



doris lessing

the sun between their feet

collected african stories volume two

'These stories are timeless, as though heat and wilderness took the place of time.' Daily Telegraph

MODERN CLASSIC

DORIS LESSING

The Sun Between Their Feet

Collected African Stories

Volume Two



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Preface

This collection has in it some of the stories I like best. One of them is the title story to this volume, *The Sun Between Their Feet*. It was written out of memories of a part of Rhodesia that was very different from the part I was brought up in, which was Banket, in Mashonaland, not far from Sinoia. But I used to visit around the Marandellas and Macheke districts, which are mostly sandveld, and scattered all over with clumps of granite boulders piled on each other in a way I haven't seen anywhere else. These piles appear to be so arbitrary, so casual, that sometimes it seems as if a perched boulder may topple with a puff of wind. I spent hours, days, weeks sitting around, walking about, on that pale crusty soil, so different from the heavy dark soil of the district my father's farm was in, examining the vegetation and the insects.

Here, too, is *The Story of Two Dogs*, which I think is as good as any I have done. And it is a 'true' story: at least, there were two pairs of dogs in my childhood, the first called Lion and Tiger, and the second Jock and Bill. I don't know now which incidents belong to which pair of dogs; but it is true that Bill, or the 'stupid' dog, rescued Jock, the 'clever' dog, by gnawing through a strand of wire in which he was trapped – thus wearing his teeth down to stubs and shortening his life.

A Letter from Home seems to me to have in it the stuff of present-day South Africa. What sparked it off was hearing the account of a white friend, living in Cape Town with another – two bachelors in a small house – looked after, or nannied, by a large Zulu woman who treated them both like small boys. And then, as food for the same story, was my thinking about another friend, a marvellous poet, so I am told – but I don't understand his own language – who writes his poetry in one of the very many languages of the world which 'no one speaks'. Except the million or so people born into it. Which leads one on to the thought that if a poet is born into one of the common languages he can be a world-poet; but if he is, for instance, Afrikaans, he can be as great as any poet in the world but it would be hard for this fact to cross the language barriers.

Of the five long stories, or short novels in *Five, Hunger* which is reprinted here is the failure and, it seems, the most liked.

It came to be written like this. I was in Moscow with a delegation of writers, back in 1952. It was striking that while the members of the British team differed very much politically, we agreed with each other on certain assumptions about literature – in brief, that writing had to be a product of the individual conscience, or soul. Whereas the Russians did not agree at all – not at all. Our debates, many and long, were on this theme.

Stalin was still alive. One day we were taken to see a building full of presents for Stalin, rooms full of every kind of object – pictures, photographs, carpets, clothes, etc.,

all gifts from his grateful subjects and exhibited by the State to show other subjects and visitors from abroad. It was a hot day. I left the others touring the stuffy building and sat outside to rest. I was thinking about what Russians were demanding in literature – greater simplicity, simple judgements of right and wrong. We, the British, had argued against it, and we felt we were *right* and the Russians *wrong*. But after all, there was Dickens, and such a short time ago, and his characters were all good or bad – unbelievably Good, monstrously Bad, but that didn't stop him from being a great writer. Well, there I was, with my years in Southern Africa behind me, a society as startlingly unjust as Dickens's England. Why, then, could I not write a story of simple good and bad, with clear-cut choices, set in Africa? The plot? Only one possible plot – that a poor black boy or girl should come from a village to the white man's rich town and ... there he would encounter, as occurs in life, good and bad, and after much trouble and many tears he would follow the path of ...

I tried, but it failed. It wasn't true. Sometimes one writes things that don't come off, and feels more affectionate towards them than towards those that worked.

Flight is, I think, a good story. But do I like it because I remember a very old man in a suburb in Africa, in a small house crammed with half-grown girls, all his life in his shelf of birds under jacaranda trees well away from that explosive house? In a green lacy shade he would sit and croon to his birds, or watch them wheel and speed and then come dropping back through the sky to his hand. The memory has something in it of a nostalgic dream.

I am addicted to *The Black Madonna*, which is full of the bile that is produced in me by the thought of 'white' society in Southern Rhodesia as I knew and hated it.

Traitors is about two little girls. Why? It should have been a boy and a girl: the children were my brother and myself. I remember there was a short period when I longed for a sister: perhaps this tale records that time.

I have only recently written Spies I *Have Known* and *The Non-Marrying Man*.

Which brings me to a question raised often by people who write to me, usually from universities. In what order has one written this or that?

This seems to be a question of much interest to scholars. I don't see why. No one who understands anything about how artists work – and there is surely no excuse not to, since artists of all kinds write so plentifully about our creative processes – could ask such a question at all. You can think about a story for years and then write it down in an hour. You may work out the shape of a novel for decades, before spending a few months working on it.

As for the stories like these – which I always think of under the heading of *This Was the Old Chief's Country*, the title of my first collection of stories – when I write one, it is as if I open a gate into a landscape which is always there. Time has nothing to do with it. A certain kind of pulse starts beating, and I recognize it; it is time I wrote another story from that landscape, external and internal at the same time, which was once the Old Chief's Country.

Doris Lessing
January 1972

Spies I Have Known

I don't want you to imagine that I am drawing any sort of comparison between Salisbury, Rhodesia, of thirty years ago, a one-horse town then, if not now, and more august sites. God forbid. But it does no harm to lead into a weighty subject by way of the minuscule.

It was in the middle of the Second World War. A couple of dozen people ran a dozen or so organizations, of varying degrees of leftwingedness. The town, though a capital city, was still in that condition when 'everybody knows everybody else'. The white population was about ten thousand; the number of black people, then as now, only guessed at. There was a Central Post Office, a rather handsome building, and one of the mail sorters attended the meetings of The Left Club. It was he who explained to us the system of censorship operated by the Secret Police. All the incoming mail for the above dozen organizations was first put into a central box marked CENSOR and was read – at their leisure, by certain trusted citizens. Of course all this was as to be expected, and what we knew must be happening. But there were other proscribed organizations, like the Watchtower, a religious sect for some reason suspected by governments up and down Africa (perhaps because they prophesied the imminent end of the world?) and some Fascist organizations – reasonably enough in a war against Fascism. There were organizations of obscure aims and perhaps five members and a capital of five pounds, and also individuals whose mail had first to go through the process, as it were, of decontamination, or defusing. It was this last list of a hundred or so people which was the most baffling. What did they have in common, these sinister ones whose opinions were such a threat to the budding Southern Rhodesian State, then still in the Lord Malvern phase of the Huggins/Lord Malvern/Welenski/Garfield Todd/Winston Field/Smith succession? After months, indeed years, of trying to understand what could unite them, we had simply to give up. Of course, half were on the left, kaffir lovers and so on, but what of the others? It was when a man wrote a letter to the *Rhodesia Herald* in solemn parody of Soviet official style – as heavy then as now, urging immediate extermination by firing squad of our government, in favour of a team from the Labour Opposition, and we heard from our contact in the Post Office that his name was now on the Black List, that we began to suspect the truth.

Throughout the war, this convenient arrangement continued. Our Man in the Post Office – by then several men, but it doesn't sound so well – kept us informed of what and who was on the Black List. And if our mail was being held up longer than we considered reasonable, the censors being on holiday, or lazy, authority would be gently prodded to hurry things up a little.

This was my first experience of Espionage.

Next was when I knew someone who knew someone who had told him of how a

certain Communist Party Secretary had been approached by the man whose occupation it was to tap communist telephones – we are now in Europe. Of course, the machinery for tapping was much more primitive then. Probably by now they have dispensed with human intervention altogether, and a machine judges the degree of a suspicious person's disaffection by the tones of his voice. Then, and in that country, they simply played back records of conversation. This professional had been in the most intimate contact with communism and communists for years, becoming involved with shopping expeditions, husbands late from the office, love affairs, a divorce or so, children's excursions. He had been sucked into active revolutionary politics through the keyhole.

'I don't think you ought to let little Jackie go at all. He'll be in bed much too late, and you know how bad tempered he gets when he is overtired.'

'She said to me No, she said. That's final. If you want to do a thing like that, then you must do it yourself. You shouldn't expect other people to pull your chestnuts out of the fire, she said. If he was rude to you, then it's your place to tell him so.'

He got frustrated, like an intimate friend or lover with paralysis of the tongue. And there was another thing, his involvement was always at a remove. He was listening to events, emotions, several hours old. Sometimes weeks old, as for instance when he went on leave and had to catch up with a month's dangerous material all in one exhausting twenty-four hours. He found that he was getting possessive about certain of his charges, resented his colleagues listening in to 'my suspects'. Once he had to wrestle with temptation because he longed to seek out a certain woman on the point of leaving her husband for another man. Due to his advantageous position he knew the other man was not what she believed. He imagined how he would trail her to the café which he knew she frequented, sit near her, then lean over and ask: 'May I join you? I have something of importance to divulge.' He knew she would agree: he knew her character well. She was unconventional, perhaps not as responsible as she ought to be, careless for instance about the regularity of meals, but fundamentally, he was sure, a good girl with the potentiality of good wifeness. He would say to her: 'Don't do it, my dear! No, don't ask me how I know, I can't tell you that. But if you leave your husband for that man, you'll regret it!' He would press her hands in his, looking deeply into her eyes – he was sure they were brown, for her voice was definitely the voice of a brown-eyed blonde – and then stride for ever out of her life. Afterwards he could check on the success of his intervention through the tapes.

To cut a process short that took some years, he at last went secretly to a communist bookshop, bought some pamphlets, attended a meeting or two, and discovered that he would certainly become a Party Member if it were not that his job, and a very well paid one with good prospects, was to spy on the Communist Party. He felt in a false position. What to do? He turned up at the offices of the Communist Party, asked to see the Secretary, and confessed his dilemma. Roars of laughter from the Secretary.

These roars are absolutely obligatory in this convention, which insists on a greater degree of sophisticated understanding between professionals, even if on opposing sides, even if at war – Party officials, government officials, top ranking soldiers and the like – than the governed, ever a foolish, trusting and sentimental lot.

First, then, the roar. Then a soupçon of whimsicality: alas for this badly-ordered

world where men so well-equipped to be friends must be enemies. Finally, the hard offer.

Our friend the telephone-tapper was offered a retaining fee by the Communist Party, and their provisional trust, on condition that he stayed where he was, working for the other side. Of course, what else had he expected? Nor should he have felt insulted, for in such ways are the double agents born, those rare men at an altogether higher level in the hierarchies of espionage than he could ever aspire to reach. But his finer feelings had been hurt by the offer of money, and he refused. He went off and suffered for a week or so, deciding that he really did have to leave his job with the Secret Police – an accurate name for what he was working for, though of course the name it went under was much blander. He returned to the Secretary in order to ask for the second time to become just a rank and file Communist Party member. This time there was no roar of laughter, not even a chuckle, but the frank (and equally obligatory) I-am-concealing-nothing statement of the position. Which was that he surely must be able to see their point of view – the Communist Party's. With a toehold in the enemy camp (a delicate way of describing his salary and his way of life) he could be of real use. To stay where he was could be regarded as a real desire to serve the People's Cause. To leave altogether, becoming just honest John Smith, might satisfy his conscience (a subjective and conditioned organ as he must surely know by now if he had read those pamphlets properly) but would leave behind him an image of the capricious, or even the unreliable. What had he planned to tell his employers? 'I am tired of tapping telephones, it offends me!' Or: 'I regard this as an immoral occupation!' – when he had done nothing else for years? Come, come, he hadn't thought it out. He would certainly be under suspicion for ever more by his employers. And of course he could not be so innocent, after so long spent in that atmosphere of vigilance and watchfulness not to expect the communists to keep watch on himself? No, his best course would be to stay exactly where he was, working even harder at tapping telephones. If not, then his frank advice (the Secretary's) could only be that he must become an ordinary citizen, as far from any sort of politics as possible, for his own sake, the sake of the Service he had left, and the sake of the Communist Party -which of *course* they believed he now found his spiritual home.

But the trouble was that he did want to join it. He wanted nothing more than to become part of the world of stern necessities he had followed for so long, but as it were from behind a one-way pane of glass. Integrity had disenfranchised him. From now on he could not hope to serve humanity except through the use of the vote.

His life was empty. His resignation had cut off his involvement, like turning off the television on a soap opera, with the deathless real-life dramas of the tapes.

He felt that he was useless. He considered suicide, but thought better of it. Then, having weathered a fairly routine and unremarkable nervous breakdown, became a contemplative monk – high Church of England.

Another spy I met at a cocktail party, said in the course of chat about this or that – it was in London, in the late Fifties -that at the outbreak of the Second World War he had been in Greece, or perhaps it was Turkey, where at another cocktail party, over the canapés, an official from the British Embassy invited him to spy for his country.

'But I can't,' said this man. 'You must know that perfectly well.'

'But why ever not?' enquired the official. A Second Secretary, I think he was.

‘Because, as of course you must know, I am a Communist Party member.’

‘Indeed? How interesting! But surely that is not going to stand in the way of your desire to serve your country?’ said the official, matching ferocious honesty with bland interest.

Cutting this anecdote short – it comes, after all, from a pretty petty level in the affairs of men, this man went home and spent a sleepless night weighing his allegiances, and decided by morning that of course the Second Secretary was right. He would like to serve his country, which was after all engaged in a war against Fascism. He explained his decision to his superiors in the Communist Party, who agreed with him, and to his wife and his comrades. Then meeting the Second Secretary at another cocktail party, he informed him of the decision he had taken. He was then invited to attach himself to a certain Army Unit, in some capacity to do with the Ministry of Information. He was to await orders. In due course they came, and he discovered that it was his task to spy on the Navy, or rather, that portion of it operating near him. Our Navy, of course. He was always unable to work out the ideology of this. That a communist should not be set to spy on, let’s say, Russia, seemed to him fair and reasonable, but why was he deemed suitable material to spy on his own side? He found it all baffling, and indeed rather lowering. Then, at a cocktail party, he happened to meet a naval officer with whom he proceeded to get drunk, and they both suddenly understood on a wild hunch that they were engaged on spying on each other, one for the Navy, and one for the Army. Both found this work without much uplift, they were simply not able to put their hearts into it, apart from the fact that they had been in the same class at prep school and had many other social ties. Not even the fact that they weren’t being paid, since it was assumed by their superiors – quite correctly of course -that they would be happy to serve their countries for nothing, made them feel any better. They developed the habit of meeting regularly in a café where they drank wine and coffee and played chess in a vine-covered arbour overlooking a particularly fine bit of the Mediterranean where, without going through all the tedious effort of spying on each other, they simply gave each other relevant information. They were found out. Their excuse that they were fighting the war on the same side was deemed inadequate. They were both given the sack as spies, and transferred to less demanding work. But until D-Day and beyond, the British Army spied on the British Navy, and vice versa. They probably all still do.

The fact that human beings, given half a chance, start seeing each other’s point of view seems to me the only ray of hope there is for humanity, but obviously this tendency must be one to cause anguish to seniors in the diplomatic corps and the employers of your common or garden spy – not the high level spies, but of that in a moment. Diplomats, until they have understood why, always complain that as soon as they understand a country and its language really well, hey presto, off they are whisked to another country. But diplomacy could not continue if the opposing factotums lost a proper sense of national hostility. Some diplomatic corps insist that their employees must only visit among each other, and never fraternize with the locals, obviously believing that understanding with others is inculcated by a sort of osmosis. And of course, any diplomat that shows signs of going native, that is to say really enjoying the manners and morals of a place, must be withdrawn at once.

Not so the masters among the spies: one dedicated to his country’s deepest

interests must be worse than useless. The rarest spirits must be those able to entertain two or three allegiances at once; the counter spies, the double and triple agents. Such people are not born. It can't be that they wake up one morning at the age of thirteen crying: Eureka, I've got it, I want to be a double agent! That's what I was born to do! Nor can there be a training school for multiple spies, a kind of top class that promising pupils graduate towards. Yet that capacity which might retard a diplomat's career, or mean death to the small fry among spies, must be precisely the one watched out for by the Spymasters who watch and manipulate in the high levels of the world's thriving espionage systems. What probably happens is that a man drifts, even unwillingly, into serving his country as a spy – like my acquaintance of the cocktail party who then found himself spying on the Senior Service of his own side. Then, whether through a deep sense of vocation or without enthusiasm, he must begin by making mistakes, sometimes pleased with himself and sometimes not; he goes through a phase of wondering whether he would not have done better to go into the Stock Exchange, or whatever his alternative was – then suddenly there comes that moment, fatal to punier men but a sign of his own future greatness, when he is invaded by sympathy for the enemy. Long dwelling on what X is doing, likely to be doing, or thinking, or planning, makes X's thoughts as familiar and as likeable as his own. The points of view of the nation he spends all his time trying to undo, are comfortably at home in a mind once tuned only to those of his own dear Fatherland. He is thinking the thoughts of those he used to call enemies before he understands that he is already psychologically a double agent, and before he guesses that those men who must always be on the watch for such precious material have noticed, perhaps even prognosticated, his condition.

On those levels where the really great spies move, whose names we never hear, but whose existence we have to deduce, what fantastic feats of global understanding must be reached, what metaphysical heights of international brotherhood!

It is of course not possible to do more than take the humblest flights into speculation, while making do with those so frequent and highly publicized spy dramas, for some reason or other so very near to farce, that do leave obscurity for our attention.

It can't be possible that the high reaches of espionage can have anything in common with, for instance, this small happening.

A communist living in a small town in England, who had been openly and undramatically a communist for years, and for whom the state of being a communist had become rather like the practice of an undemanding religion – this man looked out of his window one fine summer afternoon to see standing in the street outside his house a car of such foreignness and such opulence that he was embarrassed, and at once began to work out what excuses he could use to his working-class neighbours whose cars, if any, would be dust in comparison. Out of this monster of a car came two large smiling Russians, carrying a teddy bear the size of a sofa, a bottle of vodka, a long and very heavy roll, which later turned out to be a vast carpet with a picture of the Kremlin on it, and a box of chocolates of British make, with a pretty lady and a pretty dog.

Every window in the street already had heads packed behind the curtains.

'Come in,' said he, 'but I don't think I have the pleasure of knowing who ...'

The roll of carpet was propped in the hall, the three children sent off to play with the teddy bear in the kitchen, and the box of chocolates set aside for the lady of the

house, who was out doing the week's shopping in the High Street. The vodka was opened at once.

It turned out that it was his wife they wanted: they were interested in him only as a go-between. They wished him to ask his wife, who was an employee of the town council, to get hold of the records of the council's meetings, and to pass these records on to them. Now, this wasn't London, or even Edinburgh. It was a small unimportant North of England town, in which it would be hard to imagine anything ever happening that could be of interest to anyone outside it, let alone the agents of a Foreign Power. But, said he, these records are open, anyone could go and get copies – you, for instance – ‘Comrades, I shall be delighted to take you to the Town Hall myself.’

No, what they had been instructed to do was to ask his wife to procure them minutes and records, nothing less would do.

A long discussion ensued. It was all no use. The Russians could not be made to see that what they asked was unnecessary. Nor could they understand that to arrive in a small suburban street in a small English town in a car the length of a battleship, was to draw the wrong sort of attention.

‘But why is that?’ they enquired. ‘Representatives of the country where the workers hold power should use a good car. Of course, comrade. You have not thought it out from a class position!’

The climax came when, despairing of the effect of rational argument, they said: ‘And comrade, these presents, the bear, the carpet, the chocolates, the vodka, are only a small token in appreciation of your work for our common cause. Of course you will be properly recompensed.’

At which point he was swept by, indeed taken over entirely by, atavistic feelings he had no idea were in him at all. He stood up and pointed a finger shaking with rage at the door: ‘How dare you imagine,’ he shouted, ‘that my wife and I would take money? If I were going to spy, I'd spy for the love of mankind, for duty, and for international socialism. Take those bloody things out of here, wait, I'll get that teddy bear from the kids. And you can take your bloody car out of here too.’

His wife, when she came back from the supermarket and heard the story, was even more insulted than he was.

But emotions like these are surely possible only in the lowest possible levels of spy material – in this case so low they didn't qualify for the first step, entrance into the brotherhood.

Full circle back to Our Man in the Post Office, or rather, the first of three.

After sedulous attendance at a lot of left-wing meetings, semi-private and public – for above all Tom was a methodical man who, if engaged in a thing, always gave it full value – he put his hand up one evening in the middle of a discussion about Agrarian Reform in Venezuela, and said: ‘I must ask permission to ask a question.’

Everyone always laughed at him when he did this, put up his hand to ask for permission to speak, or to leave, or to have opinions about something. Little did we realize that we were seeing here not just a surface mannerism, or habit, but his strongest characteristic.

It was late in the meeting, at that stage when the floor is well-loaded with empty coffee cups, beer glasses, and full ash trays. Some people had already left.

He wanted to know what he ought to do: ‘I want to have the benefit of your

expert advice.’ As it happened he had already taken the decision he was asking about.

After some two years of a life not so much double – the word implies secrecy – as dual, his boss in the Central Post Office called him to ask how he was enjoying his life with the Left. Tom was as doggedly informative with him as he was with us, and said that we were interesting people, well-informed, and full of a high-class brand of idealism which he found inspiring.

‘I always feel good after going to one of their meetings,’ he reported he had said. ‘It takes you right out of yourself and makes you think.’

His chief said that he, for his part, always enjoyed hearing about idealism and forward-looking thought, and invited Tom to turn in reports about our activities, our discussions, and most particularly our plans for the future, as well in advance as possible.

Tom told us that he said to his boss that ‘he didn’t like the idea of doing that sort of thing behind our backs, because say what you like about the reds, they are very hospitable’.

The chief had said that it would be for the good of his country.

Tom came to us to say that he had told his boss that he had agreed, because he wanted to be of assistance to the national war effort.

It was clear to everyone that having told us that he had agreed to spy on us, he would, since that was his nature, most certainly go back to his boss and tell him that he had told us that he had agreed to spy. After which he would come back to us to tell us that he had told his boss that ... and so on. Indefinitely, if his boss didn’t get tired of it. Tom could not see that his chief would shortly find him unsuitable material for espionage, and might even dismiss him from being a sorter in the Post Office altogether – a nuisance for us. After which he, the chief, would probably look for someone else to give him information.

It was Harry, one of the other two Post Office employees attending Left Club meetings, who suggested that it would probably be himself who would next be invited to spy on us, now that Tom had ‘told’. Tom was upset, when everybody began speculating about his probable supersession by Harry or even Dick. The way he saw it was that his complete frankness with both us and his chief was surely deserving of reward. He ought to be left in the job. God knows how he saw the future. Probably that both his boss and ourselves would continue to employ him. We would use him to find out how our letters were slowly moving through the toils of censorship, and to hurry them on, if possible; his chief would use him to spy on us. When I say employ, I don’t want anyone to imagine this implies payment. Or at least, certainly not from our side. Ideology had to be his spur, sincerity his reward.

It will by now have been noticed that our Tom was not as bright as he might have been. But he was a pleasant enough youth. He was rather good-looking too, about twenty-two. His physical characteristic was neatness. His clothes were always just so; he had a small alert dark moustache; he had glossy dark well-brushed hair. His rather small hands were well-manicured – the latter trait bound to be found offensive by good colonials, whose eye for such anti-masculine evidence – as they were bound to see it, then if not now – was acute. But he was a fairly recent immigrant, from just before the war, and had not yet absorbed the mores. He probably had not noticed that real Rhodesians, in those days at least, did not like men who went in for a careful

appearance.

Tom, in spite of our humorous forecast that he would be bound to tell his boss that he had told us, and his stiff and wounded denials that such a thing was possible, found himself impelled to do just that. He reported back that his chief had 'lost his rag with him'.

But that was not the end. He was offered the job of learning how to censor letters. He had said to his boss that he felt in honour bound to tell us, and his boss said: 'Oh for Christ's sake. Tell them anything you damned well like. You won't be choosing what is to be censored.'

As I said, this was an unsophisticated town in those days, and the condition of 'everybody knowing everybody else' was bound to lead to such warm human situations.

He accepted the offer because: 'My mother always told me that she wanted me to do well for myself, and I'll increase my rating into Schedule Three as soon as I start work on censoring, and that means an increment of £50 a year.'

We congratulated him, and urged him to keep us informed about how people were trained as censors, and he agreed to do this. Shortly after that the war ended, and all the wartime camaraderie of wartime ended as the Cold War began. The ferment of Left activity ended too.

We saw Tom no more, but followed his progress, steady if slow, up the Civil Service. The last I heard he was heading a Department among whose duties is censorship. I imagine him, a man in his fifties, husband and no doubt a father, looking down the avenues of lost time of those dizzy days when he was a member of a dangerous revolutionary organization. 'Yes,' he must often say, 'you can't tell me anything about them. They are idealistic, I can grant you so much, but they are dangerous. Dangerous and wrong-headed! I left them as soon as I understood what they really were.'

But of our three Post Office spies Harry was the one whose career, for a while at least, was the most rewarding for humanist idealists.

He was a silent, desperately shy schoolboy who came to a public meeting and fell madly in love for a week or so with the speaker, a girl giving her first public speech and as shy as he was. His father had died and his mother, as the psychiatrists and welfare workers would say, was 'inadequate'. That is to say, she was not good at being a widow, and was frail in health. What little energy she had went into earning enough money for her two younger sons to live on. She nagged at Harry for not having ambition, and for not studying for the examinations which would take him up the ladder into the next grade in the Post Office – and for wasting time with the reds. He longed to be of use. For three years he devoted all his spare time to organization on the Left, putting up exhibitions, hiring halls and rooms, decorating ballrooms for fund-raising dances, getting advertisements for our socialist magazine -circulation two thousand – and laying it out and selling it. He argued principle with town councillors: 'But it's not *fair* not to let us have the hall, this is a democratic country, isn't it?' – and spent at least three nights a week discussing world affairs in smoke-filled rooms.

At the time we would have dismissed as beyond redemption anyone who suggested it, but I daresay now that the main function of those gatherings was social. Southern Rhodesia was never exactly a hospitable country for those interested in

anything but sport and the sundowner, and the fifty or so people who came to the meetings were all, whether in the Forces, or refugees from Europe, or simply Rhodesians, souls in need of congenial company. And they were friendly occasions, those meetings, sometimes going on till dawn.

A girl none of us had seen before came to a public meeting. She saw Harry, a handsome, confident, loquacious, energetic, efficient young man. Everyone relied on him.

She fell in love, took him home, and her father, recognizing one of the world's born organizers, made him manager in his hardware shop.

Which leaves the third, Dick. Now there are some people who should not be allowed anywhere near meetings, debates, or similar intellect-fermenting agencies. He came to two meetings. Harry brought him, describing him as 'keen'. It was Harry who was keen. Dick sat on the floor on a cushion. Wild bohemian ways, these, for well-brought-up young whites. His forehead puckered like a puppy's while he tried to follow wild unRhodesian thought. He, like Tom, was a neat, well-set-up youth. Perhaps the Post Office, or at least in Rhodesia, is an institution that attracts the well-ordered? I remember he reminded me of a boiled sweet, bland sugar with a chemical tang. Or perhaps he was like a bulldog, all sleek latent ferocity, with its little bulging eyes, its little snarl. Like Tom, he was one for extracting exact information. 'I take it you people believe that human nature can be changed?'

At the second meeting he attended, he sat and listened as before. At the end he enquired whether we thought socialism was a good thing in this country where there was the white man's burden to consider.

He did not come to another meeting. Harry said that he had found us seditious and unRhodesian. Also insincere. We asked Harry to go and ask Dick why he thought we were insincere, and to come back and tell us. It turned out that Dick wanted to know why The Left Club did not take over the government of the country and run it, if we thought the place ill run. But we forgot Dick, particularly as Harry, at the zenith of his efficiency and general usefulness, was drifting off with his future wife to become a hardware store manager. And by then Tom was lost to us.

Suddenly we heard that 'The Party for Democracy, Liberty, and Freedom' was about to hold a preliminary mass meeting. One of us was delegated to go along and find out what was happening. This turned out to be me.

The public meeting was in a sideroom off a ballroom in one of the town's three hotels. It was furnished with a sideboard to hold the extra supplies of beer and sausage rolls and peanuts consumed so plentifully during the weekly dances, a palm in a pot so tall the top fronds were being pressed down by the ceiling, and a dozen stiff dining-room chairs ranged one by one along the walls. There were eleven men and women in the room, including Dick. Unable to understand immediately why this gathering struck me as so different from the ones in which I spent so much of my time, I then saw it was because there were elderly people present. Our gatherings loved only the young.

Dick was wearing his best suit in dark grey flannel. It was a very hot evening. His face was scarlet with endeavour and covered with sweat, which he kept sweeping off his forehead with impatient fingers. He was reading an impassioned document in tone rather like the Communist Manifesto, which began: 'Fellow Citizens of Rhodesia! Sincere Men and Women! This is the Time for Action! Arise and look about you and

enter into your Inheritance! Put the forces of International Capital to flight!’

He was standing in front of the chairs, his well-brushed little head bent over his notes, which were handwritten and in places hard to read, so that these inflammatory sentiments were being stammered and stumbled out, while he kept correcting himself, wiping off sweat, and then stopping with an appealing circular glance around the room at the others. Towards him were lifted ten earnest faces, as if at a saviour or a Party leader.

The programme of this nascent Party was simple. It was to ‘take over by democratic means but as fast as possible’ all the land and the industry of the country ‘but to cause as little inconvenience as possible’ and ‘as soon as it was feasible’ to institute a régime of true equality and fairness in this ‘land of Cecil Rhodes’.

He was intoxicated by the emanations of admiration from his audience. Burning, passionate faces like these (alas, and I saw how far we had sunk away from fervour) were no longer to be seen at our Left Club meetings, which long ago had sailed away on the agreeable tides of debate and intellectual speculation.

The faces belonged to a man of fifty or so, rather grey and beaten, who described himself as a teacher ‘planning the total reform of the entire educational system’; a woman of middle age, a widow, badly dressed and smoking incessantly, who looked as if she had long since gone beyond what she was strong enough to bear from life; an old man with an angelic pink face fringed with white tufts who said he was named after Keir Hardie; three schoolboys, the son of the widow and his two friends; the woman attendant from the ladies’ cloakroom who had unlocked this room to set out the chairs and then had stayed out of interest, since it was her afternoon off; two aircraftmen from the RAF; Dick the convener; and a beautiful young woman no one had ever seen before who, as soon as Dick had finished his manifesto, stood up to make a plea for vegetarianism. She was ruled out of order. ‘We have to get power first, and then we’ll simply do what the majority wants.’ As for me, I was set apart from them by my lack of fervour, and by Dick’s hostility.

This was in the middle of the Second World War, whose aim it was to defeat the hordes of National Socialism. The Union of Socialist Soviet Republics was thirty years old. It was more than a hundred and fifty years after the French Revolution, and rather more than that after the American Revolution which overthrew the tyrannies of Britain. The Independence of India would shortly be celebrated. It was twenty years after the death of Lenin. Trotsky still lived.

One of the schoolboys, a friend of the widow’s son, put up his hand to say timidly, instantly to be shut up, that ‘he believed there might be books which we could read about socialism and that sort of thing’.

‘Indeed there are,’ said the namesake of Keir Hardie, nodding his white locks, ‘but we needn’t follow the writ that runs in other old countries, when we have got a brand new one here.’

(It must be explained that the whites of Rhodesia, then as now, are always referring to ‘this new country’.)

‘As for books,’ said Dick, eyeing me with all the scornful self-command he had acquired since leaving his cushion weeks before on the floor of our living-room, ‘books don’t seem to do some people any good, so why do we need them? It is all perfectly simple. It isn’t right for a few people to own all the wealth of a country. It

isn't fair. It should be shared out among everybody, equally, and then that would be a democracy.'

'Well, obviously,' said the beautiful girl.

'Ah yes,' sighed the poor tired woman, emphatically crushing out her cigarette and lighting a new one.

'Perhaps it would be better if I moved that palm a little,' said the cloakroom attendant, 'it does seem to be a little in your way perhaps.' But Dick did not let her show her agreement in this way.

'Never mind about the palm,' he said. 'It's not important.'

And this was the point when someone asked; 'Excuse me, but where do the Natives come in?' (In those days, the black inhabitants of Rhodesia were referred to as the Natives.)

This was felt to be in extremely bad taste.

'I don't really think that is applicable,' said Dick hotly. 'I simply don't see the point of bringing it up at all unless it is to make trouble.'

'They do live here,' said one of the RAF.

'Well, I must withdraw altogether if there's any likelihood of us getting mixed up with kaffir trouble,' said the widow.

'You can be assured that there will be nothing of that,' said Dick, firmly in control, in the saddle, leader of all, after only half an hour of standing up in front of his mass meeting.

'I don't see that,' said the beautiful girl. 'I simply don't see that at all! We must have a policy for the Natives.'

Even twelve people in one small room, whether starting a mass Party or not, meant twelve different, defined, passionately held viewpoints. The meeting at last had to be postponed for a week to allow those who had not had a chance to air their views to have their say. I attended this second meeting. There were fifteen people present. The two RAF were not there, but there were six white trade unionists from the railways who, hearing of the new party, had come to get a resolution passed. 'In the opinion of this meeting, the Native is being advanced too fast towards civilization and in his own interests the pace should be slowed.'

This resolution was always being passed in those days, on every possible occasion. It probably still is.

But the nine from the week before were already able to form a solid block against this influx of alien thought – not as champions of the Natives, of course not, but because it was necessary to attend to first things first. 'We have to take over the country first, by democratic methods. That won't take long, because it is obvious our programme is only fair, and after that we can decide what to do about the Natives.' The six railway workers then left, leaving the nine from last week, who proceeded to form their Party for Democracy, Liberty and Freedom. A steering committee of three was appointed to draft a constitution.

And that was the last anyone ever heard of it, except for one cyclostyled pamphlet which was called 'Capitalism is Unfair! Let's Join Together to Abolish it! This Means You!'

The war was over. Intellectual ferments of this sort occurred no more. Employees of the Post Office, all once again good citizens properly employed in sport and similar

endeavours, no longer told the citizens in what ways they were censored and when.

Dick did not stay in the Post Office. That virus, politics, was in his veins for good. From being a spokesman for socialism for the whites, he became, as a result of gibes that he couldn't have socialism that excluded most of the population, an exponent of the view that Natives must not be advanced too fast in their own interests, and from there he developed into a Town Councillor, and from there into a Member of Parliament. And that is what he still is, a gentleman of distinguished middle age, an indefatigable server on Parliamentary Committees and Commissions, particularly those to do with the Natives, on whom he is considered an authority.

An elderly bulldog of the bulldog breed he is, every inch of him.

The Story of a Non-Marrying Man

I met Johnny Blakeworthy at the end of his life. I was at the beginning of mine, about ten or twelve years old. This was in the early Thirties, when the Slump had spread from America even to us, in the middle of Africa. The very first sign of the Slump was the increase in the number of people who lived by their wits, or as vagrants.

Our house was on a hill, the highest point of our farm. Through the farm went the only road, a dirt track, from the railway station seven miles away, our shopping and mail centre, to the farms farther on. Our nearest neighbours were three, four, and seven miles away. We could see their roofs flash in the sunlight, or gleam in the moonlight across all those trees, ridges, and valleys.

From the hill we could see the clouds of dust that marked the passage of cars or wagons along the track. We would say: 'That must be so-and-so going in to fetch his mail.' Or: 'Cyril said he had to get a spare for the plough, his broke down, that must be him now.'

If the cloud of dust turned off the main road and moved up through the trees towards us, we had time to build up the fire and put on the kettle. At busy times for the farmers, this happened seldom. Even at slack times, there might be no more than three or four cars a week, and as many wagons. It was mostly a white man's road, for the Africans moving on foot used their own quicker, short-cutting paths. White men coming to the house on foot were rare, though less rare as the Slump set in. More and more often, coming through the trees up the hill, we saw walking towards us a man with a bundle of blankets over his shoulder, a rifle swinging in his hand. In the blanket-roll were always a frying pan and a can of water, sometimes a couple of tins of bully beef, or a Bible, matches, a twist of dried meat. Sometimes this man had an African servant walking with him. These men always called themselves Prospectors, for that was a respectable occupation. Many did prospect, and nearly always for gold.

One evening, as the sun was going down, up the track to our house came a tall stooped man in shabby khaki with a rifle and a bundle over one shoulder. We knew we had company for the night. The rules of hospitality were that no one coming to our homes in the bush could be refused; every man was fed, and asked to stay as long as he wanted.

Johnny Blakeworthy was burned by the suns of Africa to a dark brown, and his eyes in a dried wrinkled face were grey, the whites much inflamed by the glare. He kept screwing up his eyes, as if in sunlight, and then, in a remembered effort of will, letting loose his muscles, so that his face kept clenching and unclenching like a fist. He was thin: he spoke of having had malaria recently. He was old: it was not only the sun that had so deeply lined his face. In his blanket-roll he had, as well as the inevitable frying pan, an enamel one-pint saucepan, a pound of tea, some dried milk,

and a change of clothing. He wore long, heavy khaki trousers for protection against lashing grasses and grass-seeds, and a khaki bush-shirt. He also owned a washed-out grey sweater for frosty nights. Among these items was a corner of a sack full of maize-meal. The presence of the maize-flour was a statement, and probably ambiguous, for the Africans ate maize-meal porridge as their staple food. It was cheap, easily obtainable, quickly cooked, nourishing, but white men did not eat it, at least, not as the basis of their diet, because they did not wish to be put on the same level as Africans. The fact that this man carried it, was why my father, discussing him later with my mother, said: 'He's probably gone native.'

This was not criticism. Or rather, while with one part of the collective ethos the white men might say, He's gone native! and in anger; with a different part of their minds, or at different times it could be said in bitter envy. But that is another story ...

Johnny Blakeworthy was of course asked to stay for supper and for the night. At the lamplit table, which was covered with every sort of food, he kept saying how good it was to see so much real food again, but it was in a vaguely polite way, as if he was having to remind himself that this was how he should feel. His plate was loaded with food, and he ate, but kept forgetting to eat, so that my mother had to remind him, putting a little bit more of nice undercut, a splash of gravy, helpings of carrots and spinach from the garden. But by the end he had eaten very little, and hadn't spoken much either, though the meal gave an impression of much conversation and interest and eating, like a feast, so great was our hunger for company, so many were our questions. Particularly the two children questioned and demanded, for the life of such a man, walking quietly by himself through the bush, sometimes, twenty miles or more a day, sleeping by himself under the stars, or the moon, or whatever weather the seasons sent him, prospecting when he wished, stopping to rest when he needed – such a life, it goes without saying, set us restlessly dreaming of lives different from those we were set towards by school and by parents.

We did learn that he had been on the road for 'some time, yes, some time now, yes'. That he was sixty. That he had been born in England, in the South, near Canterbury. That he had been adventuring up and down and around Southern Africa all his life – but adventure was not the word he used, it was the word we children repeated until we saw that it made him uncomfortable. He had mined: had indeed owned his own mine. Had farmed, but had not done well. Had done all kinds of work, but 'I like to be my own master.' He had owned a store, but 'I get restless, and I must be on the move.'

Now there was nothing in this we hadn't heard before -every time, indeed, that such a wanderer came to our door. There was nothing out of the ordinary in his extraordinariness, except, perhaps, as we remembered later, sucking all the stimulation we could out of the visit, discussing it for days, he did not have a prospector's pan, nor had he asked my father for permission to prospect on this farm. We could not remember a prospector who had failed to become excited by the farm, for it was full of chipped rocks and reefs, trenches and shafts, which some people said went back to the Phoenicians. You couldn't walk a hundred yards without seeing signs ancient and modern of the search for gold. The district was called 'Banket' because it had running through it reefs of the same formation as reefs on the Rand called Banket. The name alone was like a signpost.

But Johnny said he liked to be on his way by the time the sun was up. I saw him leave, down the track that was sun-flushed, the trees all rosy on one side. He shambled away out of sight, a tall, much too thin, rather stooping man in washed-out khaki and soft hide shoes.

Some months later, another man, out of work and occupying himself with prospecting, was asked if he had ever met up with Johnny Blakeworthy, and he said yes, he had indeed! He went on with indignation to say that 'he had gone native' in the Valley. The indignation was false, and we assumed that this man too might have 'gone native', or that he wished he had, or could. But Johnny's lack of a prospecting pan, his maize meal, his look at the supper table of being out of place and unfamiliar – all was explained. 'Going native' implied that a man would have a 'bush wife', but it seemed Johnny did not.

'He said he's had enough of the womenfolk, he's gone to get out of their way,' said this visitor.

I did not describe, in its place, the thing about Johnny's visit that struck us most, because at the time it did not strike us as more than agreeably quaint. It was only much later that the letter he wrote us matched up with others, and made a pattern.

Three days after Johnny's visit to us, a letter arrived from him. I remember my father expected to find that it would ask after all, for permission to prospect. But any sort of letter was odd. Letter-writing equipment did not form part of a tramp's gear. The letter was on blue Croxley writing paper, and in a blue Croxley envelope, and the writing was as neat as a child's. It was a 'bread and butter' letter. He said that he had very much enjoyed our kind hospitality, and the fine cooking of the lady of the house. He was grateful for the opportunity of making our acquaintance. 'With my best wishes, yours very truly, Johnny Blakeworthy.'

Once he had been a well-brought-up little boy from a small English country town. 'You must always write and say thank you after enjoying hospitality, Johnny.'

We talked about the letter for a long time. He must have dropped in at the nearest store after leaving our farm. It was twenty miles away. He probably bought a single sheet of paper and a lone envelope. This meant that he had got them from the African part of the store, where such small retailing went on – at vast profit, of course, to the storekeeper. He must have bought one stamp, and walked across to the post office to hand the letter over the counter. Then, due having been paid to his upbringing, he moved back to the African tribe where he lived beyond post offices, letter writing, and other impedimenta that went with being a white man.

The next glimpse I had of the man, I still have no idea where to fit into the pattern I was at last able to make.

It was years later. I was a young woman at a morning tea party. This one, like all the others of its kind, was an excuse for gossip, and most of that was – of course, since we were young married women – about men and marriage. A girl, married not more than a year, much in love, and unwilling to sacrifice her husband to the collective, talked instead about her aunt from the Orange Free State. 'She was married for years to a real bad one, and then up he got and walked out. All she heard from him was a nice letter, you know, like a letter after a party or something. It said Thank you very much for the nice time. Can you beat that? And later still she found she had never been married to him because all the time he was married to someone else.'