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House of Stone

The True Story of a Family Divided in War-Torn Zimbabwe

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Аннотация

A powerful and intensely human insight into the civil war in Zimbabwe, focusing on a white farmer and his maid who find themselves on opposing sides.One bright morning Nigel Hough, one of the few remaining white farmers in Mugabe's Zimbabwe, received the news he was dreading – a crowd were at the gate demanding he surrender his home and land. To his horror, his family's much-loved nanny Aqui was at the head of the violent mob that then stole his homestead and imprisoned him in an outhouseBy tracing the intertwined lives of Nigel and Aqui – rich and poor, white and black, master and maid – through intimate and moving interviews, Christina Lamb captures not just the source of a terrible conflict, but also her own conviction that there is still hope for one of Africa's most beautiful countries.

Содержание

House of Stone

THE TRUE STORY OF A FAMILY DIVIDED IN WAR-TORN ZIMBABWE

CHRISTINA LAMB

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To my parents who taught me there are always at least two sides to a story

Among the gold mines of the inland plains between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers [there is a] … fortress built of stones of marvellous size, and there appears to be no mortar joining them … This edifice is almost surrounded by hills, upon which are others resembling it in the fashioning of stone and the absence of mortar and one of them is a tower more than 12 fathoms high.

VICENTE PEGADO, captain at the Portuguese garrison of Sofala,

on seeing the ruins of Great Zimbabwe,

dzimba dza mabwe, House of Stone, 1531

I *have one great fear in my heart-that one day when they are turned to loving they will find we are turned to hating.*

ALAN PATON, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948)

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Prologue

THE WAR VETERANS had been living at the bottom of the garden for months. Every afternoon the family would take tea on the terrace and stare beyond the swimming pool and children's tree house to the plumes of smoke rising from the round thatched huts that the squatters had built. Every night the family tossed and turned to their drumming and chanting. The next morning the farmer would find the carcasses of the cattle that the intruders had slaughtered.

Kendor Farm was in Wenimbi Valley in the rich tobacco-growing district of Marondera. Tobacco was Zimbabwe's main export, and for the previous two and a half years neighbouring farms all around them had endured similar invasions. The first murder of a white farmer had happened only a few miles away on 15 April 2000. Since then many farmers had been badly beaten; some had been hacked to death. Most had been either kicked off or fled. By August 2002 the morning roll call over the radio, started to check on the safety of local farmers, had stopped because Kendor was the only white farm left in the valley.

The Hough family had thought about leaving. But the 1,400-acre ostrich and tobacco farm and eight-bedroom house with its sweeping view over the balancing rocks and floaty canopy of msasa trees was their dream. They had worked hard for the farm and sunk all their money into it. They wanted their children

to grow up as they had and could not imagine starting all over again. Other white farmers who had moved abroad to England or Australia had ended up driving minicabs and living in poky council flats. Besides, it was not only them. On the land they had a factory producing bags and shoes from ostrich leather and they employed 300 people as well as running an orphanage for children whose parents had died in the AIDS pandemic.

One morning, Claire Hough had gone to take the children to school and her husband Nigel had left for a meeting in town when their manager called in a panic. A crowd of people had arrived at the gate waving a letter demanding the farm. Nigel grabbed a friend and rushed back in his pick-up. By the time they got there, the mob had started a fire in his driveway, taunting him and barring their way with sticks and shamboks. *'Hondo, hondo'* they chanted, Shona for 'war'. He could see that some of his furniture had been taken out of the house and piled up in front of the terrace.

Nigel telephoned the police but they refused to come, saying they did not involve themselves in 'domestic matters'. By now the crowd had surrounded him, dragging him off, nostrils flaring as they scented blood. 'This is not Rhodesia any more!' shouted one man. 'Go back to your own people.' As they pulled him towards an outhouse, Nigel noticed that some of the women had draped themselves in his wife's scarves and dresses and were tossing around his children's stuffed animals. Then he noticed something else.

In the front was Aqui Shamvi, the woman who had worked as their maid and much-loved nanny to their children since their first baby had been born six years earlier. To the Houghs she was almost part of the family. Now she was transformed. 'Get out or we'll kill you!' she spat at him, eyes rolling with hatred. 'There is no place for whites in this country!'

* * *

I first met the Houghs (pronounced Huff) and their maid Aqui (Ack-we) in August 2002 when they were all still living on Kendor Farm. Their relationship seemed different to me from any other I had seen between white farmers and black servants in Zimbabwe, and rather uplifting at a time when Robert Mugabe's government was promoting racist hate-speak in the state media.

The Houghs encouraged me to talk to Aqui and she was refreshingly candid as well as stunning in her red and white polka-dot uniform and green headscarf, and with her great big laugh. The setting was both sinister and surreal-we all sat on the terrace chatting and taking tea and Madeira cake trying to ignore the wood-smoke rising from the huts of war vets at the end of the lawn. To get to the farm had involved negotiating a series of roadblocks manned by youth militia adorned with Mugabe bandannas, their eyes bloodshot from smoking weed. Marondera was only an hour's drive outside Harare and its rich red soil had made the area one of the main targets of the government's land grab.

I wrote an article about the farm in the *Sunday Telegraphy*

for which I was then diplomatic correspondent. In it, I described Nigel Hough as 'a model white farmer' for all his involvement with the local community and pointed out that to take his farm would expose the fact that the government was clearly not interested in helping its people.

A week later, to my horror, the farm was seized.

At that time, like many, I could not believe that Mugabe was really serious about seizing all the white-owned farms. The land distribution was undoubtedly unfair, with most of the productive land still in white hands. But the 5,000 commercial farms produced most of the food for the nation, were the country's biggest employer and responsible for 40 per cent of its export earnings.

Three years on, fewer than 300 white farmers remain on their farms. Yet it was never really a racial issue. Those of us in the Western media played into Mugabe's hands by initially portraying it as such, focusing on white farmers like the Houghs, perhaps because they seemed people like us. But the real victims were the hundreds of thousands of farm workers like Aqui who lost their homes and jobs. Many of them were beaten by marauding youth brigades who accused them of supporting the opposition and raped their wives or daughters while forcing them to sing pro-Mugabe songs. With nowhere else to go, they fled to the rural areas where they struggle to survive on wild fruits and fried termites.

My first visit to Zimbabwe was in 1994 when I was living

in neighbouring South Africa. I was so taken with its beautiful scenery and friendly people that a few months later I went back on holiday with my husband-to-be. In those days, it was one of the most prosperous countries in Africa. We got giggling-drenched in the spray from Victoria Falls, drank gin-and-tonics as the sun set over the Zambezi and laughed at road signs warning 'Elephants Crossing' We sat awed by the silent grandeur of the Matopos Hills, burial place of Cecil Rhodes, empire builder after whom the country was originally named and a man who said, 'I would annex the planets if I could.'

We also marvelled at an African nation with traffic lights that worked (even if they did call them robots), the pothole-free roads, neat brick schools everywhere, cappuccino bars and book cafés. It seemed a true Garden of Eden and the roads on which we travelled passed through a patchwork of lush green fields of tobacco, cotton and maize. They looked like model farms with combine harvesters gathering up neat bundles, long greenhouses full of neatly spaced roses, and rainbows playing through the water sprinkling from sophisticated irrigation systems.

Today Zimbabwe looks as if a terrible scourge has swept through. Some of the most advanced farms in the world have been reduced to slash and burn. The fields are charred and spiked with dead maize stalks or overgrown with weeds; the equipment has been plundered and stripped; and what little ploughing still goes on is by oxen or donkey. The country, which used to export large amounts of food, cannot even feed its own people. The

destruction of the farms has left more than half of Zimbabwe's 12 million population on the edge of starvation and life expectancy has plummeted to around 30. The money is so worthless, with a loaf of bread costing 90,000 Zim dollars, that the country is returning to a barter economy.

In 2005, Mugabe switched his attention to the cities, targeting the urban population who had dared vote against him in successive elections. In the last week of May, I watched in shock as police bulldozers demolished thousands of homes, market stalls and small businesses. Operation Murambatswina or 'Clean Up the Filth' turned the country into an apocalyptic landscape wreathed with plumes of smoke and scattered with fleeing refugees clutching the scant belongings they had managed to salvage in bundles or on their heads. The few lucky ones had wardrobes or iron beds strapped onto wheelbarrows.

I have seen many dreadful things in my nineteen years of foreign reporting but nothing has affected me so profoundly as wandering through the smoking ruins of Mbare, the southern suburb of Harare that sprawls around Zimbabwe's oldest and largest market. My Lonely Planet guidebook recommends it as one of its five highlights of Harare and the place to see 'colourful crowded scenes typical of Africa'. Instead, it looked as if a tsunami had passed through, reducing the famous market into drift-piles of smashed wood, twisted metal and broken bricks. The ground was awash with fruit and tomatoes trampled by the boots of Mugabe's henchmen, the ultimate indignity in a country

where so many were starving.

Sirens wailed and newly acquired Chinese warplanes roared overhead to add to the fear. I walked around, careless of the fact that I was illegally in the country and that my white skin and fair hair were acting like a beacon to my presence, so stunned was I that a country's leader could do this to his own people.

A few figures were picking among the debris like vultures while others crouched in small dazed groups by the roadside. It was winter and the ground was hard and cold. The ubiquitous face of Robert Mugabe stared impassively up through the broken glass of a smashed picture. Ten or so women, two of them breastfeeding babies, squatted amid the rubble of what they told me had been the country's oldest chicken cooperative, founded in 1945. Further on, next to a pile of pink concrete and some torn magazine photos of celebrities, sat a large woman with elaborately beaded hair and a face that was crumpling inward. She tonelessly explained that the scattered debris was all that remained of her beauty salon, Glory's Hair Palace, which she had built up over many years. Glory was an extremely ample woman, jokingly known in the neighbourhood as Miss Universe. Her reputation for nimble weaving of hair, all the time dispensing sound advice about the male species (with frequent references to her own long-departed husband 'the useless Blessing'), had enabled her to feed and educate her children.

A little further was a small fire around which huddled a terrified family with a daughter in a wheelchair. The mother,

Memory, had the white flaking skin common among those who are HIV positive. 'When they came with the bulldozers we told the police we have a disabled child, so please don't knock down our house' she said. 'They just said we don't care about the disabled and bulldozed our house and my husband's carpentry workshop and all his tools.' Since then they had been sleeping in the open, and she showed me a seeping wound on her daughter's leg where she had been bitten by a rat.

None of these people were beggars or criminals. They had all been working for years to provide their families a decent life, only to find their homes and workplaces crushed to rubble in the name of 'urban beautification'.

Along the railway line, past the National Foods factory, I came to Kambu Zuma suburb where police and militia had just arrived on their trucks and bulldozers. I stared aghast as people sat and did nothing while police took axes to their homes. Some of the houses were not shacks but two-storey concrete houses that took the bulldozers an hour to demolish.

Impatient with their slow progress, the police started ordering residents to destroy their own homes. Large fires were lit and people told to throw on their possessions. I watched hundreds of Zimbabweans, one of Africa's most educated populations, obediently smash and burn all they had ever worked for, leaving them with nowhere to live, no means to feed their children or pay their school fees.

I had made repeated trips to report on Zimbabwe since

1999 when the first farm invasion took place. Throughout the subsequent intimidation of the population and rigging of three elections, I had never understood why Zimbabweans did not rise up against their leader as people had in Yugoslavia or Ukraine. It irritated me that they kept asking why the outside world did nothing, when it seemed they were unwilling to help themselves. But at that moment in Kambu Zuma, watching people meekly burn their own belongings, I realized for the first time just how much twenty-five years of Mugabe's rule had oppressed the population. The next morning I had coffee with Nelson Chamisa, the youth leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. Usually something of a firebrand, he stared into his cup, looking utterly defeated. 'The people will never rise up now,' he said, 'Mugabe can do anything he likes to them.'

Afterwards when I returned home to London, I found myself waking in the middle of the night seeing those blank faces watching the bulldozers. I went to see *Macbeth* at the magical Wilton Music Hall in the East End and found Shakespeare's tragic hero portrayed as an African dictator as if to haunt me further.

'Where will it stop?' had been the plaintive cry of a friend from one of the United Nations agencies in Harare. 'It's just so unnecessary.' His organization, like all foreign aid agencies, had been banned by Mugabe from assisting the hundreds of thousands made homeless because the President insisted there was 'no humanitarian crisis'. Later, Mugabe refused to let the UN

supply tents to those still sleeping in the open, saying 'there is no tradition of tents' in Zimbabwe, and his bulldozers destroyed a model settlement built by the UN in Headlands. I wasn't surprised to read the latest World Bank statistics revealing that 70 per cent of Zimbabweans are living below the poverty line and describing its fall in living standards from 1999 to 2005 as 'unprecedented for a country not at war'.

The tragedy of Zimbabwe, as my friend from the UN said, is that it is just so unnecessary. But to this African Macbeth it is very necessary indeed. For Mugabe is a man who, in a quarter of a century, has gone from liberation hero and darling of the left to tyrant with much blood on his hands. Staying in power has become synonymous with survival.

This is a story then about two people who have lived through all this, from a brutal civil war to the elation of becoming the last British colony in Africa to win independence; the early optimism and international acclaim, with Mugabe even receiving an honorary knighthood; and then the descent into madness. It is a story of two people, from completely different backgrounds, one rich, one poor, one white, one black, yet it is not about race. Rather it is about power and one violent man trying to save his skin even if he destroys the whole country in the process.

Ethnic cleansing is a loaded term and not quite accurate for what Mugabe has done, though the Ndebeles have been targeted most and he has increasingly surrounded himself with members of his own Zezuru clan whom he has known since the days of

the liberation war. Perhaps it should be called political cleansing or class cleansing, for Mugabe's Marxist ideology and loathing of the bourgeoisie underpin many of his actions. Anyone with a different point of view is forced to conform or flee. In the last five years, at least a quarter of the population have left the country- more than 3 million people, including many of Zimbabwe's brightest, such as doctors, nurses, journalists and teachers. Those who remain are enfeebled by fear and hunger, and many are sick. Around a third of the adult population are infected with the HIV virus, and few of those are able to access drugs. Mugabe has even banned church feeding programmes. By 2006 Zimbabwe had the world's lowest life expectancy- just 37 for men and 34 for women. People were so desperate in Zimbabwe's brutalised society that the United Nations Children's Fund reported one child abused every hour partly because of a myth that AIDS could be cured by having sex with a virgin.

Back in 2001, on one of the last times I was actually allowed into the country as a journalist, I went with a group of colleagues to attend a press conference of Didymus Mutasa, hardline Mugabe loyalist and Politburo member. 'We would be better off with only six million people, with our own people who support the liberation struggle,' he told us in his soft voice. 'We don't want these extra people.' He spoke extremely politely and at the time I thought this was just crazed talk. But Mutasa then became State Security Minister in charge of secret police and it was he who headed Operation Murambatswina. For in the violence-

filled years since his threat was made, Zimbabweans have learnt to their cost that Mugabe and his henchmen mean exactly what they say.

London, November 2006

1 *Zhakata's Kraal, 1970*

IT WAS ONLY WHEN Aquinata crossed the second of the three rivers where her two brothers lay buried that she felt safe. Her way back from the Catholic mission school went up and down through yellow elephant grass and over rocky kopjes or hills dotted with spiky acacia trees where green mambas lurked. If she walked quickly she could just do it in an hour.

The teachers would always keep back two or three of the girls after school to cook their supper. Aqui hated that. She had never fainted in lessons like some of her friends but most days she had been up since four or five, collecting water and firewood before school, and had eaten nothing since tea in the morning. *I would be so hungry in my belly that it hurt just to look into that pot of fine white sadza. Sometimes it would even be fortified with lumps of meat. Yet they wouldn't even give me a scrap.*

It also meant she would be walking home as the shadows turned crimson and the sun swelled like an elephant's bottom then suddenly slunk from the sky. That was the hour when trees turned to dark murmuring shapes where spirits or *tokoloshis* might hide and bad men and animals came out. On what Aqui thought of as the Wrong Side of the rivers, warthogs and vicious dogs might dart from the bush, and once she even saw a cobra lying like a stick across the path, its skin shiny as if coated with dew. In the rivers were crocodiles that occasionally ate people

from the village, though that did not stop Aqui and the other children from swimming.

But once she had navigated the log over the middle river, a crossing she could now do in five steps, she would finally be relieved of the fist that clutched at her chest and forced her breathing into an asthmatic wheeze. *Then I could walk head high for I was back in my territory, crossing the lands where the ancestors lay buried.* The wood-smoke on the wind came from the fires of her people, a subclan of the Zezuru, one of the biggest Shona tribes, and the thump-thump she could hear was the pounding of millet by their women.

Aqui lived among the prickly cactus trees in the so-called Remote Areas of Mashonaland. Her village was named Zhakata's Kraal, after a former headman, and it lay on the highveld in the stony shadow of the Daramombe Mountains behind which the birds chased the disappearing sun every evening. It was not on any map or road and was a long day's walk from the nearest town of Chivhu, a small cattle-ranching settlement that the whites called Enkeldoorn after the Dutch for 'single thorn', about 90 miles south of their capital, Salisbury. Zhakata's Kraal was in one of the Native Reserves, communal lands into which blacks had been shunted when the whites came, and it was a desolate place, the surrounding trees all having been shorn of limbs for firewood. The village consisted of a line of round mud-and-pole huts with thatched roofs all facing east and dotted amid large rocks and thorn trees. Chickens scratched in

the dust and a stray dog with a withered leg scooted about on its bottom. The headman's place stood on the other side, and a little away was the house of the witchdoctor or *nganga* near the sacred muchakata tree under which the elders would hold their meetings and lay offerings to appease the ancestral spirits.

Aqui was proud that her parents were very clever and, unlike most of the villagers, did not believe in ghosts or *tokoloshis* that could possess you, poison your food or bewitch your enemies, but that did not stop her quickening her step as she passed by. Sometimes lightning could turn itself into a ball and chase a person round a hut to strike him dead, as had happened to her father's cousin who let his mombes trample his neighbour's fields and she wasn't sure what that was if not witchcraft. 'Better to be safe than late [as in dead],' said her grandmother who saw faces in the fire and was a *mhondoro*, which meant she had the spirit of a lion and could act as a medium to talk to the ancestors.

Aqui was the eldest of five children. There had been eight of them but two of her younger brothers and a sister had died as infants. Such deaths were common in the village. *I think one brother and sister died of dehydration from diarrhoea and one brother from jaundice but my mother said it was because the spirits were not happy The first boy was almost two when he died and my mother said it was because she had met another mother whose child had muti on his head to protect him.* The weeping after the death of the first son had gone on for days and he had been buried in the banks of the first river Aqui crossed on the way to school.

The elders had explained that children could not be buried in dry places like older people because they are weak and their souls not yet formed so had to be buried in the soft clay of the riverbanks.

Their home was a small compound comprising three *rondavels*, round windowless huts, inside a fence of jagged branches. Like all the huts in the village, theirs were made from mud from anthills that the women would mix up with water from the river to form sticky dough then plaster it on with their hands. *I loved watching them doing it and longed for the day I would have my own hut.* Some of the more artistic women used sticks to decorate them with swirls or a sharp stone to cut a diamond pattern, but her mother left theirs plain. The roof was made of dried elephant grass that the women carried on their heads in bundles from the river, and for the floor they mixed cowpats with water, which set as solid as concrete.

The biggest hut in their compound was the bedroom hut where her mother, father and surviving baby brother slept and their few belongings were kept. The only decor was a small cracked mirror and a yellowing 1966 calendar advertising tractor parts that her father had brought back from a job; there was a thin lumpy mattress on the ground and a tin trunk held clothes and a Bible.

The second hut was on stilts with a ladder of crooked logs leading up to it. That was the storeroom for mealie meal to dry, safe from the white ants that got everywhere and the rats that kept Aqui awake with their scrabbling at night as they tried to

tunnel under the hut walls. The third and last hut was the kitchen hut in which they cooked the meals and Aqui and her sisters would sleep. The kitchen hut also served as the sitting room and as the female members of the family entered they would squat on the ground on the left while the men veered right to sit on a raised bench that ran all along the side. It was always smoky inside, but once a visitor grew accustomed to the gloom they would see shelves at the back moulded from the wall. On these were arranged the family's few cooking utensils and tin cups as well as two green enamel plates decorated with red flowers that her father had brought from town. The back of the hut was considered the sacred abode of the *mudzimu*, the ancestral spirits that protect the family, and when Aqui's siblings died they were laid on one of the shelves before being buried to help them cross the boundary to the spirit world.

In the centre of the floor was a fire in a round hearth where her mother would cook *sadza.* Sometimes they would eat it spiced up with relish from her mother's garden or wild fruits like marula or chakata that the chief had forbidden the villagers from selling because he believed that would cause lightning.

If the mealies were ready in the field they would roast them brown and crispy, and this was Aqui's favourite food. She thought there was nothing better than blowing off the ash and biting into the crunchy sweetness. Apart, perhaps, from the first rain when the children would all run outside and dance about, holding their hands out to try and catch the little liquid rocks which burst all

around them and would turn the brown land green overnight and wash away the red dust that coated their feet and shins. *In winter the cooking meant the hut would be nice and cosy to sleep in but in summer it was like an oven and horrid.*

The happiest days were those when she arrived home to a yeasty smell in the air and a large oil-drum bubbling away on a fire. This would mean her mother was making Seven Days, a homemade beer of maize and rapoko millet mixed with well water, so named because it took seven days to be ready. It was this that paid for Aqui's school fees and the uniform of blue and white striped dress that she always kept immaculate.

Her mother's beer was renowned in the village. On the first day of brewing, beer drinkers would pass by and give a long sniff then say, 'Eh, eh, that smells good, I am looking forward to drinking this one.' After a day of simmering, the drum would be left to cool in the hut for two days and on the fourth day more rapoko added until the mixture was of porridge consistency. It was then repeatedly boiled and simmered to reduce it and more water added from the well. When the beer was ready it had a thick froth which had to be poured off through a sieve.

On the seventh day if the beer drinkers did not automatically return to the hut, Aqui would climb an anthill or rock and shout, 'Seven Day is ready!' Her mother would then sit by the big drum, her wide skirt arranged around her considerable girth, and ladle out the lumpy yellow liquid with a cup hooked to a long stick. *She usually told me to give the first cup to the biggest beer-drinker*

because if he pronounced it good then others would flock in. People gave ten cents a cup if they had money, otherwise they paid in kind with cobs of corn or cabbage heads, and would sit there from morning till night, talking, drinking, playing tsoro [a kind of backgammon with bottle-tops] and fighting. The customers were almost all men but there was one married couple who would arrive early in the morning holding hands nicely, and, by the evening, be fighting like dogs.

Aqui hated fighting. Her full name Aquinata meant peacemaker and she was the family's firstborn in a land where everyone wanted a son. She also had a Shona name-Wadzanai-which her mother said meant 'Don't shout at each other'. It was only later that Aqui would ponder the circumstances that on the long night of her birth in August 1962 had led to her parents choosing such a name rather than Precious, Blessing or Joy like her friends, or Chipo, which means Gift, like her mother.

Aquinata was the name she was christened by the Irish missionary with the shaky hands who downed her in the bowl of water and let slip. It was a story she never tired of hearing from her mother. She particularly liked the bit where for a moment there was complete silence in the room that served as a church and the congregation all held their breath wide-eyed. Her mother usually paused in the telling at that point. Then baby Aqui was retrieved and borne aloft dripping, and to everyone's astonishment she did not cry. Father Walter said she was named after a saint who was a man of peace and renounced all things.

She did not really have anything to renounce, apart from her school uniform, but she liked having a distinguished name even if everyone in the village shortened it to Aqui, pronounced ack-we.

On days that Aqui had not been kept at school late to cook, when she got home, she would go to their stand or field and tend the cattle and goats. This meant swatting away the clouds of flies that hovered over their hides and picking the ticks from their skin as the animals pulled and chewed at the grass, then herding them back to their compound before the first stars lit in the sky. Her *mhondoro* grandmother was so wealthy from selling clay pots that she owned six cows that Aqui was sometimes allowed to milk. She loved to drink the thick yellow cream off the top.

The thing I really didn't like was ploughing. As the eldest I was expected to learn hut the mombes [cows] never stopped moving and would always pull away as I tried to yoke them to the plough. The task she dreaded most of all was trying to attach the scotch-cart. This was a trailer fashioned from planks of wood set on an axle and two wheels purloined from a car that had crashed on the road. *We used the scotch-cart to collect the crops after they had been reaped and placed in lots of heaps, ready to take to the village store. I was small and the log to join the cart had to be held high up while all the time the cows would be moving.*

She knew they were lucky to have cows and not just a small hoe to plough with manually like many of the villagers, but the mombes were obdurate creatures and she hated the boys laughing at her as she tried over and over again to yoke them. All the

villages ploughed down the hills rather than across like the white man because it was easier. No land was ever left fallow as it was all needed for the cattle and growing maize, particularly in those years when the maize grew no higher than her waist.

She had never been to Chivhu where the whites had their farms but she had heard villagers say that the fields there had special machines for spraying water for times when the rains did not come, and long golden corn, not at all like the stunted brown stalks that grew in their fields and often withered away. *They told of cows fatter than huts and chickens that laid giant eggs. My father said that the hones of our ancestors and cattle were under those fields and one day we would get them hack from the whites.*

Land had not been the main aim of the first white settlers when they left Cape Town for Mafeking in April 1890 to gather in a long line of ox-wagons behind a Union Jack and head off across the Limpopo or Crocodile River for Mashonaland. Stories of hills of gold, even more dazzling than the Rand, the great gold ridge of Johannesburg then making many fortunes, had spread through the Cape Colony and Europe. It was known that there had been gold mines in Mashonaland in the time of the kings of Mono-matapa, the African rulers who had traded with the Portuguese who settled on the Mozambique coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But the kingdom had mysteriously collapsed, leaving nothing but the ruins of a vast granite fortress at Great Zimbabwe. Rumours abounded that Mashonaland was the site of King Solomon's mines or the fabled land of Ophir

referred to in the Bible, and the 200 members of Cecil Rhodes's Pioneer Column had each been promised fifteen gold claims.

Mashonaland was located on the Great Central African plateau between two mighty rivers, the Limpopo to the south and the Zambezi to the north. It was next to Matabeleland, which was ruled over by Lobengula, King of the Ndebele, whose father Mzilikazi had led his people north to escape the spears of Shaka Zulu and the guns of the Boers. Almost as warlike as their Zulu cousins, the Ndebele considered the Mashona their subjects and sent frequent raiding parties to steal their cows.

Aqui, like all Mashona children, knew that Lobengula had been tricked by Rhodes into granting British rights for mining and colonization of these lands. Rhodes was already fabulously wealthy from his control of the diamond mining industry in Kimberley and gold mines in Johannesburg but believed that even greater riches lay further north. He also dreamed of one day extending Anglo-Saxon control to all the land from the Cape to Cairo. He saw that Bismarck's Germany and the Portuguese throne which controlled territory to the west and east were already casting covetous eyes the same way, as were the Boers to the south. So, in 1888, he sent three emissaries led by Charles Rudd to King Lobengula's kraal in Matabeleland to request a monopoly on prospecting rights.

The Ndebele king must have presented a bizarre sight. Six feet tall and weighing perhaps twenty stone, he was naked apart from a modest loincloth and spread his massive bulk on a throne made

of packing cases for condensed milk tins. On the wall hung a painting of Queen Victoria of whom he was a great admirer. But the name of his kraal was Gu-Bulawayo, which meant 'Place of slaughter', and behind its high palisade of wood he maintained one of the most powerful armies of any African kingdom.

Lobengula was illiterate but highly intelligent and wavered over Rudd's request. He was finally persuaded by the arrival of Rhodes's special emissary, Dr Leander Starr Jameson, who had alleviated the king's gout with morphine injections. Encouraged by Dr Jim, as he was known, Lobengula put his mark to the so-called Rudd Concession in return for a pension of £100 a month, 10,000 rifles, 100,000 rounds of ammunition and a gunboat on the Zambezi. Similar deals were made with chiefs further north in what would become Zambia and Malawi.

The king later claimed the document had been deliberately mistranslated. The missionary who read it to him had assured him that the British would not bring more than ten white men and 'would abide by his laws and be as his people'. Even so the story made Aqui angry. *Lobengula was given sugar and he gave away the country-they have that weakness, the Ndebele.* Lobengula sent two envoys to London with a letter of protest to Queen Victoria, all to no avail. Despite the method by which the concession was obtained, Rhodes was granted a royal charter to make treaties, promulgate laws, establish a police force, and award land throughout Mashonaland and Matabeleland, an area of 175,000 square miles-about three times the size of England.

Initially known as Zambezia, the name was changed to Rhodesia in his honour, while the land north of the Zambezi became Northern Rhodesia. *In the picture in our schoolbook he looked like a very small man to have two whole countries named after him. I couldn't think of anyone else who did, even the Queen of Britain who we used to sing asking God to save every morning. I thought she must have done something very bad to need so many children so far away asking God to save her.*

With the charter granted, the Pioneers had set off on horseback or in their covered wagons through the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland, skirting the edge of Matabeleland with its Ndebele warriors, toward the unknown land of the msasa tree. Their guide was the big game hunter Frederick Selous whose bestseller *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa* had made him a hero in Britain. To protect them they had been assigned 300 paramilitary police from Rhodes's new British South Africa or Charter Company who were armed with Martini-Henry rifles and a steam-powered naval searchlight that would sweep the plains at night.

It was hard work hacking their way through the wilderness even though they had taken hundreds of African labourers to cut and dig. The dryness of the season meant the column spent much of its time enveloped in a huge dust cloud and their boots 'rotted like paper'. Several Pioneers fell sick and died, keeping the Jesuit priests who had accompanied them busy with funerals. Many oxen succumbed to tsetse fly and almost 100 horses died of

horse sickness while several wagons of supplies had been washed away in crocodile-infested rivers or jammed on stony stream-beds. Their perilous journey would inspire Rudyard Kipling to write in 'The Elephant's Child', one of his *Just So Stories*, of the 'great grey-green greasy Limpopo all set about with fever trees'.

The natives laughed at these strange arrivals in their unsuitable thick clothes even though the *ngangas* were warning of bad times ahead. The white men were undeterred and pitched their canvas tents in Masvingo, which they renamed Fort Victoria after their Queen. From there they rode off to see Great Zimbabwe and were astonished by its soaring walls made of 'even shaped blocks of granite fitted so closely that a blade of a knife could not be inserted'. Although it was overgrown they saw 'enough to realise that their extent and importance had not been overstated', and excitement mounted.

They continued north, past Chivhu or Enkeldoorn, up to a marshy spot they named Fort Salisbury, after the Prime Minister. A 21-gun salute boomed out over the plains as on 13 September 1890, five months after setting off, they hoisted the Union Jack on a hill called Harare after a local chief.

A year later their women started arriving, first nuns and ladies of the night, a strange vision in all their petticoats, then wives. There were gold rushes all over the land, including in the hills around Chivhu, but instead of the imagined quartz reefs studded with lumps of gold they found malaria and famine. So they turned to the next available prize-land.

Each settler was awarded 3,000 acres for just sixpence-the price of a British South Africa Company revenue stamp-and farms were pegged out regardless of whether there were people living there. The Jesuits were rewarded for their services with 12,000 acres for a mission station. Soon the whites had taken the best land on the Mashonaland plateau, chasing away the area's previous inhabitants, stealing their cattle and forcing them to flee to stony ground. *When you went there you couldn't think you were going to visit a person but a baboon climbing in all those mountains and bush.* To pay the hut tax of ten shillings a year that the whites charged them, many of the men had to go and work in the mines in South Africa or the farms of the settlers.

Aqui's father said their own people were fortunate to have been granted communal land which might not have been grassy like that of the whites in Chivhu, and was away from the places with rain, but at least some things grew, when there was no locust or drought. He said they were lucky too not to have been moved again after the Big Wars in Europe when new whites came and land had to be found for them, given commemorative names like Victory Block. More than 400,000 people, almost a third of the black population, were evicted from their villages between 1945 and 1955. Nothing but mounds of red mud remained of their huts and homes.

Hut tax had been replaced by cattle tax, which was supposed to pay for dipping the cows against tick fever. But to Aqui it seemed that the land was running out. *In the old days when a*

man got married he would go to the headman and ask for a stand for himself hut now all the land was already allocated so as sons married they were having to divide up their parents' land. It didn't seem fair to me that it was the women who did all the work hut only the men who got given land. My brother would get land but not me.

The headman of Zhakata's Kraal had a bicycle and late one afternoon he came cycling back, a black Homburg on his head and his withered knees pedalling furiously, carrying a large cream and red Bakelite box with a big dial and lots of knobs. Her father explained it was a radio. *Everyone gathered round to listen. They tried to shoo us children away but I crept near.* Through the crackle she heard a voice come out of the box to slowly announce: 'This is the News from the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation', and she jumped as if there were a frog in her pants.

It was from this magic box that in 1969, when she was seven, they heard the nasal voice of the Prime Minister Ian Douglas Smith announce the Land Tenure Act so that the division of land-good to the whites and bad to the blacks-would be fixed for all time. *God bless you all, he ended and the elders snorted. Aqui knew from listening to the Seven Day drinkers that Ian Smith was a Bad Man* and what he said meant there would never be land for her and her children, *not in a thousand years*, but there were some people fighting against this. Pamphlets sometimes appeared in the nearby township with names like Ndabaningi Sithole, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, nationalist leaders who had been in

jail since 1963. They were always quickly burnt.

Mostly though we were all too busy with the small things of life to think about these matters. Apart from all the work in the fields, we had to go to collect firewood and water at the well. The elders had built a protection of logs around to stop cows defecating in it but sometimes it was a brownish colour.

Every morning the women and girls went to the well, which was forty-five minutes' walk away. To Aqui, trying hard not to splash any precious water, they looked like ghostly figures walking through the mists balancing clay jars on their heads, every so often a hand fluttering upwards to support the weight. In the summer they went again in the evening, but not in the winter when the nights were too dark to wash the cooking pots because they could not see if there were any snakes lurking inside. *We village children would all gather after supper. The moon was our electricity, and we would play games like Hide and Seek, Spot Spot or Hwaai hwaai which meant 'Sheep, sheep, come here'. That was my favourite where we took turns being sheep and someone was the hyena and had to try and catch us.*

Twice a week the choirmaster blew his whistle, the signal for those in the choir to meet under the forked tree. People said Aqui had a honey-sweet voice and she loved singing in the choir, the bare hills echoing the music. Sometimes there were competitions against other villages and once their choir won a cup, but only as runner-up. Everyone knew this was because of the choirmaster's wife who *sang like a dog whose tail had been stepped on.*

Another kind of singing was often to be heard in the village and that was from members of the Apostolic Church of Africa, which would later become the Zion Church with clothes and capes like nurses' uniforms and coloured ribbons on brass pins. Dressed in white robes they would dance about to a drummer faster and faster until one of them started speaking in tongues and frothing at the mouth as if possessed by a spirit. Their eyes would roll back so only the whites were visible. Aqui didn't like them at all. *I thought they were scary.*

Aqui was proud of being a Catholic praying in a proper church or at least a hall with a painted white cross outside. *People would say you can't take that path because of the tokolosh or the bus broke down because of the tokolosh but I never thoughtI'd get possessed. They would warn you can't say that or the dead will be unhappy but I didn't believe in spirits. If I said that, though, they would laugh at me and say, 'You think you're a murungu,' a white person. I'd reply, 'I'm not a fool,' and they would point their fingers menacingly and say, 'One day you'll see.'*

One day she came home from school to hear wailing so agonized as to rival the hyenas in the hills. It was Priscilla, one of the white-robed Apostolics who always had her nose pointed towards the sky because her husband Lovemore had a full-time job on a tobacco farm and sent back regular money. She had used this to buy a sewing machine from which she made children's clothes from scraps of material. She had no children herself, though-Aqui once heard her father say, 'That woman is as dry

and barren as the earth after two seasons of drought.'

Priscilla's husband worked as a night watchman in the tobacco barn and his duty was to keep the fires burning so that the tobacco dried at the correct temperature. But Lovemore was always falling asleep at his post, and one day the *baas* had come in and found him snoozing. It was not the first occasion and usually the farmer would cuff him awake. Once he had spray-painted Lovemore's hair completely white to make him the laughing stock of all the workers. This time, though, the farmer was in an angry temper, perhaps because the crop was poor or his wife was becoming bitter-tongued, and he threw Priscilla's husband on the fire and left him to burn.

Now he was the late Lovemore and Priscilla was distraught. 'Not even a body to bury,' she sobbed. 'How will his spirit settle?' The wag-wags in the village said that not only had she lost her monthly stipend but no one else would marry her, because they all knew no seed would ripen in her womb.

Aqui's mother was always scolding her daughter for her vivid imagination which kept her awake with thoughts of the unformed souls of the dead children escaping the riverbanks, or remembering the day the locust cloud came and turned day into night. She had cowered in the hut fearing something terrible while the other children ran to pick the insects off the thorn trees to fry for supper. The burning of Lovemore gave Aqui something new to think about.

Whites didn't often venture into Native Reserves. The only white

people I had ever seen were Father Walter, the Irish missionary at the churchy and the white policeman. It was very important in those days for a white person to talk to you, you would be so happy, but most of them didn't. When they did they spoke loudly as if we were many miles away.

All I knew was that our skins were different and that being white somehow gave you a special power and my grandfather didn't like them. He was very cheeky and refused to pay tax on his cattle, and when the black policemen came on a motorbike to collect it he told them off for doing the dirty work of whites and took out his shambok to chase them away. Although Aqui knew that the nuns at school said it was wrong to hate, they also said they were all God's creatures and she didn't understand why having a white skin should make them different. She thought about Priscilla's husband toasting on the fire and how his skin would have crackled and burnt like the mealie cobs, and began to hate them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.