

Prologue

Queenie

I thought I'd been to Africa. Told all my class I had. Early Bird, our teacher, stood me in front of the British flag – she would let no one call it the common Union Jack: 'It's the flag of Empire not a musical turn.' And I stood there as bold as brass and said, 'I went to Africa when it came to Wembley.' It was then that Early Bird informed me that Africa was a country. 'You're not usually a silly girl, Queenie Buxton,' she went on, 'but you did not go to Africa, you merely went to the British Empire Exhibition, as thousands of others did.'

It was a Butchers' Association trip. Every year there was an outing organised for the butchers, the butchers' wives and children and even the butchers' favourite workers. A day out. Mother liked to go. 'It's like a holiday,' she would say to Father.

'Bloody waste of time,' he'd grumble. But he went all the same.

Some years nearly everyone from our farm went. The inside girls who helped Mother with the pies. The outside girls who fed the pigs and poultry. Even the stupid boys, who helped Father in

the shed, changed out of their splattered aprons and into their ill-fitting, fraying best suits for the trip. We always got dressed in our best to paddle in the sea at Blackpool or ride a red bus round Piccadilly Circus or laugh at the monkeys in the zoo. Then it was time to go home again. The men would be dozing from too much beer and the children would be snivelling after being whacked for dirtying their clothes or getting a piece of rock stuck in their hair. As often as not one of the farm girls would go missing with one of the farm boys only to turn up later, looking sheepish and dishevelled.

The year we went to the Empire Exhibition, the Great War was not long over but nearly forgotten. Even Father agreed that the Empire Exhibition sounded like it was worth a look. The King had described it as 'the whole Empire in little'. Mother thought that meant it was a miniature, like a toy railway or model village. Until someone told her that they'd seen the real lifesize Stephenson's Rocket on display. 'It must be as big as the whole world,' I said, which made everybody laugh.

We had to leave my brothers Billy, Harry and Jim behind. They were too small and everyone agreed with Father when he told the grizzling boys that they would get swallowed up by the crowd. 'I'm not scared of being eaten,' Billy whimpered. They sobbed and clung to Mother's coat. So she had to promise to bring each of them back something nice – a model engine or soldiers. She left them with the inside girl Molly, who stood at the window sulking, giving us all a look that could curdle milk.

I was dressed in a white organza frock with blue ribbons that trailed loose down the front and my hair was set in pigtails adorned with big white bows. All the way there on the train Mother and Father chatted with other butchers and butchers' wives about, of all things, the bother of humane killing over the

poleaxe. Which left me sitting between two of our farm helpers, Emily and Graham, who spent the time giggling and flirting over my head.

Emily had been our outside girl for two months. She had a kindly foster-mother, who lived in Kent and made pictures from spring flowers, and a father and two uncles in London, who drank so much that they had not been awake long enough to take part in the war. Graham helped Father in the shed. He looked after the fire under the copper of pig swill, took the pork pies to the bakehouse when needed and generally ran round doing everything Father asked, only not quite quick enough. Father called Graham Jim. On Graham's first day he had said his name to Father who looked him up and down and said, 'I can't be bothered with a fancy name like that – I'll call you Jim.' Consequently some people called him Jim and others Graham – he'd learned to answer to both. But Graham's only ambition, as far as I could tell, was to get a feel of Emily's bust.

Hundreds and hundreds of people were tramping in through the gates of the exhibition, past the gardens and the lakes. Or milling about, chatting. Little kids being dragged to walk faster. Women pointing, old men wanting a seat. 'Over here! No, over here . . . Over here's better.' The Empire in little. The palace of engineering, the palace of industry, and building after building that housed every country we British owned. Some of them were grand like castles, some had funny pointed roofs and one, I was sure, had half an onion on the top. Practically the whole world there to be looked at.

'Makes you proud,' Graham said to Father.

At which Father looked his butcher's boy up and down for a minute and said, 'Will you listen to him?'

There was a lot of discussion about what we should see – the

whole world and only one day to see it. Mother was not interested in the different woods of Burma or the big-game trophies of Malaya. She said, 'Maybe later,' to the coffee of Jamaica. 'Ooh, no,' to the sugar of Barbados. 'What for?' to the chocolate of Grenada. And 'Where in heaven's name is that?' to Sarawak. In Canada there was a lifesize model of the Prince of Wales made in yellow butter. I had to struggle to the front to get a good look. I pressed my face close to the glass and Mother came and dragged me back. 'You hold Emily's hand,' she told me. 'I don't want you getting lost.' Then she moaned at Emily in front of the crowd, who strained to look past my mother and her blushing outside girl, everyone muttering, 'Butter really? Butter? Never.' Mother told Emily that she had only been brought along to look after me and that if she lost me then she would be in trouble – very big trouble indeed. So Emily attached herself to me like soot to a miner. And where Emily went Graham followed.

Australia smelt of apples. Ripe, green, crisp apples. A smell so sharp and sweet it made my teeth tingle. 'We'll have some of them,' Father said, as he joined the queue to buy a small brown bag of the fruit. Mother saved hers until later, but I ate mine and gave the core to Emily. Graham then told us all that he was going to live in Australia. 'Australia – you? You daft beggar,' Father laughed.

I was promised that I would see a sheep being sheared in New Zealand but we only arrived in time to see the skinny shorn animal trotting round a pen with the fleece at the side. Hong Kong smelt of drains, and India was full of women brightly dressed in strange long colourful fabrics. And all these women had red dots in the middle of their forehead. No one could tell me what the dots were for. 'Go and ask one of them,' Emily said

to me. But Mother said I shouldn't in case the dots meant they were ill – in case they were contagious.

The smell of tea in Ceylon had Mother swallowing hard and saying, 'I'm dying for a cuppa and a sit-down. My feet!' At which Father began grumbling that he hadn't seen the biscuit-making or cigarette-packing machines yet. I cried because I wanted to see more countries. Emily called me a little madam and Mother told her to watch her mouth. So Father gave instructions to Graham – which he had to repeat twice to make sure he was understood – to meet him and Mother later in the rest lounge of the gas exhibit. Mother and Father then went off to find modern machinery and refrigeration, while me, Emily and, of course, the soppy Graham carried on travelling the world alone.

That's when we got lost in Africa. We wandered in, following the syrupy-brown smell of chocolate. Emily trailed behind Graham only looking at me every so often to shout, 'Come on – hurry up.' I wanted one of the cups of cocoa that everyone was sipping but instead Emily pulled me by one of my pigtails and told me to keep up. Then we found ourselves in an African village with Graham looking around himself, scratching his head and telling Emily he was wanting the toilet.

We were in the jungle. Huts made out of mud with pointy stick roofs all around us. And in a hut sitting on a dirt floor was a woman with skin as black as the ink that filled the inkwell in my school desk. A shadow come to life. Sitting cross-legged, her hands weaving bright patterned cloth on a loom. 'We've got machines that do all that now,' Graham said, as Emily nudged him to be quiet. 'She can't understand what I'm saying,' Graham explained. 'They're not civilised. They only understand drums.' The woman just carried on like she'd heard no one speak – pushing her stick through the tangle of threads.

‘Have you seen the toilet?’ Graham asked her, but she didn’t understand that either.

‘I want to go,’ I said, because there was nothing interesting to look at. But then suddenly there was a man. An African man. A black man who looked to be carved from melting chocolate. I clung to Emily but she shooed me off. He was right next to me, close enough so I could see him breathing. A monkey man sweating a smell of mothballs. Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork. The droplets of sweat on his forehead glistened and shone like jewels. His lips were brown, not pink like they should be, and they bulged with air like bicycle tyres. His hair was woolly as a black shorn sheep. His nose, squashed flat, had two nostrils big as train tunnels. And he was looking down at me.

‘Would you like to kiss him?’ Graham said. He nudged me, teasing, and pushed me forward – closer to this black man.

And Emily giggled. ‘Go on Queenie, kiss him, kiss him.’

This man was still looking down at me. I could feel the blood rising in my face, turning me crimson, as he smiled a perfect set of pure blinding white teeth. The inside of his mouth was pink and his face was coming closer and closer to mine. He could have swallowed me up, this big nigger man. But instead he said, in clear English, ‘Perhaps we could shake hands instead?’

Graham’s smile fell off his face. And I shook an African man’s hand. It was warm and slightly sweaty like anyone else’s. I shook his hand up and down for several seconds. And he bowed his head to me and said, ‘It’s nice to meet you.’ Then he let my hand go and stepped out of our way so we could pass. Emily was still giggling, looking at Graham and rolling her eyes. She grabbed my arm and pulled me away while Graham mumbled again that he needed the toilet. And the African man must have understood because he

pointed and said, 'Over there by the tree is a rest room where I think you will find what you need.'

But Graham never found the toilet. He had to wee behind some bins while me and Emily kept a look-out.

Father said later that this African man I was made to shake hands with would have been a chief or a prince in Africa. Evidently, when they speak English you know that they have learned to be civilised – taught English by the white man, missionaries probably. So Father told me not to worry about having shaken his hand because the African man was most likely a potentate.

To take my mind off the encounter Father promised me a trip on the scenic railway. 'Come on, we'll be able to see for miles up there,' he persuaded Mother. She was reluctant, worried I might be sick over everyone on the ground. Father called her a daft 'aporth, then promised her the most wonderful view she'd ever see. I waved to Emily and Graham as our little carriage slowly nudged further and further up. They'd stayed behind – Emily chewing toffee and Graham smoking a cigarette. But then they disappeared. 'They'll turn up later,' Mother sighed.

We went up and up into the heavens until people were just dots below us. As we hung right at the top – the twinkling electric lights below mingling with the stars – Father said something I will never forget. He said, 'See here, Queenie. Look around. You've got the whole world at your feet, lass.'