

The Flame Trees of Thika: Memories of an African Childhood Study Guide

The Flame Trees of Thika: Memories of an African Childhood by Elspeth Huxley

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Plot Summary

Elspeth Huxley, the author, and her mother Tilly arrive in Africa in 1913. Elspeth's father, Robin, has already arrived, having purchased the lease for a farm with plans to clear the land and grow coffee beans. Elspeth is immediately enamored with the land and is caught up with the people she meets and the animals. Though the region is often harsh and unforgiving, Elspeth thrives and dreads the time when she might be forced to leave the country, returning to Europe.

Elspeth's father is something of a dreamer and is working the farm now after a series of failed business endeavors. Robin does not seem afraid to work and is putting his efforts into making the farm pay. One of the first orders of business is to find workers and Robin is dismayed to discover that the young men of the native tribes of the area have little interest in working, even for pay. He finally goes to a chief and promises to pay the chief for any men who will work. One of the men, Njombo, soon emerges as something of a spokesperson and becomes a friend to Elspeth. Robin continues to have trouble controlling his workers until he is told he should have a headman and Sammy arrives as part of the farm.

Elspeth is soon becoming acquainted with new neighbors who are also arriving with the hope of making farms in the region pay off. Among them are Lettice and Hereward Palmer who arrive with two Pekinese dogs and the story of having left their young son behind in Europe. Hereward is a former military man and Lettice later says she was not cut out for life in Africa. Elspeth likes Lettice who gives Elspeth a pony as a gift. Lettice says that a friend, Ian Crawford, selected the pony and it is soon evident that Ian and Lettice are involved in a budding romance. When war breaks out, Lettice tells Tilly that she cannot go through with leaving Hereward in favor of Ian because she fears that Hereward might sacrifice himself on the battlefield and that his skeleton would always stand between her and Ian. As it turns out, she does not have to make that decision because Ian is killed in battle. Another of the neighbors is Mr. and Mrs. Nimmo. Mr. Nimmo spends all his time hunting, leaving Mrs. Nimmo to fill her time as best she can and to manage the farm as best she can. There seems to be an emerging relationship between Mrs. Nimmo and another of the neighbors, Alec Wilson, who believes that the best way to make his farm succeed is to read everything he can find on the subject.

Elspeth is sent for a short time to stay with Ian's brother while Robin is taken into the military and Tilly is helping set up a hospital. She is soon reunited with Tilly and the two remain on the farm only a short time before returning to Europe.



Chapters One through Five

Chapters One through Five Summary and Analysis

The author, Elspeth Huxley, says that she and her mother, Tilly, are in Africa in 1913. They are riding in a cart that carries all their possessions and the things they have purchased for their new life as homesteaders in Thika. Elspeth's father Robin has purchased their land from a man in a Nairobi and is already there awaiting the arrival of Elspeth and Tilly. Elspeth says that a hippo had gotten wedged into the water flume of the electrical production plant at Ruiru, causing a power failure in Nairobi. She does not relate the hippo's fate. They stay with an African named Henry Oram who says that Ruiru will soon be a "suburb of Nairobi" and that it is time for him to move on. He says that a wife who has coffee and a wagon can always make a home wherever she happens to be. His wife says that the entire world can be a garden.

In chapter two, Tilly and Elspeth continue their travels, accompanied by a Swahili named Juma. Elspeth notes that Juma is rather snooty and that he might have simply claimed to be Swahili because to be Swahili was considered fashionable. He is an incredible cook but Tilly tells him to hush when he begins telling stories of the cannibals who live in the area they are about to cross. When they reach the Chania River, they stop at an inn known as Blue Posts because of the blue posts at the front of the building. The inn is run by a man everyone calls "Major Breeches." Robin meets them there and he tells Tilly that there seems to be a shortage of labor, that there are lots of ticks, and that he can locate only one of the two rivers that is supposed to be on the land.

Robin, Tilly and Elspeth ride mules to the property the next day. Robin announces that they are now on their property and Elspeth notes that "We did not seem to be anywhere." Robin immediately begins outlining work to be done so that the land can be cultivated and planted. They return to Blue Posts and prepare to make the move to their new land.

In chapter three, Robin and Tilly are overwhelmed by the work and the rough land. There are many huge ant holes and rivers without bridges, meaning travel by wagon is next to impossible. After a few days, some natives appear at the camp and express, through a young boy working for Juma, curiosity about the lantern. Robin instructs the boy to tell the natives who are interested in the lamp that he will give one to every man who works for him doing work on the farm. The natives are unconvinced, saying that the lamp must have a spirit inside and that it would not work for them. Two days later they return in the daylight. Robin tells their chief that he will pay young men who come to work for him but finds that they are not interested. At Tilly's suggestion he promises to give the chief a goat for every ten young men who work on the farm for an entire month.

In chapter four, the promised men arrive and are given a "ticket" to be presented each day they work so that Robin can track how many days each man works. They build a



sleeping hut for themselves and summon young women to do the thatching. One of the young men is Njombo who has become an unofficial spokesman for the natives. Njombo tells Robin that his design for the family's house "will fall down." Eventually they reach a compromise with the natives building the house but without the use of nails which have been stolen by natives who like the metal. The house provides shelter for the family for their entire stay in Africa. Elspeth tells about efforts to deal with certain problems, such as lice, which are dealt with by using smoke, and jiggas, small pests that lay eggs under the toenail and create painful sores, which are dealt with by spreading goat urine around the huts to keep the jiggas at bay. The problem, according to Elspeth, is that the children develop chest problems from breathing in the ammonia from the urine and eye problems from the smoke.

Tilly has a group of Speckled Sussex chicks and is upset when they are killed by warrior ants. Tilly is soon called on by natives that want her to provide medical care. When there is a child who appears to be dying, Tilly tries to make arrangements to get the baby to the hospital but Juma interferes. Tilly feels certain that Juma is lying but the woman gives in to Juma's insistence and the child dies. The next task is working to train the oxen to work.

In chapter five, Tilly hosts a small party and during the event the conversation turns to all the things she, Robin and their guest, Randall Swift, would do if money were not an issue. Tilly suggests things such as a safari and a model poultry farm but Robin says that he would do nothing and points out that doing nothing is "an expensive affair." Robin is having trouble retaining workers. The men tend to work for a day or so here and there but do not always return and often spend their time at leisure despite having work waiting for them. Randall says that Robin needs a headman and sends a native named Sammy to fill that role. Sammy's heritage is a mixture of Kikuyu and Masai, two tribes that are not usually friendly with each other. Sammy and Elspeth are soon fast friends with Sammy pointing out aspects of nature that most of the natives seem to pay little attention. Sammy also shows Elspeth how to "bleed cattle" to make blood cheese. Elspeth says that the workers stay more focused with Sammy as their overseer.

Elspeth's family has a neighbor, Mr. Roos, who is in the area prior to their own arrival. Elspeth says that Mr. Roos' Dutch heritage prompts him to be harsher with the natives than Robin because the Dutch seem to be caught up in the survival of their race. When Sammy and Mr. Roos have an altercation, Mr. Roos promises to take the matter to the district government officials. Witnesses tell a different story and Sammy is not arrested though he later admits that he traded cattle for the false testimonies.

There is a great deal of subtle information given about Elspeth's parents in the opening of the story. She says that Tilly has ridden out early for a look at the area and is now covered with ticks. She is calmly picking them off while she gives directions to the natives who are loading their possessions into the cart. She hates a woman who "gushes" but is herself very romantic, a fact Elspeth says Tilly works hard to keep covered up from others.



Robin is described as a dreamer who is often taken advantage of by men who partner up with him in various business endeavors. In the case of the property at Thika, the seller convinced Robin that the farming enterprise would be easy and that he was doing Robin a favor by selling it at the named price. It is not clear whether Robin entirely believes the story but it seems that Robin tends to be very trusting. When Tilly says that it seems the seller lied about some points, Robin says that the man might not have known the facts himself. An interesting point is that Robin comes to realize that the land is not what he had expected or hoped for, but he holds to the hope that Tilly will be excited and will convince him that he has done well. Elspeth notes that Robin is soon telling the story of how the land will look when the property is the successful farm he envisions and they are both soon excited at the prospect of what their hard work will accomplish.

The natives are interesting. Those who eventually come to work for Robin have no chief chosen by the tribe. Instead, some of the tribes have a group of elders as a governing body. There is, however, a government commission that oversees the region, an official appointment by the country's government. This group selects a chief in any tribe where one does not already exist. This chief seems to be responsible only for answering to the government when there are problems. The man chosen is given a polished stick and it seems to be carried with pride.

Tilly starts her time in Africa working to maintain a level of "leisured elegance." However, Tilly is, by her very nature, a person who participates in life. She soon gives way on the point of elegance, putting herself and her family more in line with African life rather than holding onto a lifestyle that has no place in Africa. Her attitudes on this point seem interesting in that Tilly does not seem to care overly much.

The family begins to fit in with the natives and seem to have no fear for their lives, despite warnings from Mr. Roos and some government officials to Robin to take Elspeth and Tilly to safety if he sees any signs of unrest. Elspeth is sometimes called "toto," their word for child, and Robin is called "Bad Hat" which Tilly says is the same name he was given by the natives of Rhodesia.



Chapters Six through Ten

Chapters Six through Ten Summary and Analysis

About six months after her family's arrival, Elspeth has several neighbors, including a young educated man named Alec Wilson who depends greatly on books for his information. Elspeth notes that there are few factual documents that include useful, correct information for their farming projects. On the other side of their river is a man named Jock Nimmo, a Scotsman who is often away on hunting trips, leaving his wife behind. Mrs. Nimmo has a nursing background but seems to resent being called on to nurse people, citing her lack of supplies for adequate care.

There is soon news of another couple arriving in the area named Hereward and Lettice Palmer. He is a former military man and she is self-confident and stylish but fits fairly well into the life of the region. The Palmers have two dogs, Pekinese, named Chang and Zena. Lettice is immediately caught up in the idea that she should have a positive impact on the natives so that they learn by her example. Lettice says that they have left their son, a four-year-old child named Hugh, behind, though she says that she fears he will not even know them when they leave Africa in five years. Tilly explains that they must have a mosquito-proof stable for their horses, be careful to remove all ticks from the dogs daily, and that the natives have an array of diseases, including plague and parasites, which means the Palmers must boil all the water they consume. After their first meeting with the Palmers, Tilly says she senses something strange about the Palmers and wonders why they came to Africa.

In chapter seven, Robin learns that Hereward plans to hire an architect to put up his house and Robin convinces him that they should partner on a rock-cutting endeavor as Robin believes there will soon be many more settlers. There is soon another problem with the native workers; the men feel pulling weeds around the young coffee plants is beneath their dignity and women are hired who accomplish a great deal more work.

In chapter eight, Lettice sends a message for Tilly and Robin to come to her. Robin goes first then sends for Tilly. There has been a fight and one of the natives has been "cut to ribbons." Robin and Hereward have gone in search of the man's attacker. Alec Wilson arrives, having heard there was trouble. The workers who are building the Palmer's house are Kavirondo and Sammy says later that burying the man is a waste of time because the Kavirondo will only dig him up to eat the corpse. Sammy later tells Elspeth that Njombo had been involved in the fight with the man and that Njombo is now gone to pay the man's father for his death, a situation that is bound to upset Njombo because the goats he had accumulated had been intended to pay for his bride. Lettice sends a gift of two chameleons to Elspeth and they are eventually named George and Mary because their crests look like crowns and they move like royalty. Robin tells Elspeth that if she puts them on a tartan rug, the creatures will explode with their efforts to match the colors. Elspeth also adopts a young duiker she names Twinkle.



In chapter nine, Elspeth stays with Mrs. Nimmo while Robin and Tilly go to Nairobi with the Palmers. Elspeth says that she is not entertained at home but expected to fend mostly for herself. She says Mrs. Nimmo's attitudes are different, a difference that includes her desire to maintain control over her supplies. Elspeth says that the natives never steal from each other and that she believes they see the bounty of the settlers as something like the bounty of a honey tree—free for the taking. One night during her stay with Mrs. Nimmo, there is a party, though Elspeth is sent to bed very early. One of those guests is Mary Walsh, known as Pioneer Mary, who is known as a tough woman in the region though she seems very nice to Elspeth and says that she had not know there was a child present so has no gift for her. Elspeth later hears the revelry of the guests and a conversation between Alec and Mrs. Nimmo in which it seems Mrs. Nimmo is very lonely. The following morning Mrs. Nimmo thanks Alec for staying the night. In talking to Njombo the following day, Elspeth learns that Pioneer Mary is credited with a great deal of power and that it is believed she will put an end to the current drought situation.

In chapter ten, Tilly is trying to provide some education for Elspeth but Elspeth says that they both soon tire of the rigors of study and begin creating countries instead. Then Tilly reads Francis Bacon's essay on gardens and puts Elspeth to work designing a garden as Bacon described. One day Lettice arrives with a pony for Elspeth and she names him Moyale, the name of his place of origin, because that is the name Njombo sticks him with. Lettice says that Ian Crawford procured the pony for her and when Elspeth meets Ian, she says that he is very attractive. When Elspeth and Ian go for a ride together the following morning, Elspeth is initially impressed with him but then says that he is like all adults, letting conversations "trail off into stupidity."

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In order to claim the land, the settlers are required to make progress toward a working farm. Elspeth notes that Mrs. Nimmo is taking that duty on herself because her husband has no desire to do anything other than hunt. Robin predicts that Mrs. Nimmo makes little progress and that her husband will be angry at the lack of work accomplished in his absence but it seems more likely that Mr. Nimmo scarcely cares what goes on at the farm.

Lettice Palmer has fears about the land but it is not a fear that she will be bitten by a snake or killed by a wild animal. Lettice looks at the unmarked land as proof that people do not leave their marks on Africa. She says that she fears being erased without a trace. Tilly says that the natives have not left a mark on the land but that they will. Lettice once tells Elspeth that she should keep a pair of chameleons as a pet but then changes that to say she should keep two. Lettice says that a person who has one of something "sucks the love out of it" and seems to equate that with children. This is a complicated issue and it seems that Lettice has either been accused of trying to smother her son Hugh or that she fears doing so herself.

Ian then tells Elspeth a story and Elspeth asks for a conclusion. Ian tells her that the way to tell a true story from one that is made up is that true stories end only when their



characters die. Elspeth says that she believes that all stories should begin and end though she says he was probably right. As an example, she cites the story of Adam and Eve which she says fades off into the story of Cain and Abel.



Chapters Eleven through Fifteen

Chapters Eleven through Fifteen Summary and Analysis

Ian has a Somalian named Ahmed as his servant and Lettice says that he has an air of nobility that makes her somewhat uneasy. Ian says he had felt the same initially but that Ahmed has now made Ian feel worthy of commanding princes himself. Elspeth says that Hereward tries to exact military discipline on the workers at his farm and that it annoys him that they simply wander from one job to the next so that some groups of workers have more than enough men to accomplish a task while others are understaffed. She says there are many interesting things at the Palmer home. Their own home is simple, with Tilly's bedroom to one side of the living room and Elspeth's to the other. Elspeth's room is divided so that she sleeps in part and the rest is dedicated as a bathroom that is sometimes used as an "emergency ward." One day an old man named Rohio arrives, unable to breathe, and is put in the bathroom. In desperation, Tilly pours brandy down the old man's throat and he survives.

One day, Elspeth, Tilly, Robin, Lettice, Hereward, Ian and Alec take a picnic as Hereward goes to confront the chief about the man who attacked and killed the man at the Palmer's. Hereward says that if the chief does not produce the attacker as promised, he will send for the D.C. The natives dislike having the D.C. around and the chief soon has a young man who claims to have killed the man. Lettice and Tilly say the boy looks incapable of having committed the murder and Elspeth does not say that she knows that Njombo actually committed the crime.

In chapter twelve, the group leaves the native village and stops for their picnic. Along the way, Tilly says that she believes there will come a day when the natives will emulate the Europeans and live decently. They hunt on the way home and Hereward shoots a pregnant duiker which upsets Elspeth who fears that Twinkle might have escaped and been killed. Ian, Lettice and Elspeth ride on while the others continue their hunt and it is here that Elspeth overhears Lettice saying that she had been married before, that she had eloped with Hereward and that the action had cost him his military career. There is obviously an interest between the two but Lettice tells Ian that she owes too much to Hereward and that he must find someone else.

In chapter thirteen, Sammy announces that he is marrying his third wife. Robin is a bit upset at the news because he knows Sammy has stolen things from Robin to make himself wealthy enough to afford another wife. Then it is revealed that Sammy's new wife was Njombo's intended bride but that he had not been able to afford her after paying off the young man who went to jail for him and the father of the man he had killed. The District Commissioner, Mr. Spicer, tells Lettice that their biggest problem with their jail is keeping people out because the natives enjoy the leisure time. By this time, a train is running to Thika three times weekly and provides transportation to a hospital. Sammy's new wife falls ill to an infection but refuses to use the proffered transportation



and she dies the following day. Since she died inside, the hut is burned and then, in keeping with the tradition of the tribe, her body is thrown to the hyenas.

In chapter fourteen, Sammy's son is horribly mutilated when he pounds on a blasting cap that detonates. Njombo is blamed by Sammy and then Njombo falls mysteriously ill. After Tilly tries everything she can think of, she takes Njombo to the hospital but he soon arrives back at home with a note from the doctors indicating that there is nothing wrong with Njombo except that he has decided to die. Tilly continues to nurse him though it is clear that Njombo believes himself cursed and dying. Tilly goes to the Italian Mission but the priests there say there is nothing they can do for Njombo because he has not freely accepted baptism. Tilly is angry but Robin says he understands because Njombo will not believe in the healing powers of the priests unless he believes in the priests. It is Alec who says that Sammy, as the person who had the curse put on Njombo, is the only person who could remove it. Robin tells Sammy that he will have Sammy's cattle seized for practicing witchcraft—which is illegal—unless he has the curse removed. In chapter fifteen, Tilly and Hereward go to the chief with the same threat. Elspeth and the two adults are just leaving the village when there is an incredible downpour.

That night there is an invasion of saifu, relentless insects which are among the few things Elspeth fears. Elspeth notes that family members usually gather for sickness but that Njombo's family stays away, fearful of his curse which one of the natives says is not something that could harm Tilly, explaining Tilly's lack of fear. Then Njombo is marked with chalk and begins recovering. Alec says that the storm that hit as Tilly and Hereward were leaving their meeting with the chief convinced the chief that God was on their side and he ordered the curse lifted. Elspeth says that Njombo recovers at a fast pace and that he never talks about the ordeal though she thinks of him always as having been "raised from the dead."

Elspeth notes that the Africans do not really have words to thank each other and she wonders whether this is because they have not developed the habit. She says they also do not thank Europeans for anything and that she does not know if it is because they do not have the words to do so or because they feel Europeans never do anything without motive and therefore do not need thanks. However, the old man Tilly heals, Rohio, is different and he always brings Tilly some gift anytime he comes to visit.

There are some interesting attitudes expressed about the roles of women and men on the trip to the native village. Many of the natives are naked or nearly so and Hereward says that they should probably have left the women at home. Tilly, pointing out a young woman who is naked to the waist with little covering lower, says that maybe the men should have remained at home. Robin seems a little envious about the fact that the native men tend to laze around while the women work and Ian explains that the natives are appalled that the European women are allowed so much freedom, and that they talk with the men as something near equal. The lack of tolerance is to be a common theme throughout much of the story as the Europeans simply do not accept that the natives



have an established way of life, that they are happy and need not change in order to meet the European ideals.

A goat is offered up as a sacrifice for Sammy's wife and Elspeth seems drawn to these grisly scenes, somehow believing that she can do something to save the animals set for slaughter. She describes one goat that is eviscerated and continues bleating until someone holds its mouth shut. It is not clear whether Elspeth is tenderhearted or merely sees the sacrifices as an injustice.



Chapters Sixteen through Twenty

Chapters Sixteen through Twenty Summary and Analysis

In chapter sixteen, the Palmers' piano arrives by train and Hereward asks Robin to help him get it home. It is a dangerous endeavor in that there are rivers to cross and steep hills and creek banks. The piano eventually arrives safely and everyone is mesmerized by her playing. At one point there is a discussion about the use of bribery and Hereward is very angry about the subject. Robin breaks the tension somewhat by saying that he cannot quite figure out the difference between a bribe and a tip, prompting Ian to say that it has to do with timing.

In chapter seventeen, the Palmers' house is complete and most of the cannibals leave, though a few settle with their wives in the region. One night a leopard takes one of Lettice's dogs from the porch of their house while Hereward is very close by. Lettice is upset that she allowed it to happen and says that she deserves to live in a "solitary fortress" because she "brings disaster to everyone" she cares about. Tilly plans to get Lettice another Pekinese as a gift, though Robin warns that the pups are expensive. She sells a pair of turkeys to raise the money for the purchase. Meanwhile, the men begin their efforts to kill the leopard. They are unsuccessful until someone suggests that they call on Mr. Roos for help. Elspeth is allowed to take a note requesting his help and when she arrives he tells her that he would like to show her a nest though she does not understand what kind of nest. Elspeth is wary and hangs back, telling him that she is expected back with his answer about the leopard right away. On the second night, Mr. Roos' trap captures the leopard but the animal escapes. Robin is happy that Mr. Roos is, after all, fallible, but everyone is worried that there is an angry, wounded leopard on the loose. Elspeth is particularly worried about Twinkle because she is quite tame and roams around the farm during the daytime.

In chapter eighteen, the men plan to hunt down the leopard. When Mr. Roos refuses to go along with the plan by Hereward for finding the wounded animal, Tilly asks to take his place. Hereward puts himself in the position of most danger and wants to refuse to allow Tilly to participate in the hunt, but seems to fear that she might also refuse his orders and so gives in. Elspeth and others, including several natives, are watching from a higher point when they hear shots. There is confusion about the situation with some saying that there were two leopards rather than one and Lettice fearing that Hereward was killed or injured. Mr. Roos says that he had known there would be a mate because leopards always travel in pairs and he had placed himself to be near the action so that he killed the second leopard that only he was searching for. Soon after, the Pekinese arrives and Lettice, thrilled with the gift, calls the puppy Puffball.

In chapter nineteen, several of the local residents plan to go on a safari. Robin feels he cannot leave the farm but encourages Tilly to go and she agrees, planning to leave Elspeth with Mrs. Nimmo. On the morning they are to leave, they have breakfast at the



Blue Posts and Elspeth joins them. Ian is going, as is his friend, Jack Riddell. Both Tilly and Elspeth cry as they part and then Robin takes Elspeth to Mrs. Nimmo's. Elspeth says that she hates going to Mrs. Nimmo's, mostly because she fears some disaster will befall Twinkle while she is away. At the farm, there is now a large python that Robin hopes to kill though he has never had the opportunity. Elspeth takes a pencil and a packet of needles as a gift to a man who provides spells and charms and trades it for a charm to protect Twinkle. She says that she believes the charm will work but fears that she did not apply it correctly. Njombo says that the python is necessary for the rain and Elspeth promises herself that she will tell Robin not to kill the snake because they need the rain for their young coffee plants.

In chapter twenty, Elspeth goes home from Mrs. Nimmo's and finds that Twinkle has gone missing. She is worried though others say it was merely time for her to want to return to the wild in order to search for a mate. There is a cry from the river and Robin fears a child might have fallen in, so he and Elspeth go to look. There, they discover the python and a bulge in its middle indicates that it has eaten something. Elspeth initially fears that the snake has eaten Twinkle but then there is a woman crying that the snake has eaten her child. Robin goes for his gun and kills the snake. It has not eaten the child but the woman has seen the snake as bad luck because the snake might come back later to take the child. One night Njombo says that an old man has seen a young buck he believes to be Twinkle because he has evaded traps and spears have passed by harmlessly, as if the buck is protected by a charm. She convinces Robin to go with her in search of the young buck and calls out to the animal but knows that the bond between them has been broken. Back at Mrs. Nimmo's, Elspeth finds that her hostess has bought her a dress as a gift. She says she does not know when she will wear it which prompts Mrs. Nimmo to say that Africa is no place for a child and that she believes Robin will send Elspeth home when the coffee begins producing. Elspeth knows her parents hope the coffee is successful soon, but she finds herself hoping this is not the case.

Another example of the intolerance of the Europeans toward the natives is seen as Robin and Hereward try to get the Palmers' piano home. There is very nearly an accident when the wagon begins to roll backwards and Robin has to rush in to help stop it. He says that he had told the men about the use of "wheel chokes" several times but that they had not used them when it was necessary. Hereward responds that it seems the natives have brains but that they avoid using them. There seems to be no tolerance for the fact that this kind of work is new to the natives and that they have other areas of expertise, such as the building of huts without using any nails.

There are some bad feelings toward Mr. Roos after the incident involving the leopard. It seems to involve the fact that Mr. Roos had withheld vital information—that there would be a second leopard in the area—, which could have caused death or injury to some of the other hunters. Hereward says that Mr. Roos had not mentioned it because he did not care if someone were hurt as long as he had the opportunity to kill and keep the skin of the second leopard. There is a second issue regarding Mr. Roos when he tells



Elspeth that she should come for a visit anytime she wants in order to see the "boomklop" nest. This is the word Elspeth does not recognize and she does not want to tell Tilly that she had been afraid to go see it. Tilly asks if Mr. Roos had said they have to see this creature in private and then, apparently fearing that Mr. Roos had some devious act in mind, tells Elspeth that she is never to go to see Mr. Roos alone again. Tilly goes on to say that if Mr. Roos offers to show Elspeth a "boomklop," that she is to refuse. It is interesting that the adults catch onto the idea that there might have been something wrong in Mr. Roos' offer from Elspeth's version of the story, just as Elspeth had felt when the event was occurring.

Hereward seems to realize there is something wrong with Lettice but it is unclear whether he knows that she and Ian are on the verge of a relationship. At one point Hereward tells Tilly that he is going to plan a safari because he believes that Lettice would benefit from the trip. Hereward says that Lettice has been somewhat depressed. It is not revealed how the relationship between Lettice and Ian began or why, but it seems that Lettice feels she is caught in an impossible situation. She will later tell Tilly that she does not know what to do, indicating that she has at least toyed with the idea of leaving with Ian. The child, Hugh, whom she says is her son and whom she fears will not remember her, is also never explained. It seems possible that he is a figment of her imagination, a product of her first marriage being raised by relatives, or possibly her memories of a child who died. It is left to the reader to decide the significance.

Before their departure on the safari, Tilly tells Elspeth that she can come on a safari when she is older which prompts Lettice to say that it must be as horrible for a child who feels they cannot grow up quickly enough as it is for an adult who feels that time is flying by much too quickly. She says that the natives seem happy and that it may be because they do not worry about time. This is the first time anyone has indicated that the natives may have their lives under more control than the Europeans give them credit for.



Chapters Twenty-One through Thirty

Chapters Twenty-One through Thirty Summary and Analysis

In chapter twenty-one, Alec takes on a pupil, Edward Rivett, and a great many of Mr. Roos' cattle are stolen. In chapter twenty-two, the rains arrive as does Mr. Nimmo. Tilly returns but the Palmers remain behind, Hereward having had an accident. When they return, Lettice says that she is torn about Ian and that she has to make some decision. Lettice asks Tilly what she would do in that situation and predicts that Tilly would "do her duty." Tilly objects, saying that she would actually do whatever makes her happy and then would be happy. Tilly does warn Lettice that she is going to be giving up the life of luxury that she has with Hereward. She says that a person who lives in luxury tends to believe that she does not need it, but that actually doing without it is a different story. Tilly later tells Robin that she believes Lettice will go with Ian but predicts failure.

In chapter twenty-three, there is news of impending war. Robin reports for duty and is assigned a job in intelligence. Tilly decides to go to Nairobi to help with a hospital and Elspeth is sent to stay with Ian's older brother, Humphrey Crawford, and his wife. Tilly puts Elspeth in the care of a guard who promises to deliver her safely. Elspeth arrives safely and she soon notices that Humphrey is nothing like Ian. While Elspeth is there, the Crawfords open the gates on a new irrigation system which prompts several of the natives to give long speeches.

In chapter twenty-four, Elspeth is spending some time with a young man named Dirk who works for the Crawfords and who has been on light duty because of a broken leg. It is the only reason the young man has not yet joined the military and he is anxious to go. Elspeth has overheard a concern that buffalo might damage Mr. Crawford's irrigation system and when she finds a Dorobo, a member of a hunting tribe, whom she knows will know where the buffalo are. She has to tell Dirk about the situation in order to gain the goods the Dorobo wants as a trade for the information and Dirk then refuses to allow her to go along but she slips out of the house and tags along. Dirk kills two bulls and has to track another. The Crawfords worry when Dirk takes a long time to return but he does safely.

In chapter twenty-five, Dirk goes to Londiani and Elspeth goes along. On the way, Dirk tells about his life and his family. He says that his family makes what they need. There, she finds that Dirk has left her to join the military. In chapter twenty-six, arrangements are made to get Elspeth back to the Crawfords. On the way, Elspeth encounters Pioneer Mary who has a bakery. In chapter twenty-seven, the Crawfords send Elspeth back to Tilly who is returning to Thika. In chapter twenty-seven, Tilly learns from Alec that Ian has been killed.

In chapter twenty-eight, Lettice tells Elspeth that she plans to take the two Pekinese with her when she goes home and that she does not believe she will return. Elspeth



asks how she could possibly stay away and Lettice predicts that Africa will seem different to Elspeth once she has left the country. Elspeth notes that Lettice has changed. Some of those changes are subtle but some are dramatic and at one point Elspeth believes Lettice is about to make fun of her—an act she would never have considered in the past. Hereward has already left for his military post and Robin leaves soon after. Robin says that when they return, he wants to install a factory to hull the coffee beans. After the train departs with Robin aboard, Tilly finds that Robin gave Njombo his watch, an act Elspeth says is typical of Robin though she says she cannot be certain that Robin did not leave the watch lying somewhere so that Njombo had the opportunity to simply pick it up.

In chapter twenty-nine, Elspeth and Tilly are preparing to sail for Europe on a Greek cargo ship. Elspeth is sad and does not want to leave the land, the animals and the people. As they are preparing to leave, Tilly tells Elspeth to kiss each of the four walls of the living room to ensure her return, and Elspeth does so. In chapter thirty, they encounter Humphrey Crawford who says that something has happened to Kate, but does not say what. Since she was pregnant during Elspeth's stay, Tilly suggests that she might have lost the baby but it is later revealed that Mrs. Crawford died, leaving Humphrey with a baby. Tilly offers to take it but Humphrey declines. They soon board the train and begin their journey.

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Elspeth's disobedience in going with Dirk is something that might have caused her to be punished but the Crawfords seem relieved that she is not injured. As they all watch, the members of the Dorobo tribe gather around the dead buffalo and begin to eat it raw. Mrs. Crawford later says that the Dorobo are carnivores but then says that perhaps they are the same except that they cook their food first. She suggests that perhaps they should try giving up meat but Mr. Crawford says that is not a good idea. Elspeth says that Mrs. Crawford might have had a good idea.

Tilly talks at length with Lettice who says that she thought she would go away with Ian but that she now finds she cannot for fear that Hereward would allow himself to be killed in order to clear the way for their happiness. Lettice says that she would see Hereward's skeleton for the rest of her life if that were to happen. After Tilly tells Lettice that Ian has died, she tells Elspeth and that night Elspeth dreams of Ian. In the dream, there is danger approaching. Ian shoots an eagle and then turns into a bushbuck and runs away.



Characters

Elspeth Huxley

The author, she is a child when she goes with her parents, Robin and Tilly, to a largely unsettled part of Africa. Elspeth is a bright child and is interested in everything, which makes her an apt student of her life in Africa. She is tenderhearted but seems to accept the fact that life in the wilds of Africa is brutal. Elspeth lives with her parents, though Tilly is much more responsible for her life, education and well-being than is Robin. When Tilly goes away on a safari, Elspeth is sent to stay with friends. Elspeth, under Tilly's tutelage, studies some educational material but seems to spend more time studying life in general. For example, when Tilly is sidetracked by the business of the farm, Elspeth colors, draws or even goes off on her own to play. She tends to have animals in her care and worries often for their safety. Her playtime is sometimes spent in the company of natives of the region and she learns about their culture from this time spent with them. Though just a child, Elspeth is able to recount details of confrontations and the social standards of the various tribes.

Elspeth is a precocious child and realizes that her parents are waiting for an opportunity to make a fortune that never quite materializes. Elspeth is given a gift of a dress along with the information that her parents will likely send her back to Europe once the coffee plants have begun yielding crops and Elspeth hopes that day is put off for a long time, but her departure from Africa is actually prompted by the beginning of the war.

Tilly

Elspeth's mother, Tilly is a young woman herself when the family moves to Africa. Tilly has stood beside Robin though Robin seems to have encountered several bad business endeavors. Tilly herself is a strong woman and some of the natives believe that her strength is a poor quality in a woman. She is able and willing to do whatever work is required in Robin's absence, including the managing of the various natives who serve as laborers. Tilly is the principle caregiver for Elspeth but does not, in Elspeth's words, hover. When Tilly has the opportunity to go on a safari, she does so, leaving Tilly in the care of a neighbor. Tilly is dedicated to their project of homesteading the land in Africa and of making the farm pay, but is not so caught up in the project that she has no time for other things.

Tilly is quickly known to the natives as someone who will help when they have a member of their tribe injured or sick. When one man is sick and it becomes evident that he believes he is under a spell, Tilly creates a situation in which the curse will be broken and the man recovers. Though she does not believe in the curse, she does realize that the man believes and that a belief that he will recover is the only thing that will save him. Tilly is thoughtful to a fault, spending a great deal of money to purchase a new dog for a neighbor.



Robin

Elspeth's father, Robin is something of a dreamer and believes that he will eventually find his fortune. An interesting point about Robin that sets him apart from most men of his ilk is that he is willing to work hard at making the farm a paying proposition. It seems his previous failures have been largely because of personal affiliations rather than a lack of work ethic. Robin is a dedicated husband and encourages Tilly to go on a safari even though he himself is unable to go. Robin has great respect for Tilly but has little use for practicalities.

Njombo

One of the natives who lives and works at the farm of Elspeth's family, he becomes a trusted worker and Elspeth's friend. Njombo apparently kills a man in a quarrel and has to use the money he had intended to use to buy his bride as payment to the dead man's family. Njombo almost dies as the result of a curse but Tilly takes steps that helps prompt the lifting of the curse so that Njombo survives. Njombo is, according to Elspeth, the kind of person who could easily lie to the Europeans without feeling any remorse.

Sammy

The man sent by a neighbor to take over the duties of headman for Robin's farm, Sammy has a mixed heritage and it seems to set him apart somewhat from the other natives who work on the farm. Elspeth, who loves the outdoors and is an avid observer, says that Sammy is the one of the native workers at the farm who can show her nests and animals, teaching her about the nature of their area.

Mrs. Nimmo

The wife of one of the settlers, Mrs. Nimmo has a background in nursing but hates being called on by the natives to tend their sick, mostly because she does not believe she has the proper medicines and supplies to do an adequate job. She is somewhat flighty, has no children of her own and tends to mother Elspeth whenever Elspeth stays with Mrs. Nimmo.

Hereward Palmer

Another of the neighbors, Hereward is a former military man and is wealthy. He is called "Captain Palmer" by Elspeth and seems very stern and upright. Hereward seems to know there is something wrong with his wife but it is not clear whether he knows that she is torn by her affection for someone else. Hereward goes off to war as the story comes to a close.



Lettice Palmer

Hereward's wife, Lettice is rather flighty and seems to wish for the civilized life she left behind, though it is eventually revealed that her marriage to Hereward was something of a scandal and that they have little choice on this front. Lettice confides in Tilly that she cares for Ian Crawford and that she wants to be with him but does not believe she can leave Hereward, especially not with the opening of the war.

Alec Wilson

A young man who lives in the region, Alec believes that the answer to successful farming lies in his ability to learn about the subject. Toward that end, he gathers everything he can find on the subject but Elspeth says that it is not a good plan because there are so few books on the subject and almost nothing that is both correct and useful. It is Alec who brings the news of Ian's death.

Ian Crawford

A young adventurer who falls in love with Lettice Palmer. Ian is somewhat romanticized in Elspeth's eyes and she finds him incredibly attractive. It is Ian who tells Elspeth that a true story is different from one that is made up because a true story never has a tidy ending. Ian is killed soon after the beginning of the war.



Objects/Places

Thika

The place in Africa where Robin buys five hundred acres of land for his family to farm.

Blue Posts

The name of a way station near Thika where Elspeth and her parents stop on the way to their new farm.

Chania River

The river near the Blue Posts.

Toto

The name used for child.

Bad Hat

The name given to Robin by the natives.

Kavirondo

The people of the Kavirondo Gulf on Lake Victoria, they are said to eat the meat of human corpses.

Saifu

Insects that invade in torrents and are kept out of the huts by ashes and off beds and furniture by putting pans of water under the legs.

Londiani

Where Dirk goes with Elspeth and leaves her to join the military.



Nairobi

Where Robin buys the farm property and where the family goes for supplies.

Europe

Where Elspeth's family is from and where Elspeth and Tilly return at the beginning of the war.

Themes

Intolerance for Cultural Differences

There are many differences between the native Africans and the Europeans who settle the region and both seem to have little tolerance for most of the differences. For example, the European women who agree to settle in Africa with their husbands are generally strong-willed women, at least to some degree. The Africans have little respect for their women and do not understand the European tendency to allow women to move around with the men and to voice opinions. On the other side of the coin, the Europeans have arrived in Africa with plans to civilize the African people. At one point Tilly says that their work is difficult but predicts there will come a time when the African people have a better life and that it will be because they are willing to emulate the European examples. Another aspect of this lack of understanding is seen in the fact that Africans have no word for thank-you and do not see any need to thank Europeans for any good deed or gift. The Europeans believe the Africans are inconsiderate and are not willing to accept that a cultural difference is the reason. It is interesting that the Europeans are not at all willing to believe that their influence and impact on the natives will be anything other than positive, and that they have no doubt that the Africans need to be changed.

Loyalty

Loyalty is a theme seen mainly in Elspeth's family and most commonly in Tilly's loyalty to Robin. Tilly has had a difficult life as Robin's wife. The family was once wealthy enough that Elspeth had a nanny and Elspeth recounts the story of having overheard the nanny say that Robin "had a hole in his pocket." Tilly makes a reference to the jewels that she had once owned that had been sold after one of Robin's failed business ventures. For his part, Robin seems to be so incredibly trusting of others that he is likely to remain something less than a success, simply because he allows others to take advantage of him. As Robin continues to struggle with his plans and dreams, Tilly is left to work at his side and pick up the pieces when he is ready to move on to the next idea. What is interesting is that Elspeth recounts no instances of having seen her parents argue over these problems. It could be that the family arguments are kept from Elspeth or that she does not choose to recount them, but it also seems possible that Tilly's loyalty to Robin is such that it is not ever in question. There are a few other examples of this theme, including in Lettice Palmer who feels a sense of loyalty to her husband Hereward despite her emerging love for Ian Crawford.

Coming of Age

In some ways, the story is a traditional coming-of-age story though the theme is less obvious than might be because Elspeth talks less about herself than about others. Elspeth is a young girl and ages physically over the course of the story. She also



matures to some degree though she is such a precocious child from the beginning that it is difficult to see signs of the maturing. Elspeth says that she is left largely to her own devices. For example, she is seldom eager to work at homework but says that she and Tilly are much the same on this point and she is given different kinds of assignments but also spends a great deal of time wandering around the area on her own. She meets and comes to know neighbors and some of the natives and pays close attention to attitudes, events and conversations, all which age her emotionally over the course of the story. These include relationships, some that are supposed to be hidden. She also notes the things said by adults, both native and European, that indicate attitudes toward the other cultures and provide Elspeth with additional information that helps her mature.



Style

Perspective

The story is written in first person from Elspeth's point of view. The story is very limited and the perspective never changes. Any details not seen from Elspeth's perspective are presented by Elspeth, relating them to the reader as Elspeth learns about them. The limitation makes Elspeth's character something of a mystery. Though she explains her feelings about particular events and her thoughts on some points, she tends to present more of her observations of others. This gives the reader a very limited view of Elspeth's character.

Elspeth tells many of the stories from her child's perspective and sometimes these stories are also limited by both the perspective and the telling. For example, she tells of a sexual encounter between Mrs. Nimmo and Alec Wilson though she does not realize exactly what she is describing. She also tells of a budding love affair between Lettice Palmer and Ian Crawford, though this story is told in greater detail and apparently with greater understanding than the Nimmo encounter. Elspeth may gloss over some aspects of her life in Africa. For example, she tells of witnessing the sacrificing of animals for various African rituals and tells only about the cruelty to the animals being sacrificed. However, she does not really say how these situations impact her personally, and does not delve deeper than the surface of her own feelings on these points. It is left to the reader to decide how much she is holding back.

Tone

The book is written in a fairly straightforward style though there are some references to the time period that may confuse some readers. For example, Elspeth tells about the native way of building round houses and their tendency to use very little furniture. She says that the huts were, to some degree, sufficient for the needs of their inhabitants. They used smoke to keep away lice and goat urine to keep away another pest called "jiggas," which tended to lay eggs under a person's toenails. Elspeth, in her explanation that the positive points of this process are countered by negatives, refers to "roundabouts" and "swings." There is a saying referring to what the natives "gained on the roundabouts they lost on the swings." The reference is a dated saying that basically means that it is necessary to take the good with the bad. There are also a great many legends and cultural references. For example, the natives will burn down a hut if a person dies inside, citing the fact that there would be a spirit trapped inside. Njambo refuses to have anything to do with Elspeth's chameleons, saying only that they are "bad." Alec later tells Elspeth of a legend that God had once entrusted a chameleon with an important message and that because the chameleon had failed in its duty, the moon disappears each month and humans will not live forever.



There are some interesting aspects of the culture revealed through the stories of the book. For example, Njombo is apparently responsible for the death of a man on the farm of Elspeth's neighbor's, the Palmers. Njombo had been planning to marry and had been saving up the price of his bride, but after the man dies of wounds Njombo causes, Njombo then has to give the dead man's father all his accumulated wealth as payment for the son's death. It is also revealed that the country's official government that follows its people as they begin settling the region causes some changes. For example, there is a man known as the District Commissioner who seems to hold great power but this power is actually only effective as far as the native people allow it to be. When the D.C. goes to a chief and demands to know the truth of some particular event, the chief can often produce witnesses that were bought by the accused to tell a particular story in the way the accused requests. Sometimes this elaborate cover will go so far as to include another native who will take the punishment—even time in jail—for the accused, again for a price. Lettice tells Tilly that she does not believe the settlers can make an impact on the people but it seems none of them realize the impact they are making.

Structure

The story is divided into thirty chapters of varying lengths, most ranging from eight to twelve pages though some are slightly shorter and some longer. The chapters are titled by number only and there is no clue as to the contents of the chapters. The story is divided between narration and dialogue. Both seem reasonable and believable.

The story is set in Africa beginning in 1918. The date, places and other aspects of the story are set out clearly in the narrative. The story is presented in chronological order by the author. Events that happen without the author being present are presented as the author finds out about them. For example, Elspeth stays with the Crawfords for a time while Tilly is in Nairobi and Mrs. Crawford dies after Elspeth leaves. News of her death is given to the reader when Tilly and Elspeth meet up by chance with Mr. Crawford well after the death. This seems an adequate method of presentation.



Quotes

"One cannot describe a smell because there are no words to do so in the English language, apart from those that place it in a very general category, like sweet or pungent. So I cannot characterize this, nor compare it with any other, but it was the smell of travel in those days, in fact the smell of Africa—dry, peppery yet rich and deep with an undertone of native body smeared with fat and red ochre and giving out a ripe, partly rancid odour which nauseated some Europeans when they first encountered it but which I, for one, grew to enjoy." Chapter 1, p. 8.

"Robin wants a castle in Scotland, and I should like a safari across the Northern Frontier into Abyssinia and home by the Nile. And then I'd like to own a balloon, and to breed New Forest ponies, and to get to China on the trans-Siberian railway, and to have a model poultry farm, and buy a Daimler, and fish in Norway—oh, and lots of other things." Chapter 5, p. 43.

"Robin and Tilly used to buy supplies when they visited Nairobi, and a doctor Mrs. Nimmo had served under sometimes sent her things. For the rest, she worked by faith and Epsom salts." Chapter 6, p. 55.

"This appears to be a country where women do all the hard work while the men look fierce and decorative, like cock birds. That might suit Hereward, but I have a long way to go before I can be as useful as a Kikuru woman." Chapter 8, p. 75.

"Let's have the bottle, Jack, and wish Mrs. Nimmo the best of health and happiness, and her good man also, and God bless all our friends and damnation to our enemies."—Pioneer Mary, Chapter 9, p. 88.

"Perhaps gratitude was simply a habit Africans had never acquired towards each other, and therefore could not display toward Europeans; or perhaps Europeans were looked upon as being of another order to whom the ordinary rules did not apply; if they wished to help you, they would do so for reasons of their own, and were no more to be thanked than rivers for providing water or trees for shade." Chapter 11, p. 113.

"We may have a sticky passage ourselves, but when we've knocked a bit of civilization into them, all this dirt and disease and superstition will go and they'll live like decent people for the first time in their history." Chapter 12, p. 121.

"'There is only one man who can save Njombo,' Alec said, 'and that is Sammy; it was he who put on the spell, because he thinks it was Njombo's magic that blew up his son; and he must take it off again.'" Chapter 14, p. 146.

"I began to perceive that a third world lay beyond, inside and intermingled with the two worlds I already know of, those of ourselves and the Kikuyu: a world of snakes and rainbows, of ghosts and spirits, of monsters and charms, a world that had its own laws and for the most part led its own life, but now and again, like a rock jutting up through



earth and vegetation, protruded into ours, and was there all the time under the surface." Chapter 20, p. 197.

"Don't forget to clean your teeth, and try to not scratch your head so often, and when you ride for heaven's sake keep your toes straight and your heels down, and your elbows in, and don't look so much like a performing monkey." Chapter 23, p. 223.

"We ate the buffaloes' liver and enjoyed it, in spite of Kate's doubts; but since then I have often wondered whether she was right." Chapter 24, p. 245.

"That was just like Tilly; starting next morning for a voyage on a cargo-boat with an unknown destiny ahead of her, and no preparations, she was quite willing to including a new-born baby in her kit." Chapter 30, p. 285.



Topics for Discussion

How do Elspeth and her family come to be in Africa? What does the family hope about the farm?

List at least three neighbors near Elspeth's home in Africa. Describe each in detail, including their relationships with Elspeth and her family.

There are many cultural differences between the Europeans who settle in Africa and the natives who live there. What are some of these differences and how do they define that people?

Who is Robin? Tilly? Elspeth? What are the relationships between the three? What kind of people are Robin and Tilly? How do their personalities and actions impact Elspeth? How might Elspeth have been different if Robin and Tilly had been different?

Elspeth witnesses a great many deaths of animals during her stay in Africa. List at least three, including their circumstances. What are Elspeth's thoughts on these deaths? How do they impact her life?

Who is Ian Crawford? Lettice Palmer? Hereward Palmer? What are the relationships between the three? What happens to each of the three as the story comes to an end?

What are some of the things that frighten people in Africa? What are some of the challenges? What are some of the exciting things? How does Elspeth present each of these? How do these draw the reader into the story?