, Paul Latrille came over to Rosalia. "I'll bet he's forgotten about the helicopter," he murmured. "I'd better remind him to ask the president."

They crossed the room together and Paul tapped Chidagwa on the shoulder. The man broke away from the little group clustered around Cressida and turned to him.

"I just want to remind you about the helicopter," said Latrille.

Chidagwa had indeed forgotten about it, and as soon as the moment was opportune he put it to the president. Muchete acquiesced immediately. He seemed delighted to hear that Paul himself was qualified to fly helicopters.

"Like most independent African countries, we are desperately short of trained pilots," he said. "Especially in times of war. I know we are supposed to be at peace right now; but skirmishing is still going on, unfortunately, both here in the south and in the extreme north. Raids on government troops by insurgents are happening daily. But I'm glad to say that the areas you will be visiting are still pretty safe. In any case, I shall

provide you with an armed soldier to guard you against the possibility of attack."

Latrille doubted that it would be necessary to take an escort, but Muchete insisted, and turned immediately to arrange it with one of his officers. Then he turned back to Latrille. "So that's settled. There will be a man with the helicopter, waiting for you," he said.

The matter was closed, so they left it at that. The president returned to his chat with Cressida, leaving Paul and Rosalia together.

"Cressida seems to be getting on extremely well with the president," Rosalia remarked, rather wickedly. "She certainly knows how to charm a man!"

Latrille chuckled. "As I said before, Cressida is a great diplomat. We need the president on our side. But don't worry; she knows exactly how far to go."

It was late by the time all the guests had finally gone, the president lingering for a last word with Cressida. It seemed obvious to Rosalia that the two had eyes only for each other, diplomacy or not. Eventually there was no-one left in the room except two bleary-eyed servants waiting to clear up, and the three visitors and the Chidagwas were able to go to bed.

On her way from the bathroom Rosalia could hear Adelia Chidagwa's voice raised crossly, and her husband's surly reply, but they were speaking in an African tongue, and she could only guess at what was being said. She guessed that her prediction had been right: the unfortunate man was receiving a tongue-lashing for paying too much attention to Cressida – not that he could have enjoyed much success in competition with the president.

Rosalia slept like a log for what remained of the night, and she was able to lie in bed undisturbed until late the following morning, when a serving girl eventually brought her a welcome cup of coffee. She looked through the window as she sipped her coffee, savouring the scent of flowers and the distant swish of waves on the beach, aware of the exciting feeling that a new epoch was dawning in her life.

The cumulative effect of their long journey followed by the reception had left Rosalia only too glad to spend the day relaxing in the garden and on the beach. After breakfast the following day Chidagwa drove them out to a military airfield several miles from the capital. There they were introduced to the young man who was to be their guide and interpreter on the trip – a smartly white-suited, bespectacled African. They were joined too by the uniformed soldier – a corporal in a crack commando regiment – who was to be their escort.

Finally they were supplied with maps, a list of military airfields for refuelling, and a pack of emergency rations. They climbed aboard and strapped themselves in. Paul started the powerful engine, its great blades chomping rhythmically through the air; then, with a wave to the watching Chidagwa, they were up and away over the field.

The military buildings receded into the distance as they gained height, and the last outlying suburbs of Mankwala slowly passed out of sight as they headed north and

west. As she became more accustomed to the novel experience of riding in a helicopter, Rosalia cast a surreptitious glance at their new companions. The soldier, she thought, looked arrogant and ruthless. She could see he was already eying Cressida hungrily; she certainly wouldn't trust him. By contrast, the other young man looked not in the least ruthless or dangerous, and Rosalia studied his face with interest. She thought she could detect a hint of petulance in his youthful features, but his slightly sulky pout gave him a winsome appeal. As he caught her eye on him she smiled in what she hoped was a no-nonsense way, and he smiled back politely.

After several monotonous hours of thumping through the sky they reached their first port of call – a somewhat desolate bush village of thatched huts with mud walls, clustered around a well. The helicopter landed in a clearing, raising great clouds of dust which scattered children, dogs and chickens, and the occupants climbed down, feeling a little stiff in the joints.

The headman of the village welcomed them and, after some preliminary talk, invited them to eat at his house. The meal consisted of coarse maize meal porridge, with a decidedly high and somewhat gristly meat stew. Perhaps it was fortunate that they were all ravenously hungry by now, and so managed to eat enough to seem polite in the headman's eyes.

Cressida turned to the young interpreter. "Tell him the food was simply delicious," she said sweetly. Then she looked sideways at Paul and added: "Any more revolting meals like that, and I shall be hitching a lift on the first ox-cart back to Mankwala!"

"It's probably the best they have to offer," Rosalia said, reprovingly, hoping their hosts did not sense the heavy sarcasm in Cressida's voice.

"Well, they're welcome to it," Cressida retorted.

After the meal was finished, the headman led them along a track to the market crop fields. The local growers' co-operative had encouraged the farmers to plant fields of amaryllis, nerines and hippeastrums, the brightly coloured trumpet flowers standing proudly on their stout stems. The visitors passed on their advice and detailed requirements.

"Are those all the fields you have in the co-operative?" Paul asked.

The interpreter put the question and turned back to Latrille. "He says these are the most important. There is one more farm, several miles away in the hills, but it is of little consequence. The place is not very popular with the co-operative council, because it is sited in a quite different type of countryside. He says bulbs will not grow there."

"Well, we may as well do the job thoroughly, and fly out there," said Paul.

"But there is only one small family working that farm," the interpreter explained. "The headman says it is hardly worth a visit. In any case, they have very different ideas about suitable crops."

"Well, they obviously have new ideas," Paul said. "And that's what we need in

any enterprise!"

Dutifully, everybody climbed back aboard the helicopter and, following the headman's directions, set out across the fields and towards a line of green hills in the distance. Soon the headman pointed down into a green, wooded valley, and Paul brought the helicopter down beside a small cluster of thatched huts from which a few people were peering uncertainly.

The isolated family could scarcely be blamed for looking a little alarmed at the sight of a military helicopter landing on their farm. No doubt they thought that the army or even a band of rebels had decided to pay them a visit. The relief showed clearly on their faces when the local headman and the other civilians emerged, though they still cast apprehensive glances at the soldier accompanying them. Through the interpreter, Paul put their minds at rest, explained the reason for their visit, and asked if they might see what crops they had decided to grow for the market.

"This is a moist region, here in the hills," the interpreter translated. "They say there is no way they can grow dry-land bulbs up here. But when they heard there might be an export trade in flowers, they planted a crop of the most beautiful wild ones they could find."

The farmer led the way to a patch of cultivated land which had not been completely cleared, but was well shaded beneath tall, evenly spaced trees.

Rosalia was delighted when she glimpsed the crop. "Crimson flag lily," she exclaimed. "How charming!"

Paul was interested too, and he stooped to examine the opening blooms, grown from rhizomes propagated from the local wild flowers, and replanted here in their own half acre.

Cressida looked askance at the crimson flowers, then glanced over her shoulder at Rosalia disparagingly. "I don't like them much," she said. "I think it's a waste of time growing them! Anyway, they don't look robust enough to withstand the journey to the UK."

Rosalia was not standing for that. "Oh, I'm sure they are," she said. "Their petals are tough – and there's certain to be an excellent market for them back home."

"Well, I agree with the co-operative council. These small growers should stick to their main product, and not try to produce bits of this and that."

Rosalia was convinced that Cressida was out to annoy her, and thought it wise to let the matter rest at that. Apparently, Paul intended remaining neutral, and merely said: "I suppose we could try a sample consignment, and see how well they travel."

Having seen the crop and given their advice, everyone was invited into one of the huts to sit and drink coffee with the family. At least they could grow good coffee beans and these, if not enough for export, were enough to supply the villages and small towns nearby.



The farmer and his wife apologised for the lack of chairs, and the party sat down gingerly on the hard-beaten floor. Cressida did little to conceal her distaste. It was plain that poverty would not suit her one little bit.

As they sat drinking their coffee, the farmer's little daughter came in, looked at them shyly in turn, and evidently finding Rosalia's face the most sympathetic, presented her with a bunch of wild flowers, crimson flags together with arum lilies, freshly gathered from the valley marsh.

"Why, thank you," Rosalia said. "They're lovely."

And they really were lovely, she thought, as she studied them closely. It was not merely a case of being kind to a child. The arum lilies were a warm canary yellow, shading to translucent lime green, more delicately textured than most of the cultivated varieties. She turned to the interpreter where he sat near the door. "Ask them whether they might not be able to grow these on a commercial basis too," she said. Cressida looked daggers at her, but said nothing.



The sun was sinking now, slanting low through the trees on the hillside, and the party clambered back aboard the helicopter and waved goodbye to the farming family.

"Actually, we came in the right direction to arrive here," Latrille said as he started the engine. "These hills are on our course. But I suppose we'd better not make the headman walk all the way home – that might not be too popular with the co-operative! I reckon we'd better go back and stay at the village overnight."

They would all far rather have stayed there among the hills where it was pleasantly cool, but of course Paul was right. They could scarcely leave the headman stranded miles from home.

The helicopter roared into life, and before many minutes had passed they were landing again in the dusty clearing at the headman's village, and thinking about settling down for the night. The villagers very hospitably provided them with an evening meal, on a table this time, in their community hall – one of the few buildings thereabouts which boasted a tin roof.



As they sat that evening sipping tea, Cressida spoke suddenly. "You say we have to go back over that farm place tomorrow, Paul?"

"That's right."

"Well, I should like you to stop there again, if you don't mind."

"Why, my dear?"

"Well, I know you arranged with that farmer for a trial consignment of their crimson flag – though I must say I was not in favour of the idea – but we did rather leave them in the air over those arum lilies, didn't we, Rosalia darling?" She looked at Rosalia, wearing her sweetest smile.

Paul said quickly: "Oh, no, I'm sure that won't be necessary, Cressida. Besides, we can always take a few boxes of wild arums. Rosalia liked the look of them, even if you didn't."

Cressida insisted. "Sooner or later, someone is going to say 'no'," she said. "And we don't want those good people chasing around to no avail, do we? So let's stop there again and make sure they're not putting themselves to a lot of unnecessary trouble."

Rosalia felt exasperated, but said nothing. She was sure Cressida was simply trying to annoy her.

That night turned out to be one of the least comfortable Rosalia had ever experienced. She was not, in any case, a great enthusiast for the joys of camping. When this trip had been mooted, she had visualised a string of hotels; but she was not alone in this, of course. The others were having to rough it as well.

The next morning they were all up and about before it was properly light, and by the time the sun had climbed into sight they were aboard the helicopter and away, retracing yesterday's course as far as the distant line of hills. Then, as a consequence of Cressida's insistence, they landed once more in the green valley, near the farm buildings. The farmer was evidently in his fields, but the wife came out to meet them, looking worried.

Cressida spoke to the interpreter. "Tell her we agreed to take a few crimson flag, but not the arum lilies ..."

But the farmer's wife was already speaking to the interpreter in agitated tones, and it seemed probable that the message was never delivered.

The interpreter turned back to Cressida. "I'm sorry, missy," he said. "But she doesn't want to talk about flowers just now. She says their little girl went out by herself after we left yesterday, probably to look for more flowers, and she has not come home yet. She says, please, can you fly the helicopter to look for her child!"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," said Cressida. "She can't have gone far – she's only a

tiny child. We have no time to scour the countryside looking for lost children." She turned to Paul, who was just removing his flying helmet, still unaware of the crisis. "The farmer's not here," she said. "We can't get any sense out of his wife. so we might as well leave it at that. You were right after all, Paul darling. Come on – let's get this thing off the ground and be on our way."

Rosalia had placed a comforting arm around the distressed woman's shoulders, and Latrille looked at their faces in turn. Then he said: "What's happened here, Rosalia?"

Rosalia explained the situation, and Paul spoke now to the interpreter: "Can the mother say which way the child would be likely to go?"

"The mother thinks that if the child was looking for flowers, she would probably have stayed in the stream valleys. There are so many streams. The farmer is checking the main valley already."

Without wasting any more time they climbed aboard and took off. Cressida was decidedly sulky, and barely glanced out of the windows. The others sat with their faces pressed against the perspex, their eyes searching every inch beneath them. The soldier had plainly been bored most of the time, with nothing to do but ogle Cressida; but now he came to life, and showed some real interest in the situation.

It was impossible to be completely thorough, as there were so many trees in the valley bottoms. The hilltops, however, were open and rugged, and it would be comparatively easy to search them thoroughly. Paul glanced round at the two women, his hand indicating the wild scenery below. "If you ever get lost in the bush," he shouted over the engine's roar, "Make sure you climb to the top of a hill, where you can be seen."

But it seemed unlikely that the little girl would have climbed up one of those hills. The valley streams were the most likely places to look. Paul navigated the machine slowly along each one in turn, hovering over every patch of thicket like a hawk seeking its prey.

In one little valley the marsh was particularly bright with flowers, and everyone strained their eyes for signs of movement. It seemed the sort of place the child might have remembered and decided to visit again.

Suddenly, the soldier shouted something and pointed. They saw a hyena loping away, looking up at them hesitantly. They were close enough to see the blood smeared on its muzzle. Then several vultures flapped heavily off the ground where they had been feeding, and the searchers could see a dark shape of some kind, huddled there near a clump of brilliant red-hot poker flowers, half concealed by the long grass. Paul hovered low, but it was impossible to see exactly what it was.

With the hatch open, the machine held its position a few inches off the ground while the soldier jumped out, keeping his head down beneath the whirling blades. As the man ran across to investigate, Rosalia sat with her heart in her mouth. She could still see the hyena, hanging about at the edge of the marsh, waiting for them to go away.

A moment later the corporal splashed his way back and clambered through the hatchway, yelling something to the interpreter. The latter's teeth flashed in a grin as he translated: "It's a dead bush pig!"

Everyone breathed again, but the search of course had to continue. The next stream course to be followed was quite close to the farm, and the strip of marsh again was bright with flowers. A clump of crimson flag lilies caught Rosalia's eye and she stared intently.

The soldier was staring in that direction too, and now he pointed excitedly and shouted again, rising to his feet to tap Paul Latrille on the shoulder.

Paul veered the helicopter to swoop low over the valley, and as they neared the spot they could all see that they were looking for. The little girl had got herself well and truly stuck in the quagmire. Only her arms, head and shoulders were visible, for she was completely bogged down up to her chest. One arm was waving at them weakly. The other was grasping the vegetation to prevent herself sinking any deeper.

Paul brought the machine down on what appeared to be solid ground, but the floats started to sink, tilting the craft sideways, and he hurriedly opened up the power and kept it hovering weightless on the edge of the marsh as the soldier and the interpreter jumped out. Rosalia was on the point of following suit when Paul reached out and caught her by the arm. She could not hear his words over the engine's roar, but he shook his head in dissent. He was probably right; the two men were already floundering heavily in the mud, and it would serve no useful purpose if she became stuck too.

In a moment the interpreter came splashing back, and put his head through the hatchway, shouting something and making a chopping motion with his hand. Paul looked at Rosalia and pointed to the rack of tools behind the pilot's seat, and she scrambled across to reach it. Among the tools was a panga, an African bushknife, and she unclipped it and handed it to the man.

She watched him splash his way back across the marsh to the further edge, where he and the soldier started chopping leafy branches from the surrounding bush. These they hurriedly collected together and laid over the surface of the bog, forming a platform along which they could crawl to the child on their hands and knees. Slowly, inch by inch, the two men hauled the little girl from the clinging mud, then carried her across the quaking reeds to the helicopter and lifted her through the hatch where Rosalia was crouched ready to grab her.

The little girl was very quiet as Rosalia cuddled her in her arms, ignoring the clinging mud that caked the child. The two men climbed aboard, dripping slime. They would certainly need a wash and brush-up before going on to meet whatever local dignitaries there may be at the next scheduled stop. A few minutes later they landed at the farm, where Paul was thankfully able to silence the engine at last.

The mother came running up as they landed, still not knowing her child's fate. The relief on her face as she cradled the mud-caked girl was a picture to warm Rosalia's heart. Even Cressida looked relieved as she said: "It's a good job I persuaded you to

stop back at the farm, isn't it? You can thank me for saving her life!" It was true, of course; Rosalia could not deny that.

The stream where it passed the farm was deep and clear, and the farmer's wife carried her little girl to the bank and unceremoniously dumped her bodily into the water, rinsing her up and down like a bundle of laundry. The treatment seemed a little harsh to Rosalia, but it was effective: the mud floated away from her clothes, her skin and her hair. Then the farmer's wife undressed the child, by now half asleep, fed her, and put her to bed.

Paul wanted to restart the engine to look for the farmer and his sons who were still searching, but the soldier and the interpreter forestalled him. They both possessed stentorian voices when required, and before long faint shouts came back along one of the valleys, as the searchers returned to hear the glad news.

The brook was cool and inviting, and in a secluded site which the farmer's wife indicated a little way upstream, Rosalia rinsed her soiled things through, bathed in the clear water, changed into fresh clothes and spread the wet ones out to dry in the hot sun. The interpreter and the soldier were also washing themselves downstream. They had no change of clothes, of course, so were obliged to loaf about naked until their clothes had time to dry – which really took no more than a few minutes.

The farmer called them all inside and everyone was treated to coffee. But there was no point now in hanging about. As soon as the coffee was drunk they stood up to go and filed back into the helicopter.

Before starting the engine, Paul turned to the interpreter and pointed to the fuel gauge. "All that extra flying has played havoc with our fuel level," he said. "Where's the nearest place we can refuel?"

The maps were consulted and the destination decided. They were cutting it a bit fine, but further emergencies excepted, Paul decided, there should be enough to see them safely to Maguti military camp. He started the engine, and once more they were away over the hills. The green valleys passed out of sight, and soon there was nothing to be seen but jagged rocks and mountain slopes.

The fuel level was indeed running dangerously low when the soldier tapped Paul on the shoulder and pointed ahead, where a small hill was surrounded by a river, gleaming through the trees. "Maguti camp!" he shouted.

The hill formed a natural fortress, and on its plateau they could see a line of semi-permanent barrack-type buildings, a few rows of tents, and several troop carriers and light armoured vehicles drawn up in ranks. Nearby two or three helicopters were assembled on an open area close to the buildings, and Paul landed there, the fuel gauge flickering on the empty mark.

As the party climbed down, they were greeted by a suspicious group of armed guards. The corporal and the interpreter quickly put them at their ease, however, and soon there were broad smiles and handshakes all round. Then after some shouted instructions, a tanker drove up to pump fuel into their machine.

They were standing around waiting when a red-flagged armoured staff car roared across the field and pulled up close by. The soldier who was driving jumped out and held the passenger door open to allow the VIP occupant to alight.

There was no mistaking the enormous figure that emerged from the vehicle. There was no mistaking, either, that incredible display of medals, sashes and orders of chivalry which covered the massive, uniformed chest. It was pure coincidence, apparently, that President Fernando Garcia Muchete, in his capacity as Field Marshal of the Zambezian armed forces, should be inspecting the camp at that time, and he looked genuinely delighted to see them there, as he strode across the clearing with his arms outstretched affably.

"Ah ... welcome to Maguti, my friends! What a pleasant surprise," he boomed. "And how is your visit progressing?"

Rosalia thought that Paul looked none too pleased at the surprise meeting. Cressida, of course, looked positively radiant, almost as though she had forgotten the discomforts of the past few days. And as for Rosalia herself – she too was glad; unaccountably so, perhaps, though she would not have cared to formulate the reason why. But she glanced at Paul rather smugly, and for once found herself wishing Cressida every success in her scheming.

"You will be my guests for the evening ... I insist!" Then Muchete turned to the interpreter. "You and the corporal can go and report to the camp mess hall for your food."

The two Africans moved away to speak to the troops nearby. Then the president held out a courteous, guiding arm, and steered them across the field towards the buildings, chatting to Paul about the success of their visit so far.

Rosalia hung back a little and watched as the two men walked shoulder to shoulder, talking, making little gestures with their hands. Both were natural-born leaders, she thought. Both were confident in the decisions they made; in their ability to plan their own life, and to choose the companions they wanted to share it.

"... And, of course, I shall arrange for rooms to be made available for you tonight, so that you can enjoy at least a modicum of comfort for a change." The president had been speaking to Paul, but Rosalia noticed that his hawk-like gaze kept alighting on Cressida. In her, with her blouse casually open just a little too far, her eyes alluringly dark beneath that frizzy blonde hair, she certainly looked strikingly attractive under the late afternoon sun.

Paul said: "I'm afraid we left our evening clothes at Mankwala, with your minister. There's not much room aboard a helicopter ..."

The president laughed, his ebony features creasing to reveal large and even white teeth. "Please don't worry yourselves about that." He looked at the two girls, confidentially. "I'll let you into a secret," he said, tapping his barrel chest. "Actually, this is only my working uniform. I, too, have left all my best medals in Mankwala!"

Later that evening, dressed as they stood, in bush shirts and jeans or denim shorts, they discovered that this African army, at least, was not lacking a certain style when it set out to entertain guests,

They were served a local version of *faisão e arroz* – a kind of local pheasant, roasted and served with rice, and, somewhat amazingly, a very palatable home-grown claret. Not the Ritz, for sure. But for a remote military camp in the African bush, not even Cressida could complain. Soon they were sitting back in their chairs, enjoying a feeling of well-being.

Needless to say, Cressida was basking in the president's favour a little too sensually, almost purring like a cat. It was unsympathetic of Rosalia, but she found herself quite enjoying the hint of unease she could detect in Paul's features every time Muchete spoke a little too intimately to Cressida.

Muchete himself was in his element. "Of course, it's a man's world, in the army," he was saying. "I sure don't get to see many beautiful ladies when I am on a field visit." He poked Paul in the ribs, playfully. "You have the right idea, my friend," he said. "You bring two, so that you have a choice, depending on your mood, eh?" He turned to Rosalia. "You, my dear, are *graciosa*, serene and peaceful. And you ..." he turned to Cressida. "Aha! A *sedutora*, fierce and fascinating!"

Paul chuckled back wryly. A steward served them with coffee, and they were silent for a while. Then the president changed the subject.

"The next village you have to visit is quite near this camp, is it not, Mr Latrille?"

Paul confirmed that indeed it was.

"Well, you know, we have some beautiful scenery around here. I should be honoured if you will permit me to take you all for a drive into the hills tomorrow, to show you some of the sights."

Paul's reaction was to refuse. "It's very kind of you, Mr President," he said., "But I really think we should be concentrating on the work in hand as a first priority. I am due to meet the organisers of the local co-operative tomorrow morning, to discuss financial terms, and it is very important to them, of course. I hope you won't mind if I decline your very generous offer."

"But Paul, darling ...," Cressida's voice was silky smooth. "You are a financial wizard – you know you are. I would just be an encumbrance to you there. You go and attend the meeting, and I shall go with the president to see the scenery!"

Paul's expression was carefully non-committal. "All right, you win," he said. Then, with an easy smile, he turned to Rosalia. "You two girls go and admire the scenery with the president, and I shall take the interpreter with me to the meeting."

The president beamed at them all, the medals heaving on his chest. "Splendid!

Until tomorrow, then."

Long after the camp had become silent for the night, the several glasses of wine Rosalia had drunk earlier insisted that she pay a visit to the bathroom. It was only a little way down the corridor that ran the length of the building, but of course, she had not brought a dressing gown on this trip, so she thought it discreet to slip her pants and shirt back on to make the short journey.

It was just as well she had taken that precaution, for to her surprise she met the president, still in uniform, standing outside Cressida's room. As soon as he saw her he started to walk away, then stopped, sprang to attention, and ushered her through the bathroom doorway with a gallant flourish, before bidding her goodnight for the second time and striding away down the corridor.

She went back to bed, and slept soundly until a bugle call roused her in the half light. She got dressed quickly, washed, and went in search of the others. Breakfast saw the president in high spirits, and Cressida too seemed on top of the world. Paul, on the other hand, seemed a little grumpy, or so Rosalia thought. As soon as he had eaten he excused himself and went out to the helicopter where the interpreter was waiting for him.

They heard the helicopter lift off, and the president grinned broadly, sending a steward to prepare packed picnic lunches. Then he led them outside and across the camp lines to the vehicle bay where, with the help of a sergeant, he selected a heavy open-topped staff car. The bench-type front seat was broad enough for all three to sit together, and the corporal bodyguard came too, perched above the rear seat, his automatic rifle at the ready.

Their vehicle wound its way down the gravel track leading from the camp, churned through the river drift, then swung up a dirt track which climbed steeply through the forest, past clumps of giant tree ferns and below lianas that hung from the high branches like ropes. The side-to-side motion of the swaying vehicle as it negotiated sharp bends tended to make the girls slide a little along the smooth seat. Cressida, of course, made a great game of this. She was in the centre – naturally – and unlike Rosalia was not able to hold on to the top of the door panel. At every sharp bend she slid provocatively into the president's bulky figure, with little shrieks of feigned alarm. Muchete laughed, and drove faster, making the car swerve dangerously.

All this time they were climbing higher and higher up the side of the hill, and eventually the forest started to thin out, then ended abruptly in brilliant sunshine, with bare grassy slopes all around, broken by jagged outcrops of rock. A troop of baboons ran away at their approach.

As the track reached what must have been the peak of the hill, Muchete stopped, switched off the engine, and climbed out. "Come along, my dears," he said. "I want you to walk with me over this hill, to look at the view."

Telling the corporal to stay and guard the vehicle, he led the two girls off the track and over the rocks. He was a naturally courteous man, Rosalia thought; chivalrous, even. But surely there was no need for him to place his arm quite so blatantly around

Cressida's waist, with his hand resting low on her very brief shorts.

Beyond the peak of the hill they stopped, and it was indeed a panoramic view of spectacular beauty, taking in the whole sweep of countryside to the east, ranging from the tallest peaks in the mountain range to the rolling woodlands that stretched away in shades of yellow and brown. Now holding them both by the arm, protectively, the president led them to the edge of a cliff, and they looked over warily. Below them was a sheer drop of a thousand feet or more, falling away into a rocky ravine thick with banana-like plantain trees, and dense jungly vegetation, through which they caught glimpses of a raging torrent, its roar filling the gorge with a whispering rumble like distant thunder. An eagle soared across the ravine on a level with their eyes, screeching with a wild and lonely sound.

Muchete smiled at them both now, with a proprietorial air. "Come back to the car now," he said. "I want to take you farther into the mountains!"

As they reached the car and climbed in, the chuckling Muchete found it amusing to give Cressida playful little bumps-a-daisy nudges to get her to move along the seat, pretending she was taking up too much room. They really were acting like love-sick teenagers, Rosalia thought, and she looked the other way, pretending an interest in the shale-strewn slope that bordered the track.

The track took them down again through the forest, and skirted the verge of a great lake for some distance before climbing again to dizzy heights. Eventually Muchete pulled off the track and parked on a flat piece of grass, stopped the engine, took off his gold-spangled cap and mopped his brow. "Well," he said. "Where are those picnic lunches that we brought?"

They pulled out the haversack containing their packed lunches from beneath the seat and, on foot once more, Muchete led the way over the hillock, the haversack slung from his epauletted shoulder. Rosalia was glad to see that the corporal had brought his own lunch, and was already munching as he strolled a little way into the shade.

After a short walk, the oddly assorted trio found a place to sit overlooking the lake far below, and opened their lunch packs. The officers' mess at Maguti camp had done its visiting VIPs proud. Not for them the cold maize meal porridge that provided the staple diet in that part of Africa. Their picnic lunch included some more of those delicious roast native pheasants, cold, to be eaten with a kind of savoury pastry.

With a flourish, the president produced a bottle of Portuguese *vinho verde* – light and not too strong a vintage to go to their heads in the heat of the early afternoon – a corkscrew, and glasses. It was a good picnic, there was no doubt about that. Muchete filled their glasses attentively, and Rosalia was entranced by their surroundings. Some aloes were growing amongst the rocks nearby, their scarlet flowers ablaze in the sunlight, and as they ate she watched a tiny iridescent green sunbird probing the flowers for nectar with its long, curved beak.





The lake below them stretched away like a broad winding river through many miles of mountainous country. The president lounged comfortably on his elbows, clearly enjoying his role as tourist courier.

"That is Lake Kwankwaza," he informed them. "It almost cuts this whole range of mountains in half. Anyone coming down from the north would probably have to cross it, somewhere about this point."

"Lake Kwankwaza – what an alluring name. What does it mean?"

"Oh, it's named after some kind of bird that lives there ... a fishing eagle, I think – or something like that."

As Rosalia watched, a ripple of white foam suddenly appeared and traced a line across the surface, standing out in contrast against the dark forest bank. She thought it must be made by waterfowl, their feet scuttering across the water.

"There are some birds down there, flying across the lake," she remarked. "I wonder if one of those eagles has disturbed them."

As she watched, it soon became evident what had startled the birds, for she could make out the shape of a small boat just emerging from behind a promontory. Then she saw another boat leave the bank, then another."

"What are those boats doing," she asked the president. "Are they fishing?"

"Boats!" The president leaped to his feet, scattering the remains of their picnic lunch over the turf, and sending the bottle rolling. "Boats?" He was standing now, half crouched, staring down at the lake. "Landing craft! It's them ... it's a raid! Come on, there is not a moment to lose!" He grabbed them both by the arms and propelled them back towards the car, yelling for the corporal as he ran. "Hurry," he urged them as their feet slipped on the smooth turf. "We must get back past the lake before they land, or we shall be cut off!"

Leaping into the driving seat, Muchete started the engine and they roared headlong down the track. He was driving like a man possessed, and the vehicle swerved and bucked wildly over the rough surface, lower and lower into the valley until

they reached the sudden darkness of the forest, and a flash of silver through the trees told them they had reached the shores of the lake. He drove more warily now, the bodyguard crouched in the back, his gun at the ready.

Suddenly, Muchete brought the vehicle skidding to a halt, turned to the corporal and pointed urgently through the trees, where one of the landing craft could be seen, fast approaching the bank. Then he hissed at the man to follow him, and leaped out, drawing his pistol as he did so.

Peering through the leaves at the water's edge, both men began firing at the boat, and the girls could hear frantic shouts echoing across the water. Then a burst of automatic fire rattled through the branches above them and ricocheted off the rocks behind. The air was hissing with bullets, and several of them crashed into the bodywork of the vehicle very close to Rosalia. In a panic she half fell half jumped out and scrambled for cover, cowering instinctively in a hollow beside the track.

When they saw that the inflatable boat was sinking, Muchete and the corporal started to run back towards the car, keeping their heads low; but as they ran a shout went up from another position further away through the trees, not far from the track. Evidently at least one boatload of the attacking forces had already landed. More shots rattled out, and the corporal began firing from the hip as he ran.

The president reached the vehicle first and vaulted into the driving seat. He sat there for a moment, looking round anxiously. As more bullets flew the soldier was hit as he reached the car. He lurched into the bushes and fell heavily, to lie head downwards among the thick vegetation, not far from where Rosalia was crouching, rigid with terror. Muchete revved the engine and sped away, wheels spinning, as another volley of bullets crashed through the foliage above Rosalia's head, bringing down a shower of leaves and twigs.

Lying there motionless, though dry-throated with fear, Rosalia slowly recovered from her state of panic. She could still hear voices and the rattle of equipment but, thankfully, there was no more firing. After a few more minutes she eased herself out of the ditch and started to crawl away, deeper into the forest. The track would probably soon be swarming with hostile soldiers, and it seemed to be the one place to avoid at all costs.

Some distance from the track, far enough to feel safe from observation, Rosalia stood upright and struggled on up the hill, fighting her way through dense vegetation. Paul would try to rescue her as soon as he found out she was missing – she knew he would. She pictured his reaction when he heard the news: he would jump into the helicopter and search the hills until he had found her. It was only then, with a pang of guilt, that she gave a thought to Cressida. What had become of her? Was she, too, scrambling through the forest somewhere close at hand, or did she stay with the car to be driven away by Muchete. Was she dead?

There was nothing she could do about it now. And one thing was very certain: no-one would be able to see her, let alone rescue her, stuck in this dense jungle. It was impossible to see beyond a few yards. She recalled their search for the missing child – was that only yesterday? It seemed incredible. She remembered what Paul had said,

shouting over the noise of the engine: "If either of you get lost in the bush, climb to the top of a hill where you can be seen!". That is what she had to do – to climb; to get clear of the forest; to find an open hilltop.

Heartened briefly she quickened her pace, struggling onwards and upwards through the undergrowth. Patches of wickedly curved thorns scratched her legs and tore her clothes, and she stumbled over rocks underfoot. She forced herself to battle on until, exhausted, she stopped and leaned against a tree trunk, bent double, panting to regain her breath.

Suddenly a harsh coughing snarl seemed to echo through the green twilight, and made her scalp tingle. She was alone in a wild forest, deep inside a remote African mountain range, yet it had never occurred to her that she might be in danger from wild animals. Whatever had made the noise, it certainly sounded dangerous. Gritting her teeth, she stirred her aching limbs back into action and forced herself on.

A small antelope bounded away, almost from under her feet, making her stagger back in alarm. But she was sure there was more sunlight to be seen now. The forest was definitely thinning out. Desperately, she fought her way through a thick clump of bushes, struggled clear and then, abruptly, found herself in the open. A few steps more, and the forest lay beneath her. Above was clear mountain turf, with piled rocks and jagged cliffs high above her head.

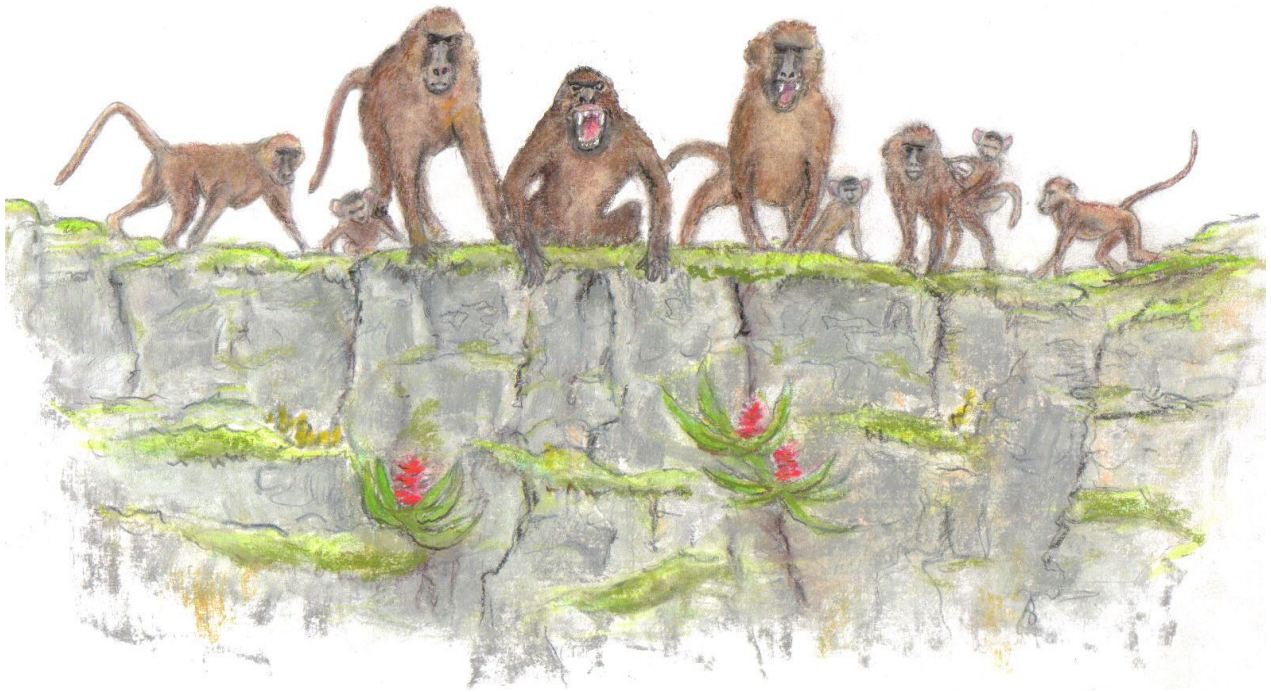
Rosalia felt a good deal safer as she left the edge of the forest and started to scramble up the bare mountain slope. But even as she heaved a sigh of relief, she heard that devastating, grunting snarl again – much nearer this time, on the very edge of the forest. Looking back anxiously she saw something move. The creature bounded effortlessly over the clump of bushes that she had just struggled through. There was no mistaking the spotted coat and heavy tail disappearing again into the forest edge: she was being followed by a prowling leopard!

Hardly daring to look back again, she urged herself to climb, with pounding heart, sometimes crawling on all fours, sometimes gripping bare rock to haul herself upwards. Under different circumstances Rosalia would have been captivated by the stunning beauty of the place, but her sights were set on the very top of the mountain.

She struggled on over the shoulder of the hill, and suddenly the going became easier; the ground was level for a change, and then she came to a little valley which she would have to descend and climb up the other side before approaching the final peak. Nothing less, now, than the top of mountain was good enough – particularly if there was a hungry leopard tracking her!

Across the little valley was a ridge of rock like a high stone wall. Painfully she started to clamber up, startling a yellow lizard that had been basking in the sun. Then she half slipped and hung there, gripping the slippery turf with her fingers, her body for a moment refusing to move. Biting her lip, she forced herself to start moving again, pulling herself up inch by inch. Before her a narrow passageway led between rugged cliffs, their flanks alcoved and fluted, with clumps of aloes crowding into every hollow, their flower spikes a glorious scarlet and orange against the grey rock.

Suddenly a horrible, throaty roar came from high up on one of these cliffs, and Rosalia froze with horror. But the sound did not come from the leopard on this occasion: it came from an enormous baboon, standing on all fours, looking down at her angrily. As she watched a row of heads appeared all along the top of the cliffs. In moments, the whole troop of baboons was staring down, and as soon as they saw her, they too began roaring, barking and squealing.



Rosalia stood still for a moment, undecided; but just then she heard a more disturbing sound – the coughing snarl of the leopard from somewhere directly behind her, beyond the wall-like ridge of rock over which she had just climbed. This made up her mind for her; she would certainly rather risk the wrath of the baboons than the ferocity of the leopard.

As she started to walk again on aching legs, the baboons set up a chorus of barking and roaring, the young ones squealing shrilly. Then suddenly, led by the enormous creature that had frightened her in the first place, they all came rushing down from the cliffs – the older, stronger ones bounding from ledge to ledge, the smaller ones scrambling gingerly, like humans, grasping the turf and bushes with their fingers.

For an instant, Rosalia was convinced that they were about to attack her, and she cried out, standing stock still again, her own face distorted into a primitive snarl. But the dog baboon bounded past her, showing his long fangs, and suddenly, to her surprise, the cliffs to the front and on either side were bare. She looked back over her shoulder to see the baboon troop spaced out along the rock ridge, peering down like soldiers guarding their battlements.

Rosalia felt a surge of relief. She was no threat to the baboons – they realised that. The leopard was their chief predator, terrorising them at night, and the one creature that could rouse them to fury. As quickly as her weary legs could manage she set off again along the narrow passageway between the rocks, edging round a great fold in the cliffs which muffled the noise behind her. Then, once more, she was alone on the mountain.

Suddenly she heard a new sound which brought her heart to her mouth, a human sound this time – the noise of guns firing somewhere, echoing through the hills. The echoes made it impossible to tell exactly where the sound was coming from. There was a brief burst of firing, then a pause, then what sounded like a larger gun firing steadily: boom – boom – boom; then silence again.

It was twilight by the time she reached the top of the mountain. She looked around, her eyes blurred with fatigue. The surface of the peak was fairly smooth, and covered with lichen with a few sparse patches of fine grass. Rosalia flopped down on her back and lay with her arms outstretched, her mind briefly a vacuum as her body relaxed completely. With her consciousness ebbing into the sleep of exhaustion, she stirred herself again and struggled to her feet.

What if the helicopter should come, and she were to miss it through giving way to sleep? Paul would surely have returned to the camp by now. He would know she was in trouble. Propping herself against the rocks she peered into the dusk, listening for the sound of a helicopter's engine.

A dozen possibilities flashed through her mind. What if Maguti camp had been attacked and overrun by the insurgents? What if Paul himself had been captured or killed? Or perhaps the president and Cressida had made it back to the camp, only to tell Paul that she had been killed. She pulled herself together; she was being foolish. What use would it serve, to bring a helicopter into the mountains at night – Paul would not be able to see her or anything else.

Rosalia gave up her vigil, chose as comfortable a place as she could find, closed her eyes, gave way to exhaustion, and fell asleep instantly.

### 3 *Ferment*

As the sun warmed a new day Rosalia heard again the sound of gunfire: heavy guns thumping followed by the rattle of light automatic weapons. The full horror of her situation came back in a rush and almost swamped her, sending the blood pounding in her head, with fear twisting her inside. Paul was not going to come. It was obvious, wasn't it? They had been caught up in a nightmare, the victims of someone else's war. She was foolish to hope that she would be able to survive longer than a few days, stuck here on a mountain top, before she died of hunger and thirst, or worse.

Dreadful doubts crept into her mind and kept up their nagging. Even if he could, why should Paul come to rescue her? Was she not being incredibly simple minded, to think that he really cared about her welfare? She appraised the situation coldly, bitterly. What a fool she was! Why, he was probably relaxing somewhere even now with Cressida, enjoying a drink, or at least a good breakfast, laughing at his own good luck, thankful that it had been neither of them to be listed as missing – presumed killed.

In her agony of indecision, Rosalia actually began scrambling down the slope; then she changed her mind and clambered back again. A few minutes later she was once more on the verge of climbing down to the track, to look for somebody – enemy or not. But at that instant a distant throbbing, thumping vibration in the air stopped her in her tracks. A fresh breeze had sprung up with the rising of the sun, and made it difficult to hear distinctly. She listened, trying to still the thumping of her heart, craning her neck in all directions. Yes, she was certain it was a helicopter – and suddenly she could see it, sweeping along the top of the forest, then turning like a hunting hound, sniffing its way up the mountain slope, rising high to inspect the peaks, then swooping down to probe some valley.

Her aching limbs forgotten, Rosalia leaped onto the highest point of the rocky pinnacle, waving her arms furiously. But the helicopter was still a long way away – and every now and then she could hear another, harsher sound – the dangerous clatter and thud of the guns. As it swept high on one of its changes of course, she distinctly saw a tight cluster of red streaks flash from the ground, hurtling close past the soaring machine, leaving a ragged, drifting trail of smoke.

Crying aloud with anxiety, Rosalia flailed her arms like a windmill as the pilot seemed to be steering a weaving course in her direction, quartering the barren hill slopes and soaring low over the turf. Then, near the upper edge of the forest, it seemed to be heading out towards the lake, and Rosalia's heart sank. But it suddenly veered again, nosing its way up a gully, finally climbing a spiral course towards the peak.

Rosalia stood on the topmost rock, waving and shouting. Then the machine was hovering directly overhead, the squall of its down-draught making her lose her foothold and grab wildly at the rock. There was not really enough room for a helicopter to land without the terrible risk of its rotors snagging on the rock. It hovered there, poised at a slight angle against the wind, its undercarriage skids touching the rock briefly, then drifting off a foot or two, then back, bumping gently, the hatchway standing invitingly open, just out of reach.





Rosalia would have leaped for it across a bottomless chasm. Fighting against the violent slipstream she clambered back onto the rock, balanced there for a moment, then threw herself upwards and forwards, fingers clutching. As she pulled herself through, a strong arm reached out to grab her and haul her inside. Then the sliding door was slammed shut behind her.

Paul's broad back was hunched over the controls, his shirt patchy with dark streaks of perspiration. She pulled herself forwards in the cramped space and took the seat next to his. As the helicopter swung clear of the mountains, he turned and grinned broadly. His face was tired and caked with dust, but his dark blue eyes were twinkling. At that moment there was a loud bang somewhere beneath their feet, and the machine lurched as though it had struck some invisible obstacle. The blades continued to thump steadily, but Paul's smile had faded now.

"That's the second time we've been hit," he shouted.

Fearful that they were about to crash, Rosalia pressed her face close to the window, peering downwards. "What's that: Is it smoke?" she shouted, jabbing her finger downwards towards their undercarriage.

Paul leaned forward and peered down through the windscreen. Below them, they seemed to be carrying their own miniature rainbow: a misty cloud, swirling and trailing, reflecting the colours of the spectrum as the sun's rays caught it.

Paul glanced at Rosalia with a wry expression. "We're spraying out fuel," he shouted. "They must have hit the tank with that last shot!" Conversation was difficult over the roar of the engine, and he pointed to the fuel gauge which was already flickering on the red. He leaned over to place his lips close to Rosalia's ear. "The nearest town lies to the north, along this line of hills," he shouted. "We had better fly as high as we can while the fuel lasts, so keep a good lookout for any villages or farms."

After a little while Rosalia pointed ahead. "There are some huts in the distance," she shouted.

At that moment the engine died and their machine began to sink, eerily silent except for the flailing whirr of the blades and the whistling of the wind. Paul switched over to the emergency tank, and the engine roared into life again.

"We have just a couple of minutes flying time left," he shouted. "Hold tight – I'm going to put her down!"

He selected what appeared to be a fairly clear area, and swooped towards it, fast. As they hovered a few feet from the ground, the violent agitation of the vegetation caught in their turbulence told them that what had looked from the air like an open field was, in fact, a marshy patch of giant elephant grass.

It was too late for Paul to change his mind about the landing site. As the skids touched down he cut the engine, and the grass which towered above them outside the windows swirled and swayed like a moving curtain. Gradually the rotors stopped rustling round through the grass tops and everything became still.

Neither of them spoke for a moment, then Paul said: "Oh well, I suppose we were lucky not to explode or catch fire when they hit the fuel tank."

He opened the hatch door, but neither of them was in a hurry to leave the comparative security of the helicopter. For some minutes longer they sat in the two passenger seats, facing each other without speaking.

"Are you all right after your adventure, Rosalia?" Paul asked at last. "I hope you're not hurt?"

"I'm not hurt; no, I'm tired, stiff, scratched, bruised, hungry, thirsty, but not hurt, thank you Paul. How about you?"

"I'm fine. Cressida thought you were probably dead, or captured. But something told me you'd be okay – you're not the sort of person to be written off so easily!"

"So the president managed to get Cressida back to the camp in one piece?"

"Yes. It was fairly late by the time I got back myself – almost dark, in fact. The camp was in turmoil when I arrived, everybody at battle stations. I didn't even see the president. The officers tried to persuade me to fly troops into the front line this morning ... they got quite nasty about it, in fact. It was lucky they had no spare helicopter pilot, or they'd have taken this machine back, and I wouldn't be here now." But of course their



present predicament was not exactly what he had planned either, and he added ruefully: "And we wouldn't be stuck out here, stranded in the bush!"

"Oh, Paul ... anything's better than being stuck on top of a mountain, all alone." She was suddenly horrible conscious of her appearance. "I could do with a wash," she said. "I must look a fright."

"We have a water-bag," he said. "But that's for drinking, and not for washing, I'm afraid. We shall need to conserve our resources. Perhaps we shall find a stream or something, later on."

He reached under the pilot's seat and pulled out a haversack, rummaged inside, and produced a flask of tea, some rolls, and the remains of a joint of cold meat, which he set out like a picnic lunch on one of the folded maps on the floor.

"Everyone was ordered out to fight, including the cooks," he explained. "The troops commandeered our emergency rations, so I raided the kitchen. This is the best I could manage, in the dark!"

Rosalia poured her first cup of tea for some time and drank it slowly, savouring it with her eyes half closed. She really needed that! Evidently Paul had been without a proper meal, too. They were both ravenously hungry, and fell on the food eagerly, feeling energy gradually flowing back into their bodies as they ate.

When they had eaten their fill, Paul said: "I wanted Cressida to come with us, but she was too exhausted, poor thing."

Rosalia thought: 'Thank goodness for that!', but she said nothing.

"The interpreter was commandeered too," Paul continued. "What happened to the corporal bodyguard, by the way?"

"He was killed," she said, shortly.

Paul nodded and looked at her solemnly for a moment without speaking. Then he jumped down through the open hatchway, reaching back to help Rosalia down into the elephant grass, which rasped against her bare legs. Then he reached back up. "I have your luggage here," he said. "I'll scout around a bit and try to find the best way out of this stuff. It will give you a chance to sort your things out."

He started elbowing his way through the elephant grass, and was lost from view almost immediately. Then the rustling sound he was making faded too, and she was on her own again. She discarded her torn shorts and put on a clean pair. A bath would have been bliss, but at least she was able to make herself reasonably presentable. She found a soldier's canvas bush-hat among the equipment, and put it on, tucking the tangled mess of her hair out of sight. Then feeling slightly more human, she felt ready to tackle the bush again.

After a few minutes Paul returned. They could not stay where they were indefinitely, though the helicopter had seemed to offer a little security. Better to press on

towards the huts they had seen in the distance from the air, and then perhaps make it to the nearest town.

They closed the hatch door for the last time, and shouldered their way along the rough path Paul had trampled through the thicket. The high grass certainly concealed the grounded helicopter from anyone passing that way on foot. Unless somebody spotted it from the air, it could well remain undiscovered for years.

By now it was approaching the hottest part of the day, and though the tree cover seemed at first sight to be thick, all the leaves hung limply, folded face inwards like resting butterflies, so that they cast very little shade. To make matters worse, the surface of the ground was very soft loose white sand that yielded with every step they took, making walking very tiring. Some antelopes sprang up and pranced lightly away; and once, as they were walking side by side, an enormous greyish-black snake slithered across their path with frightening speed.

Paul grasped her arm and held her back until the creature was out of sight. "Black mamba!" he said. "Never argue with one of those, Rosalia! Are you ready for a drink of water yet?"

"I could drink the lot!"

"Well don't. If you drink too much when you're overheated, it will make you sick."

Rosalia sipped the cool water thankfully, and handed the canvas bag back to Paul. Then, sinking wearily to the ground, she sat in the loose sand, leaning against a tree, rubbing her aching legs. But there was no great advantage to be gained by resting for more than a few minutes: it was too hot, and before long they were heading north again, floundering on through the sandy bush. It really spoke highly of Paul's skill at navigation through the featureless country with map and compass. It would have been all too easy to start walking in futile circles.

Even so, the sun was slanting towards the west and almost touching the tops of the trees before they arrived near the grass-thatched buildings they had seen before their emergency landing. The first indication that they were on the right track was the shrill sound of children's voices carrying through the trees, and they soon caught sight of one of the huts.

On the edge of the village clearing two young men were standing together, both in uniform, both armed, both staring in surprise at the pair emerging from the bush. It was too late to take evasive action.

"We shall just have to try to bluff it out," murmured Paul as, expecting trouble, they walked across the clearing to meet the men.

To their relief, neither of them seemed threatening. One of them said something in Portuguese as they approached.

"We're English," said Rosalia.

One of the young men grinned affably. "Ah, English!" he said. "And what are you doing walking through our country? Are you alone? Are you lost?"

"We were on a trade mission, but got caught up in the fighting," Paul explained. "We were trying to make our way to Machipanda, or some other town. We really want to get back to Mankwala and see the authorities there ..."

The two soldiers discussed the situation at some length between themselves. Rosalia thought they seemed amused at their predicament, and felt more than slightly put out at their seeming lack of urgency.

"We are really rather hungry and thirsty," she said. "Is there anywhere near here where we can ..."

The men stopped talking, and the one who could speak English said: "Come on, follow us."

As they were led into the village, Rosalia felt bold enough to ask: "Excuse me ... are you with the government, or the insurgents?"

The young man grinned, translated to his companion, and they both laughed out loud. Rosalia felt even more put out.

"Well, as it happens," said the soldier, "I am with the government, and my brother here is with the insurgents – so you can take your pick, I suppose!"

As Rosalia and Paul digested this piece of information in silence, the man continued: "This village is our home. We don't want to fight. We were both more or less forced to take up arms. We are not really politically minded, all we want is a nice peaceful country. We don't care much who is in charge. We were both involved in a skirmish not far from here, and we took each other prisoner! Then we thought it would be a good idea to disappear into the bush. We can always go back if we have to, and claim we managed to escape."

The two brothers introduced themselves properly, and took them to meet the other members of their family. Before long they were sitting in one of the thatched huts together, enjoying a bowl of *sadza*, the local maize meal porridge, with beans. There was only water to drink, but to them the simple meal tasted like a banquet. The village possessed a well of cool, clear water, and a stream for washing off the worst of their grime. Rosalia was beginning to feel human again.

By the time they had finished eating it was quite dark, only the flickering fire lighting the hut. The mother of the two soldiers lit an oil lamp, and carrying the guttering flame led them across the compound to another hut, where she unrolled two rush mats and spread them on the floor. She was talking volubly all the time, though they understood not a word. Her meaning was clear enough, however, and her intentions were good. She left them the lamp, and they bade her goodnight. The lamp was a great help as they made use of the somewhat primitive toilet facilities; then they settled down in the darkness. The mats were more comfortable than they looked, and very soon they were asleep.

Next morning the village was abustle early, and as soon as they were ready Rosalia and Paul rejoined the family, with the idea of saying their farewells and continuing on their way. But the English-speaking brother persuaded them to change their plans.

Before long a somewhat elderly woman came into the hut and spoke to the people there. The soldier translated:

"This is Sophie, our wise woman," he said. "She has heard about your arrival. She knows and you know how we have become divided in our loyalties, and she says that this is the very best time to perform a ceremony which will unite, not only our family, but perhaps the whole country as well. It has to involve you, because you are British. She can see the future. The country has belonged to the Portuguese for a long time, but she says it will become part of the British association of countries – what do you call it ... the Commonwealth of Nations!"

Rosalia doubted that this could be, but smiled and nodded politely.

"So will you stay a while to help? She says it is the only way to bring peace."

They could scarcely refuse, and wondered what was coming next. There was a great deal of talk during which it seemed that Sophie was issuing instructions. The two brothers had stowed away their uniforms and were wearing shabby shirts and shorts. Carrying spears instead of guns, they rounded up all the young lads of the village, and together with numerous tiny, skinny dogs all yapping happily, set off through the bush.

Paul and Rosalia stood near the hut, waiting. Finally Sophie approached them and handed Paul a panga and a sack, indicating that they should follow her.

With the wise woman leading the way, they were soon following a path which headed slightly uphill towards a dark hogback ridge. "Gurungurwi," she said, pointing. "The place of the pigs!"

After a mile or two they came to a grove of *mupane* trees, where she stopped and took the panga from Paul. Selecting one of the trees she knelt by the root buttress and began to grub around with the long blade. Several roots were exposed and then covered again before she expressed satisfaction, chopped off a few lengths of root, wrenched them from the ground and handed them to Paul to stow in his sack.

Further along the path they began to climb quite steeply up the hill until it became increasingly rocky underfoot where the soil had eroded away. They were soon following the steep course of a little stream trickling in miniature cascades down the hillside. The vegetation had changed its nature and become more jungly, with dark evergreen leaves of silver-splashed green. Rosalia admired them with a trained florist's eye, wishing she could take some with her.

Farther up the hill, gnarled cassia bushes clung to the rocks, clothing them with showy yellow flowers, and here Sophie stopped again, peering at each bush closely until she had found the one she wanted. Then she stripped the bark from one side of each main branch, and added it to the *mupane* roots in Paul's sack.



They turned back down the path now, but soon took a fork which brought them to a flatter area of bush near the base of the hill. There she led them to a large and shady tree.

"*Mumbhuni*," she said. "The sand-apple tree. We must collect some of the fruit."

A few brown, wrinkled-looking sand-apples had fallen and were lying among the grass, and she motioned to Rosalia to collect these. Then she looked at Paul and pointed up the tree with a grin. "Plenty more up there," she said.

Paul looked doubtfully at the stout trunk with its rough, dark grey bark, but he managed to reach the lowest limb and pulled himself up into the branches, where he started picking more fruit and dropping them down for the women to collect.

After a while Sophie said: "Enough! We go now."

Paul scrambled down, took the panga and the sack which he slung over his shoulder and, their mission complete, they started back to the village.

Back in the hut Sophie began to prepare her brew, setting water to boil in a large cauldron over the open fire. The young men of the village returned before long, and Rosalia realised now what they had set out to do, for they carried between them a large wild pig, alive, but trussed up and secured to the long poles.

Sophie set the roots and bark to boil, and when they were bubbling fiercely the steam became acrid and heavy. As Rosalia inhaled it she felt as though her lungs were being tanned. She wondered if she ought to go outside, but Sophie came and stood at her shoulder.

"You feel a part of you inside that is being tied down when it breathes the steam? That is what we call *Kandapasi*. If you hang up meat here over the fire it will never go bad, because *Kandapasi* cannot come out with this *muti*, this medicine. It can only stay tied down inside the body!" She gave the brew a stir and kicked the fire into place.

The wild pig the hunters had caught, a huge sow, was held firmly in place in a wicker framework with wooden pegs driven into the ground, fairly near the door of the

hut. Sophie arranged some kind of dried vegetation, leaves and flowers, around the base of the pot, on the glowing charcoal-red edge of the fire, and thick blue smoke began to curl up to join the acrid steam. The smoke carried with it a sweet incense-like aroma which soon filled the hut almost overpoweringly.

"When the spirit we call *Pachipagati* breathes this, he comes out to have a look!"

The sow had been grunting frantically at every movement in the room, but now she also was affected. Pacified, she stopped grunting and rolling her eyes, and no longer strained against the restraining wickerwork. Sophie had removed the sand-apples from the sack and put them onto the floor where the sow could reach them. The creature grunted softly and began to eat contentedly.

Sophie took a small gourd, curved and elongated, such as Africans often use as a stew ladle, and dipped it into the cauldron, taking it out and blowing on it to cool it. Then she handed it round the gathering, telling them each to spit in it. Then it was Rosalia's turn.

"Spit in it!", commanded the wise woman.

Rosalia spat in it, thinking: 'She'd better not try to make me drink out of it, or I'm off!'

Paul murmured in her ear reassuringly, sensing her unease. "Spitting doesn't carry quite the same connotation for Africans as it does for us," he whispered. "I think it's more a sign of goodwill and friendship than anything else."

But it was not for drinking. Sophie took the gourd and did something with it at the sow's rear. The animal lifted its head from the *mumbhuni* fruit, looked surprised, then grunted and carried on eating. One of the women present replenished the sow's supply of sand-apples as the ceremony continued.

Finally, Sophie cut the strip of bark which had been holding the framework together. Then she went to the doorway and shouted a warning to the people outside, and lifted out the retaining stick.

"Ha!" she shouted, slapping the sow on the rump. The animal grabbed a final mouthful of fruit and dashed out through the doorway, grunting frenziedly as she came to her porcine senses. The children outside laughed and shouted, waving their arms as they chased the pig, which galloped through the clearing and disappeared into the bush.

Sophie turned to Paul and Rosalia. "Thank you," she said. "Now we must wait and see. But have faith!"

The ceremony over, there was nothing to keep them in the village now, and with profuse thanks and goodbyes, they picked up their belongings and continued on their way.

Paul was checking his map more frequently now, and the next time they stopped for a rest, he said: "We have a choice now. Either we can press on in a straight line



towards the town – but it's a long way – or we can change course slightly and join one of the major roads some time this morning, and maybe get a lift. I think we ought to make for the road."



Rosalia agreed. "I think that would be best, unless the road turns out to be swarming with rebels ..."

"Oh, I don't think that's likely. Anyway, it's probably worth the risk. After all, the rebels have no quarrel with us."

Rested, they started off again on their modified course. The sun was climbing high in the sky before they were stopped in their tracks by the sound of a heavy motor engine. Through the trees they caught sight of the top of a lorry, travelling in a great cloud of dust.

They approached the road cautiously. Caution had become ingrained in them. It seemed strange, somehow, to venture onto a public highway again, as though people had become unpredictable and dangerous. The road, at any rate, seemed little used. No more traffic came along for some time, and they walked side by side along the dusty, roughly graded surface. Eventually they came in sight of some huts grouped alongside the road, and saw a small boy idly riding an old bicycle around the buildings. They called out to him, and he hopped awkwardly on one foot as he came to a standstill.

"Machipanda?" They pointed, and made the motions of walking into the distance. "Machipanda?"

"Machipanda," echoed the boy. He waved his arms expressively. "*Ganshani!*" "Then he shouted something that sounded like "*Omnibus!*" and pointed to a spot near the roadside.

"Am I mistaken," asked Rosalia. "Or did he say 'omnibus'?"

The boy grinned widely, and said it again. With his bike propped at an angle he gripped an imaginary steering wheel with his hands, making a noise like a revving engine. Then he pointed at the sun. "*Meio dia!*" he said. Then he wheeled his bike to the place he had indicated and pointed firmly at the place by the side of the road. "*Apa, meio dia!*"

"Well, that's clear enough," said Paul. "He says a bus passes here at midday. Fair enough – let's wait here for it!"

They smiled their thanks at the boy, who got his bike going again with some difficulty and continued his aimless cycling around the huts, looking well pleased with himself.

After a few minutes a stout woman wearing a Mother Hubbard frock and carrying a cloth bundle and a wicker crate containing some chickens appeared, and joined them at the side of the road. Then an old man arrived, bent double, propelling himself along with the aid of a stout staff.

Half an hour later the bus arrived – a rather ancient coach, crowded with people. The interior was stiflingly hot, smelling of chickens and perspiration. The driver took their fare without comment. All the seats were full, and most of the remaining space was occupied with luggage and squatting people. Paul and Rosalia followed their example, and squatted down in the gangway, clutching their haversacks.

A few miles down the road the bus came to a sudden halt, and an armed man stepped aboard. He wore a camouflaged tunic and a forage cap, and through the window they could see several men, all toting automatic rifles. It was plain that the other passengers knew what was expected of them, for they were already reaching into pockets and bundles, and he began taking money from each of them in turn.

"Give him some money, for goodness' sake," Paul whispered. "He's obviously collecting for the rebel cause!"

As the man came up he said, sardonically: "*Contribuição, senhora,*" and took Rosalia's proffered banknote. Then he looked at them both more closely, with some curiosity. "*Português?*" he asked.

"No, English," said Paul.

"Ah!" He passed along down the length of the bus, and Rosalia breathed a sigh of relief, but they were not forgotten. The man edged his way back to the door, but before getting off he spoke to the driver, who looked round doubtfully, and the bus remained stationary.

In a few moments another of the rebels looked in at the door, and made it plain that they wanted all the passengers sitting on the floor to come out. The people struggled awkwardly to their feet in the confined space, and slowly filed out through the doorway.



When Paul and Rosalia reached the exit and stepped down, the rebel troop leader inspected them closely. He wanted to know what they were doing in Zambezia. Paul explained, as well as the language barrier allowed, making it plain that their only interest was in trade, and not politics. As they argued, the other passengers were allowed back on board, and it was with something of a sinking feeling that Rosalia watched the bus trundle away, until it was no more than a moving cloud of dust in the distance.

The troop leader motioned with his rifle for them to start walking into the edge of the bush. A little way into the trees a troop-carrying vehicle was standing on a bush track, out of sight of the road.

Paul squeezed Rosalia's arm as they settled down in the truck, their haversacks at their feet. "Don't worry, Rosie," he said quietly. "We'll find a way out of this. Just keep your eyes open; there's nothing we can do right now."

They set off along the rough, sandy track, and after some miles it became clear that they were heading into the hills. The track climbed steadily higher, not sandy now, but hard-packed red clay. The countryside was liberally dotted with rocky koppies, and the vegetation was much greener than it had been on the plain, with gwasha forest in evidence in the gullies and along the stream margins.

They soon caught sight of mountain peaks, high and barren, dark against the sky; but the sky itself was beginning to look black. It was still quite early in the afternoon, but the further they drove into the hills, the darker it became. It seemed that they were in for a heavy storm.

The track rose still higher until, suddenly, they were clear of the trees and on the bare ridge of a deep valley, its sides steep like the crater of some ancient, extinct volcano. With storm clouds building up on every side it was a dramatically wild place, rimmed with towering mountain peaks, with here and there the odd ray of sunshine striking orange through gaps in the clouds; but soon their vehicle began to nose its way steeply downhill. The rebels' hideout lay concealed just inside the thick gwasha forest which clothed the valley floor. As they entered the trees, buildings and tents which had been hidden beneath the overhanging foliage now came into view.

Their vehicle edged into a space beside one of the buildings and stopped. The rebel commander came out to meet them, and the troop leader jumped down and spoke to him. The commander strode to the rear of the vehicle and looked at Rosalia and Paul with interest. Then he indicated that they should be brought inside, and the soldiers at the back of the truck made way for them to climb down.

The atmosphere was heavy with the storm clearly building up fast. As they were about to enter the building a peal of thunder reverberated over the rim of the hills and growled on, echoing and re-echoing for a long time between the peaks.

The commander, as it turned out, was obviously keen to try out his English skills on the two captives, and Paul quickly explained that they were on an official trade mission to Zambezia, and demanded to know why they were being held prisoner.

Rosalia feared that his forthright manner might anger the commander, but he heard Paul out politely.

"We have nothing against you personally," he said. "But you must realise that we are not in agreement with that upstart, Muchete. It was his government that invited you to Zambezia, was it not? And of course we cannot go along with any deals he chooses to make with foreign countries."

He led them outside where two guards escorted them across the clearing to another hut, opened the door, and steered them inside. It was quite dark beneath the trees with the storm clouds overhead. The interior of the hut looked pitch black from the doorway, and Rosalia hesitated on the threshold. One of the guards prodded her with his rifle, so that she exclaimed indignantly. Paul turned on the guard threateningly, and the guard scowled, taking a step backwards. Then he levelled his gun at Paul's midriff.

"It's all right Paul. Leave it," Rosalia gasped in alarm, and they entered the dark windowless room. The door slammed shut behind them and, setting their haversacks on the floor, they sat down with their backs to the wooden wall.

It was not many minutes before the door opened again, and the commander looked inside, flanked by his guards.

"I've just been on the radio to my headquarters, and they want to see you," he announced. "So come along now, if you please."

They picked up their bags and were led outside, where they were made to climb into the vehicle that had brought them, with two guards taking their place on either side. A driver climbed in and started the engine.

As the vehicle began to climb clear of the sheltering trees, Paul looked up at the sky and remarked: "It looks as if we're going to get wet!" Then he spoke more softly, his voice calm. "Be ready for action, Rosalia. Keep watching now!"

The appearance of the sky had become quite alarming. It seemed as though three or four separate rainstorms were converging almost directly overhead, for the black clouds were sweeping in from several directions at once. By some freak of the air currents they were colliding over the valley, the swirling clouds towering to a great height, with lightning flickering continuously in the very centre.

Suddenly, above the crash of thunder, the roar of a jet engine drowned the noise of their vehicle as a solitary military fighting plane swung in low between the hills, avoiding the electrical heart of the storm and swooping deep into the valley. The driver saw the plane coming and stopped hurriedly, while he and the guards ducked low. Nothing happened however. The plane roared past and the vehicle started moving again. But almost immediately the guards shouted a warning as the jet swung in a tight circle and headed straight for them again. Obviously it was about to attack. The driver skidded to a standstill once more and the three men jumped out and rolled for cover amongst the rocks and bushes.

"Quick ... now's our chance," shouted Paul, scrambling forwards into the driving

seat. Then, as Rosalia crouched dithering, he bellowed: "Move yourself, dammit woman!" Reaching back he dragged her bodily over the seats and forced her onto the floor.

A salvo of rockets crashed into the ground, very close, sending a shower of soil and stones spattering over them and rocking the vehicle wildly. But Paul had the engine going now and in gear. Revving hard they shot forwards along the track.

"Keep your head down," he yelled, as bullets from the guards' rifles crashed against the bodywork and drilled a neat hole in the windscreen. Then, temporarily out of the soldiers' view, their vehicle bounced and rattled viciously over the rough track, heading upwards into the teeth of the threatening storm.

Paul reached down and patted Rosalia on the shoulder. "I think it's okay for you to come up now," he said. "But keep a good lookout!"

The track plunged briefly down to ford a stream, and as they churned out of the water and up the far bank the vehicle swerved and skidded violently, the wet tyres spinning against the hard clay.



"This track gets slippery when it's wet," said Paul. "If we don't make it to the top before that storm breaks, we won't make it at all!"

With this additional threat, Paul drove all the more furiously, Rosalia hanging on for dear life, craning her neck to peer back down into the valley.

"I can see them," she called. Far below men were running, then she saw another vehicle leave the trees and head fast up the track, pausing to pick up the guards, then gathering speed through the gloom. "They're after us!"

A thousand feet higher up the valley Rosalia could still make out the pursuing vehicle. Then, as they neared the top, two or three bullets ricocheted past their heads with a frightening howl, clearly audible above the noise of the engine.

As they breasted the valley slope the storm broke. The first few drops were large and heavy, hitting the ground explosively and thudding on the brim of Rosalia's bush hat, causing the four-wheel drive vehicle to slither and scramble over the last remaining few feet of the climb.

With lightning hissing audibly all round, leaving the air full of a sulphurous smell, as the towering black clouds reached their peak and burst, they let their massive load of water drop. For a brief spell the rain fell not as rain normally does, but in a torrent of water crashing down like a cataract.

There was a rolled-up canvas canopy behind them and Rosalia fumbled with this. But even when she finally had it fixed correctly the downfall was so powerful that it forced its way in, deluging across the seats and soaking them to the skin. Paul discovered that it was impossible to drive while it lasted. He could not even see the track, and was forced to stop and wait helplessly for it to ease. On all sides the red clay was splashing several feet into the air to form a solidly opaque wall; even their breathing was laboured and difficult.

This was nature at its most violent, and Rosalia instinctively reached out and clung to Paul for protection. Almost father-like, his arm closed around her shoulders and he leaned over, half crouching, shielding her body from the worst of the storm. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the storm ended. For a few moments the downpour abated to normal rainfall, and the sun shafted through in rays of orange and yellow, dazzling them. Then it stopped abruptly, like a tap being turned off, dripped a little, and was over. The clouds, thinner and whiter now, drifted in the higher layers of atmosphere and hung there, as though drying in the sun.

They both sat for a while, gradually releasing their embrace. There did not seem to be so much urgency now: there was not the faintest chance of any wheeled vehicle climbing up the clay track for several hours at least. Then Paul stirred and got out, releasing a flood of water as he opened the door. Rosalia watched him as he walked back to the brow of the hill, shielding his eyes against the sun's glare, peering down into the valley. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she joined him. Hundreds of feet below them on the track they could just see the dark shape of the vehicle that had been pursuing them, and the tiny figures of men milling around.

Paul caught her arm and drew her back a little. "Don't let them spot us against the skyline," he warned. "We don't want to give them any more target practice."

As they watched, the vehicle moved slowly across the track, with the men pushing. Evidently they were turning it round. Then the men climbed in, and the vehicle started slithering its way back down the track towards the gwasha.

They regained their vehicle and settled uncomfortably on the soggy seats, their clothes heavy and clinging. This was not the best time to stop and dry out – they could only hope to find time for that later.

Paul pressed the starter and the engine roared into life. "Thank our lucky stars these military vehicles are properly waterproofed," he said.

The track ran level for a while over the peak of the hill, and the heavily treaded tyres spun wildly, seeking a grip. But as the track dipped into a gentle downhill slope they soon started moving at a fair speed.

Paul drove in silence for a while, then turned to Rosalia. "I've been thinking," he said. "It might not be too clever of us to head for Machipanda now. If the rebels do come looking for us, that will be the obvious place to look – and they will certainly want to get their vehicle back, if nothing else."

They were approaching the main road now, and as they reached the junction Paul swung to the right, heading back in the general direction from which they had come. Rosalia released the clips holding the canopy in place and rolled it back over the seats. Evidently the storm had not affected this side of the hills, and everything was dry. The late afternoon sun was still hot and this, coupled with the breeze of their own speed, was drying their clothes fast.

They soon passed the huts where they had caught the bus and there, sure enough, the small boy was still riding his cycle aimlessly around the clearing. Paul could not resist giving him a 'peep-peep' on the horn, and Rosalia waved. The boy stared after them in amazement, the high machine capsizing as he came to an involuntary hopping halt.

It was well after dark by the time they stopped at the little town of Chipungwe. It seemed discreet to avoid driving along the brightly lit main street, and Paul nosed the vehicle into a dark side turning and switched off the lights. "Come on," he said. "Let's take our haversacks and look for some kind of a hotel for the night."



One of the buildings bore the illuminated sign *Hotel Roseiral*, and they peered into the vestibule before making up their minds. It looked reasonably respectable, and given their dishevelled appearance hoped it was not *too* respectable.

They walked in and presented themselves to the reception clerk. "*Um quarto de casa?*" he enquired politely. "A double room?"

Rosalia looked at Paul quizzically, wondering whether she ought to say anything. She would not care to draw undue attention to themselves by raising an objection. But she need not have doubted Paul; he was the perfect gentleman.

"No; two singles ... er, *dois quartos para* ... er, *para pessoa só*," he said, hesitatingly venturing his scant knowledge of Portuguese. Then he looked at Rosalia and smiled. "Two singles are safer," he said. "We don't want any scenes at this stage. Besides, I don't think I'd better push my luck too far."

Later, after the sheer luxury of a warm bath – although their clothes were still dusty and a little damp – they were pleasantly surprised at the quality of the food. The main course was evidently some kind of venison – probably wild, they thought, delicately flavoured with herbs. The waiter apologised for the lack of wine, explaining that it was in very short supply, at least in rural areas. But they did serve excellent ice-cold lager – a *cerveja branca* which complemented their meal very well.

Upstairs in her room, Rosalia rinsed a few of her things through, and hung them above the basin to drip-dry. Then she tapped at the door of Paul's room, and performed the same service for him, happy to do something domestic after roughing it for so long. Was it really no more than a week since they arrived in Zambezia? It seemed like several months.

They went to bed early; but Rosalia lay awake late into the night, quite relaxed and comfortable beneath her mosquito net, listening to the musical chirping of the crickets outside her bedroom window.

In the morning a maid brought coffee and rolls, and very obligingly took Rosalia's washing away to have everything neatly pressed by the time they were ready to emerge. When she finally came downstairs, Paul was already in the vestibule, telephoning Chidagwa, the minister for agriculture.

His conversation lasted for some time. Then he put the phone down and turned to her. "A car is on its way from Mankawala, and it should be here by this afternoon."

Presently, like any tourists abroad, they left the hotel together and strolled into the bright sunshine of the street. Whilst they were still some distance from the side street where they had left their borrowed vehicle, they could see three or four policemen milling around. Taking Rosalia's arm, Paul led her across the road towards a gateway in the wall, where a footpath led down to the banks of the Pungwe River.

As they approached the water's edge a giant black and white kingfisher with a bright rufous breast left its perch in the low branches of a tree and flew away calling shrilly, its wings just skimming the surface of the water. As she watched the bird fly away, an enormous butterfly with iridescent mother-of-pearl wings settled for a moment on the back of her hand before dancing away along the river bank. Rosalia was entranced by the sheer beauty of it.

"I wonder how Cressida's getting on," Paul remarked.



Rosalia felt sure that Cressida would be looking after herself very well, and glanced at Paul with a sceptical comment hovering on her lips. But he looked so tranquil that she said nothing, and they continued their stroll.

After an hour or two of killing time, they came across an unpretentious little café overlooking the river, and here they ordered tea and a lunchtime snack. Finally they sauntered back to the hotel to await the arrival of the ministry car.

The police were still milling around the side street. "I wonder what they make of a military vehicle suddenly appearing in their town," Paul remarked. "But I for one am quite content to let them puzzle it out for themselves!"

At about two o'clock in the afternoon a large black limousine rolled up to the hotel and a uniformed chauffeur put his head through the entrance and saluted. Rosalia and Paul grabbed their haversacks, and a couple of minutes later they were carried across the Pungwe bridge and heading fast down the road towards Mankwala.

By the time they reached the minister's house it was already approaching evening and the sun was low behind the building. As the car pulled up, Manuel Chidagwa came hurrying out to meet them, waving for one of his servants to come and fetch the haversacks. Then Adelia came out, and for some time they both fussed over their two visitors, ushering them indoors. They were obviously genuinely upset that the visit had gone wrong, and sought desperately to make amends.

"My dear Mr Latrille ... my dear Miss Green ... until your phone call this morning we all thought you must be dead. We have been wondering how we were going to break the news to the British Consul. But you will be pleased to hear that the other member of your party – Miss Silk – is fine. I believe she is staying at the president's residence, here in Mankwala. I have not seen her personally since you all left my house last week ... but I am sure the president will be looking after her."

Rosalia said: "Oh yes, I'm quite sure he is!"

The two men were soon deep in conversation centred round Paul's account of their adventures, and Rosalia struck up a conversation of her own with Adelia.

"The president called here yesterday, when Manuel was out," said Adelia. "Your female colleague was with him. I must say, they seem to get along very well together; very well indeed!" She looked at Rosalia with narrowed eyes. "She was very worried about you, of course. But she said there would be no point in her returning to Europe by herself. I'm not sure exactly what she had in mind ..."

Both women, of course, knew exactly what Cressida had in mind, but Rosalia thought she had better show a little charity. "I really think Cressida is better suited to life out here rather than back in England," she said, not too proud of the fact that she was suddenly feeling rather pleased with herself – an emotion not too far from elation; triumph, even, as she looked across the room at the two men still engaged in earnest conversation.

Manuel Chidagwa caught her eye just then and raised his voice a little so as to

include the women in his conversation with Paul. "I had better telephone the president right away," he said. "All this has been a great worry to him. And of course it must have been a great worry to your charming colleague Miss Silk, too. At least we can now put their minds at rest."

His telephone call took some time, and it became plain that he was being passed from one person to another without success. At last he put the receiver down and turned back to face them.

"I'm afraid the president cannot be contacted for a day or two," he said. "His aides say he is taking a well-deserved break on the off-shore island of Ponto Douro, and apparently Miss Silk has gone with him."

Everyone digested this piece of information each in their own way. Then Manuel said, brightly: "Well, if they can take a rest, so can you. I must insist that you both make our house your home, for as long as you wish. Er ... I don't suppose you want to continue with your tour of the growing areas?"

"No," said Paul. "We managed to visit a fair selection of them. There are one or two areas that we haven't seen, but the other local growers will be able to pass on the information to them without our help."

Manuel was pouring them drinks now. Adelia opened the French windows and they strolled outside onto the terrace. Rosalia's tall drink – a cooling brandy and lemonade – perked her up and made her realise how much she needed a good rest. The Chidagwas' garden was as beautiful as ever now that the sun had set, its glorious backdrop of the Indian Ocean looking dark and mysterious in the half-light.

Adelia excused herself when she had finished her drink, and disappeared into the kitchen. Manuel too announced that he had to go into town for an hour or so, telling them to help themselves in the meanwhile to anything they might want.

Paul stood with his back to the crimson and orange bougainvillea that covered the house wall, and its vivid colour made his dark brown hair look almost black. Rosalia too was framed by the bougainvillea, and Paul's expression softened as he looked at her. He reached out and arranged a long, flowering spray around her hair, like a halo.

"Flowers always seem to suit you, Rosie," he said. "I suppose that's why you went into the floristry business in the first place."

"They probably just flatter me!" She gave a nervous little laugh.

Paul took her empty glass and set it down on the terrace table. Then he touched her arm, and they walked together down the steps and onto the grass. The frangipani tree was filling the garden with its fragrance, and Rosalia reached up and took one of the thick, stumpy flowering shoots in her hand, drawing it towards her face, holding the starry white blossom against her lips, breathing its heady perfume.

Paul sat down on the grassy slope, and after a while Rosalia joined him. Automatically he put his arm around her shoulders. They had been close enough to one



another during the hardships of the past few days to make the contact seem quite natural. He looked down, his face very close, and Rosalia expected him to say something romantic. But when he spoke, his words were far from amorous.

"It was quite wrong of Cressida to go running off like that," he said. "We shall have to stay here now until she shows up, whether we want to or not. It is most inconsiderate of her."

They sat quietly for some time in the twilight, watching a fleet of fishing boats setting out in the distance. The darkness was velvety among the trees when an enormous eagle owl swooped soundlessly down and perched on the lawn a few yards away, staring at them for some moments with unblinking yellow eyes, before questioning them with a gentle 'hooo?'

They stared back, amused, keeping quite still. Then Adelia came out of the house to look for them, and the sudden disturbance made the giant owl hunch its shoulders and spring into the air, to glide into the branches of a nearby jacaranda tree, heavy with purple blossom. They got up quickly and walked up to the terrace steps, into the light,



"Manuel won't be back for a while yet, so we shall have a quiet meal, the three of us," Adelia said, leading them through to the dining room.

For several days more, the president and Cressida remained incommunicado apparently on their holiday island, and although Paul may have felt some anxiety, both he and Rosalia found themselves enjoying their enforced rest – visiting the shops and one or two local hotels, spending much time on the beach and in the garden.

When Manuel Chidagwa finally announced that the president had returned to the mainland, there was no doubt that Paul and Rosalia had got to know each other far better. An emergency is said to bring out the best – or sometimes the worst – in a person, but in order to get to know someone really well, it is necessary to spend some time together with absolutely nothing to do. Separated briefly one afternoon, as Rosalia sat at a pavement café waiting for Paul, and suddenly caught sight of him striding through the market square beneath the scarlet

flamboyant trees that surrounded it, she thought she had never felt so completely peaceful and relaxed.

On the morning after the president's return to the capital, Manuel was on the phone early. They were still at breakfast when he walked into the room, all smiles.

"The president says it is his turn to give a party this time, to celebrate your safe deliverance. We are invited to the presidential palace this evening; and, of course, you will be reunited with your colleague, Miss Silk."

After the casual holiday atmosphere of the past few days, Rosalia felt uncomfortably formal at first in her halter-neck evening dress. She studied her reflection in the dressing table mirror doubtfully. But she was glad to see that its deep velvety purple still matched her complexion – that much darker than before her newly acquired tan. She emerged to find Paul in the drawing room with Chidagwa, and they were soon joined by Adelia resplendent in saffron and orange.

The ministerial limousine was standing waiting for them as they left the building, and soon they were speeding through some of the most affluent suburbs of Mankwala. In its colonial heyday, *o palacio presidencial*, pillared and porticoed, had been the provincial governor's residence. As they stopped, a liveried flunkey ran down the steps to hold open the car door for Rosalia and Adelia to alight. They were ushered inside, Rosalia feeling that it was all like a scene from a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. A footman took their names and announced them as they walked through the double doorway into the room.

It was the president who caught their eye first. He was such an enormous man, and so very gaudy, with his great display of decorations and bright colours. He strode across the vast room and clasped them both in an embrace.

"My dear Mr Latrille! My dear Miss Green ... *minha cara!* I cannot tell you how delighted, how relieved I am to see you, and how disgusted I am with the terrorists who have put a blight on your visit."

Rosalia thought that the president maintained his close embrace just a little too long as he gushed on, and she was starting to feel distinctly crushed when he released them, and led them across the plush carpets towards a buffet bar in one corner.

Cressida was standing there, waiting for them, holding out her arms, a small smile lifting the corners of her mouth. "Paul ... darling!" She kissed him on the lips, then gave Rosalia a brief embrace, brushing her cheek. "How terrible it was ... I thought you were both dead."

Paul's voice was calm as he said, simply: "It's good to see you again, Cressida."

They stood a little apart, looking at each other. Cressida was wearing a voluptuous creation of black lace, trimmed with flame. It was obviously new, unique, and frightfully expensive. To Rosalia's surprise, also, Cressida's amazing blonde dreadlocks were as tight and frizzy as ever, beautifully set in a full, tasselled fringe, like the pale petals of a gazania flower. Her skin had darkened considerably since she had been in

Africa, and even Rosalia would have had to admit that she looked stunningly glamorous.

A little later in the evening, when Rosalia had the chance, she asked Cressida where she had managed to get her hair done in such style.

"Why, darling," Cressida purred. "In South Africa, of course, where else? I flew out to Johannesburg one afternoon – and picked up this little dress at the same time. Fernando is such a dear."

The president had been circulating among his guests, talking freely, and his booming voice could frequently be heard over the buzz of conversation. It was getting late when he took Cressida's arm and led her to the top of the room, silencing everyone with an upraised hand. Then he called for drinks all round.

"My dear friends and colleagues. This party has been called firstly in honour of my guests from England, to show our delight at their safe escape from the insurgents. I give you a toast: Mr Paul Latrille, and Miss Rosalia Green!"

Everybody drank and then clapped politely. When the applause had died down, the president continued: "And now, I have a very important announcement to make. I have not been in Ponto Douro on holiday; I have been holding discussions with the leader of the resistance, and it looks as if peace is on its way." He paused and gestured towards Paul and Rosalia. "He apologised personally for letting his men put your lives in danger, and hopes you will forgive him. And I hope so too: both here in Zambezia and over most of southern Africa, forgiveness is in the air!"

There was a buzz of agreement in the room, and the president held up his hand again. "And now I have a further important announcement to make," he said, drawing Cressida forwards and holding her at arm's length like a salesman displaying his goods. "Cressida Silk has consented to be my wife, and a marriage ceremony has been arranged to take place next month!"

Champagne was flowing freely as Rosalia looked around the room for Paul, thinking he must have been completely devastated by the president's bombshell announcement. But when she spotted him, he was chatting happily with a government minister, laughing at some joke. He noticed Rosalia looking at him, and raised his glass playfully. Perhaps he had not been wounded too badly, after all.

\* \* \*

Back in England a few days later Rosalia found herself immersed for a while in the comparatively grey and humdrum world of routine work, and it was several months before she found time to visit her old shop again – more out of nostalgia than any business requirement. It seemed to be thriving under Felicity's management, and the two new girl assistants seemed pleasant and efficient. Strange, though, how cramped and limiting the place seemed now. If she were to be completely honest about it, Rosalia would hate having to take up where she left off.

As though reading her thoughts, Felicity said: "I expect the shop seems rather dull and unadventurous to you now, doesn't it, Mrs Latrille? You must have a much busier life now, I should think!"

Rosalia Latrille could not help but agree. "I loved it when I was here," she said. "But I certainly have broader horizons now."

