

## CHAPTER SIX

### INTO THE INTERIOR

MOMBASA is the gateway to the heart of Africa. Eight hundred miles still separated the missionaries from their destination. While they waited for transportation into the interior, the newcomers visited part of this island town, the ancient name of which was *M'vita*, meaning "war".

They saw the historic Fort Jesus, built by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century to secure their position on the coast of East Africa. To this harbour Vasco da Gama had sailed in 1498:

*Four small vessels comprised his fleet  
The Cross of Christ on each mainsheet.*

*The Cross of Christ, destined to be*

*Emblem of His supremacy.*

With the defeat of the Portuguese by the Arabs, in 1698, Christian influence waned and the Crescent of Islam was in the ascendant. The Holy Ghost Fathers, arriving in 1863, raised once again the standard of the Cross.

The Island of Mombasa is a world in miniature and has a magical loveliness, as the Sisters discovered, to their delight, when they set out to visit the bazaars. Dignified Arabs, dressed in voluminous embroidered robes, mingled with turbanned Indians and white-robed Somalis. The coastal Africans, clad in goat-skins, and dark Swahili girls wearing grass skirts, jostled Parsee ladies who rustled by in gorgeous *saris* and flashing ornaments. Seated under the flamboyant trees, the vendors shouted their wares—spices, frankincense, dates, fruit, rugs, jewels and beaten brass. The air was alive with light, sound and colour.

While Sister Kevin and her companions enjoyed their sightseeing tour, the Bishop was engaged in making arrangements for the journey inland. Bishop Hanlon, on his first coming to Uganda, in 1895, had made the journey on foot. Since 1896, however, things had changed. Operation "Lunatic Line" had been begun and there was, on the Sisters' arrival, a (more or less) permanent railway track from Mombasa to Nairobi, four hundred miles inland. In the romantic history of rail transportation this African Railway holds a special place. The building of the Kenya-Uganda Railway was begun by the British in 1896. The main reason was, ostensibly, to suppress the slave trade; there was, of course, another reason. With the discovery of the fertile country of Uganda, the sphere of British influence had been extended and the progress of the Christian missions brought this newly discovered territory into greater prominence. It was considered desirable, even necessary, that Britain maintain control over the strategically important headwaters of the Nile. Lord Salisbury's Government considered the possibility of constructing a railway from Mombasa to Lake Victoria, a project which raised a storm of protest among many people in England. The scheme was lampooned in the press. Caustic verses by Labouchere, a political opponent of Salisbury, give the gist of the general scepticism with which that noble Lord's project was regarded:

*What it will cost no words can express;  
What is its object no brain can suppose;  
Where it will start from no one can guess;  
Where it is going to nobody knows.*

*What is the use of it none can conjecture;  
What it will carry there's none can define;  
And in spite of George Curzon's superior lecture, It  
clearly is naught but a lunatic line.*

While waiting for the outcome of the Bishop's negotiations, the Sisters could have answered one of Labouchere's queries. They had good reason to know that the line started from Mombasa! Sister Kevin said:

"At that date the permanent track went as far as Nairobi. Beyond that you took your chance. A trial train from Nairobi to Kisumu had rolled down the Mau Summit. The week after our arrival at Mombasa, another trial train was to travel on this temporary track. The Bishop was offered free tickets for us if we cared to take the risk. The offer was too good to be missed!"

Nowadays travellers land at the modern harbour, Kilindini. Taxis take them swiftly to the railway station, where they board a modern Pullman train, complete with diner and coupe. In this moving hotel, they enjoy the two-day trip to Kampala, passing through famous game Reserves and the awe-inspiring scenery of the Rift Valley. Yet, for the missionary, there is something nostalgic in that terse comment of a veteran missionary:

"The offer was too good to be missed."

The group that gathered on what served as the railway platform on that morning in January, 1903, were agog with excitement. Any misgivings on the part of Sister Alexis and Sister Andrea were brusquely brushed aside by Sister Marcella: "It's a choice between that and walking—and we don't have to pay!"

The Diary reads:

"On Thursday, January 8th, we boarded our wonderful train. Two carriages were selected for us and coupled so that we could cross the rickety little platform and visit each other. We had a small Beatrice stove, biscuits, cheese, tea, sugar and tinned fish and, of course, a kettle and teapot. We were told that somewhere, at some time, along the line, someone would provide us with food at the *ddk* bungalows. So off we puffed with thousands (so it seemed) of Africans and Asians lending vocal aid to the engine's attempts to start. The carriages had wooden seats. Only wood fuel was used, so progress was slow. Wild animals were prone to lie on the track and there was some unpleasantness when the engine encountered a sleeping rhino." (It does not state whether the "unpleasantness" was on the part of the rhino or of the engine!)

We heard many terrible stories of the ravages of wild animals, while the railway was being built, and Sister Alexis was always on the look out for lion and elephant. Of these there were plenty. Indeed the variety of animal life in that great stretch of country was a thrilling sight. We saw large herds of giraffe, ostriches, zebra and all kinds of antelope and gazelle. It was superb!

The meals at the *dak* bungalows proved rather tantalizing. No sooner had the food been procured, after a long wait—it was usually rice and eggs with curry—than the train whistled, and we had to grab and run. At night we rolled up in a blanket, for it got quite cold, and were fairly comfortable. In the morning we were the colour of Red Indians, from the powdered metal that had blown in on us. Travelling in this way, for a whole day and a night, we finally reached Nairobi."

At this time, the city of Nairobi was in its muddy and dusty infancy. In her book *The White Man's Country*, Elspeth Huxley describes Nairobi in January 1903:

"The railway station consisted of a wooden platform roofed by a few strips of corrugated iron and a godown with a kitchen clock suspended over the door . . . The town consisted of one cart track, recently labelled Government Road, flanked by Indian dukas."

The Sisters had nothing to add to this description of the now famous city. They had reached the end of the permanent way and were now approaching the adventurous lap:

"From Nairobi onward the train went at a snail's pace, so that often the male passengers jumped off and ran alongside for exercise. The wild animals were numerous and the Masai 'braves' hostile,

some hurling spears at the train! Going up the Mau Escarpment, the Bishop bade us stand on the footboards and hang on to the handgrips. He instructed us, moreover, that we must be prepared to jump at the word of command! It was surely unique in the annals of train travel to proceed in such a fashion, like a beetle hanging on to the side. The train listed perilously and we expected, at every moment, to go over into the gorge. Slowly we climbed the steep gradient and slowly we descended on the other side—the first train to make the complete journey from Mombasa to Kisumu—*Deo Gratias!* Coming down from the Mau, the view was breathtaking. The trees were very beautiful and as the hills stretched out, one behind another, the forests rose tier upon tier as far as one could see. There were chasms and ravines among the mountains, and the train went curling round in perilous circles just like horse-shoe curves. When we looked down—those of us who dared!—we could see tracks of the railway line far below. This railway is going to be a marvellous piece of work."

Kisumu was no salubrious spot, with fiery heat by day and hordes of mosquitoes by night. For the travellers, it was the end of one journey and the beginning of another. Here they had their first sight of the great Lake Victoria, that majestic inland sea as big as Ireland and, to reach Uganda, they had to cross its gleaming width. They found their launch, the *Percy Anderson*, but it looked little better than boards tied together. The Bishop looked askance at the craft and firmly decided that it needed a thorough overhaul. This meant delay. At night the Sisters slept in a railway carriage. At least they tried to sleep:

"All night hyenas bumped against the bottom of our railway carriage and numerous unnamed beasts howled around and made the night hideous."

Yet it was truly "wild Africa", there in the Kavirondo Bay/with the large expanse of water, the tropical forest, and the almost unbroken stillness of the day, disturbed only by the flight of a bird or the cry of a beast.

In Kisumu the Sisters met for the first time men of the Baganda tribe, the people for whom they had come to work. They were much impressed by the grave, gentle courtesy of these men who had come to welcome them. Gifts were exchanged, according to etiquette, and the Baganda formally welcomed the Sisters to their country. As they had not yet reached Buganda, the Sisters were somewhat intrigued by the formal welcome. They were told that this "advance welcome" was in accordance with Baganda traditions of hospitality, and afforded to royalty and other important personages. Naturally, they were highly gratified and expressed their deep appreciation of the welcome, as well as the hope that they might serve the gracious people of their adopted country.

At last the launch was judged to be fairly sea-worthy. It was obviously no luxury liner, and the Sisters were warned that they might have to "rough it" a bit. In view of the perilous hardships already endured, this warning sounded somewhat ominous, but they were prepared for anything, and boarded the almost moribund steamer with light-hearted gaiety. Their account of the Lake crossing is light-hearted, too.

"The launch boasted only one cabin which was allotted to the Sisters. A flight of nine stairs led down to it from the deck. A long table filled the length of the cabin and two wooden benches fixed to the wall afforded us seats by day and beds

by night. We slept three on a bench, no room at all for a good turn! There was no possibility of undressing or bathing, so all had their share of extreme discomfort. The bishop had a camp bed on the forrard deck. The priests bestowed themselves where they could, some of them on that part of the deck which formed the sloping roof of the cabin. A series of man slides punctuated their slumbers and caused much suppressed merriment both above and below stairs.

The bill of fare included no surprise items. In a corner of the deck swung a sheep's carcase, skinned and sun-dried. This was the tempting meat supply from which chunks were cut daily, and stewed with onions and small potatoes. One morning the Bishop looked extremely troubled and kept gazing first in one direction and then in another. Early on the voyage we had learned that the one-man crew—an aged local man, who was Captain, Purser, Navigator, Stoker, Old Tom Cobley and all— could not read the chart! There was neither lifeboat nor lifebelt on board, so the evident anxiety on His Lordship's face made us all want to know what was amiss. 'It seems to me that we are going the *length* of the Lake and not across it. And the trouble is that there is not a compass on board to check the direction.' It was then that Sister Kevin remembered the small compass which had been given her by the novice at Mill Hill with the laughing remark: 'It may come in useful!' It certainly did on this occasion, and proved the Bishop right, although it took him a long time to induce Old Neptune to change the course. With very little firewood and the minimum of provisions on board, the lake crossing might have ended in disaster. God be praised for the Bishop's wisdom and seeing eyes!

At evening time we sought out sheltered coves in which to anchor, and watched the hippopotami sport around the launch. They showed no fear of the strange bipeds, but opened their huge mouths and patiently waited for the morsels thrown to them. Crocodiles basked on the low rocks and we watched, intrigued, the white birds that perched on their jaws and picked their teeth! What a lot we had to learn about the animal kingdom!

When we came to the largest island, Buvuma, we found it in the throes of 'eviction'. Sleeping sickness had so ravaged the island that the Government ordered the people to the mainland. It was a sad sight, as these people dearly loved their island home. The remnant of the population of 40,000 came down to the cove to welcome us. With them were Fr. Proctor and Fr. Pelger, the island missionaries. Fr. Proctor was coming to the mainland with us; Father Pelger was staying until the evacuation of the island was completed. In the loneliness and silence, the beautiful deserted island looked somewhat appalling, as one watched the solitary missionary taking his place in the canoe to return to his duty. Storms could isolate him for months, sickness could strike and loneliness depress. Fortitude, which is a Gift of the Holy Spirit, is needed in such circumstances. We watched as the canoe glided away, the young priest waving his sun helmet until he was out of sight. We had our first lesson in the complete and all-embracing detachment required by the missionary.

Our voyage was nearing its end. On January 15th we sighted the little port of Munyonyo where we were to land. The launch could not dock, but from where we were anchored we could see the crowds gathered to greet us. Presently a fleet of canoes, made of woven bark and embowered with green leaves, hove into sight. The paddlemen were naked to the waist and their shoulders glistened with grease. The leader began by casting on the waters some pieces of plantain and some tobacco, propitiating the water-god, Mukasa, for a safe passage. We descended very cautiously into the frail-looking craft and, to the gliding rhythm of an African Lake-shanty, we made for the shore.

Suddenly it seemed to us that a slice of brown hill tumbled seawards. It was the impatient element of the welcoming throng which was yelling, clapping, beating drums, piping pipes, blowing horns and raising a deafening clamour. With a rush and a roar, the vanguard hit the water. Before we knew what was happening the canoe was lifted shoulder high and carried to the shore where we were dumped unceremoniously into the vociferous melee. Sister Kevin was at her gayest and looked as though she had been left a fortune! Such was our reception to the Kingdom of Buganda!

It was a wonderful procession that set out on the seven-mile tramp to Nsambya. Hundreds of porters took up the loads; a long line of well-wishers joined on; we were given our places in the middle, the Fathers bringing up the rear and, to a swinging tune, we set off. The Fathers told us that the marching song was all about us. We hoped it was nice! We went on our now weary way, stumbling over roots in the forest, slipping on mud in the narrow tracks, struggling up steep inclines and plunging into declivities. The path we followed was the old caravan route by which the Arab slave-traders had passed, with their cargoes of ivory and their bands of slaves, from the villages to the Lake-shores. We thought of them and counted our blessings! At least we were not manacled and could pause for an occasional rest and drink some water. When we passed a village the women and children came out and, kneeling, presented us with flowers, fruit and welcome gourds of cool water. They greeted us in their liquid musical language and we loved them at sight. At one stage the *Namasole* (Queen-Mother) herself came to greet us. She rode in a rickshaw something like a large perambulator. She was dressed in white muslin with a blue flower and looked truly regal. She welcomed us to her son's kingdom. We replied with a little formal speech in Luganda, which we had carefully rehearsed. This gave her great pleasure. It was a moving moment for us too. She then took her leave.

By this time we were exhausted and walking became a labour. Sister Kevin's face was burned brick-red, but she kept cheerful, and valiantly encouraged us all. We reached Nsambya drenched in sweat, caked with red dust; our heads ached and our eyes smarted; the world was whirling around us. Here again we were given a rousing welcome, and then went to Church for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. In spite of our fatigue we were exalted by the thought that we had reached our adopted land. Tea followed, the Fathers opening precious tins of fruit to add festivity to the fare. We were hardly conscious of what was there, but *were* conscious that bread was *not* there. Afterwards the Bishop led us across the road to our new home. He presented the keys with due ceremony. Mother Paul kneeling to receive them. He spoke to us seriously, exhorting us to devote ourselves whole-heartedly to the women and children of his Vicariate, and then he blessed us.

We entered our little convent at last. Night had fallen and we stumbled over the piled up luggage on the floor. A hurricane lantern was unearthed and lighted. Mother Paul unpacked our large Crucifix and hung it on the wall, while we paused and made an act of Faith. The lantern threw weird shadows on the white-washed walls and, although dropping off our feet with fatigue, we had to laugh at the picture we presented. Someone murmured 'Bed'. Where were the beds? No beds could be found. Sister Kevin was spreading her blanket on the floor, quite undaunted by the lack of a couch, when the mission boys appeared, bearing camp beds. Soon there was silence. Sheer fatigue rendered us speechless, but our hearts were eloquent with prayer and praise. We had reached Uganda. We had reached home."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### GREEN RUSHES AND GOLDEN BOUGHS

THE six weary Sisters slept soundly on their camp beds—or on what they thought were their camp beds. It was many weeks later, when a second set of beds arrived on the doorstep, that they learned the truth. The luggage van, containing the heavier items, had not followed the gallant engine up the Mau Escarpment. It had dropped off! When the priests in the Mission checked the luggage they found the Sisters' camp beds missing. Not a word was said. The Fathers sent their own beds to the convent and they themselves slept on the hard mud floor until the lost property eventually reached Nsambya. It was an action typical of the quiet self-sacrifice of the Mill Hill Fathers.

Extract from 'Love Is The Answer' The Story of Mother Kevin O.S.F. by Sister M. Louis, O.S.F. Fallons (1964)