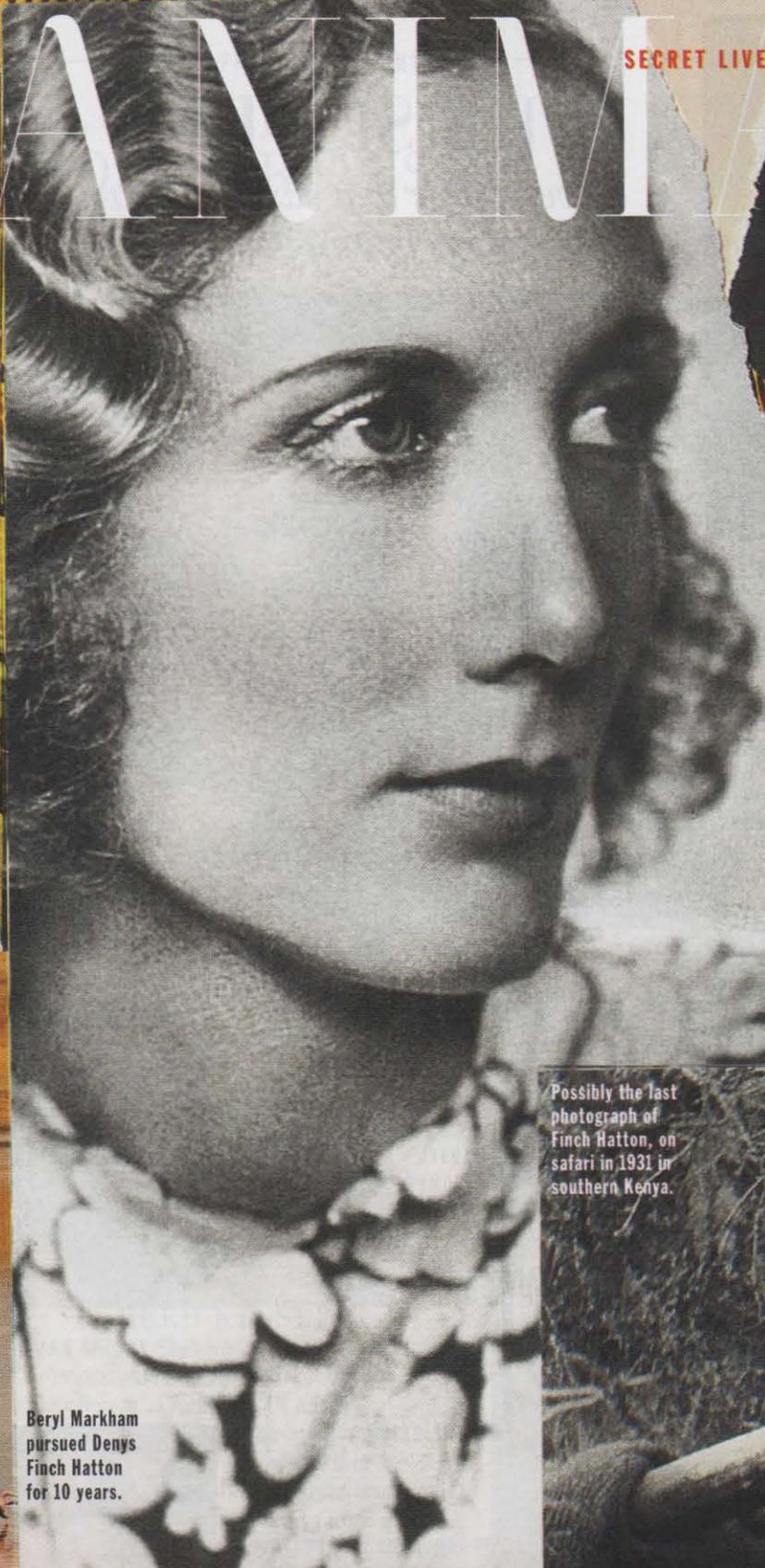
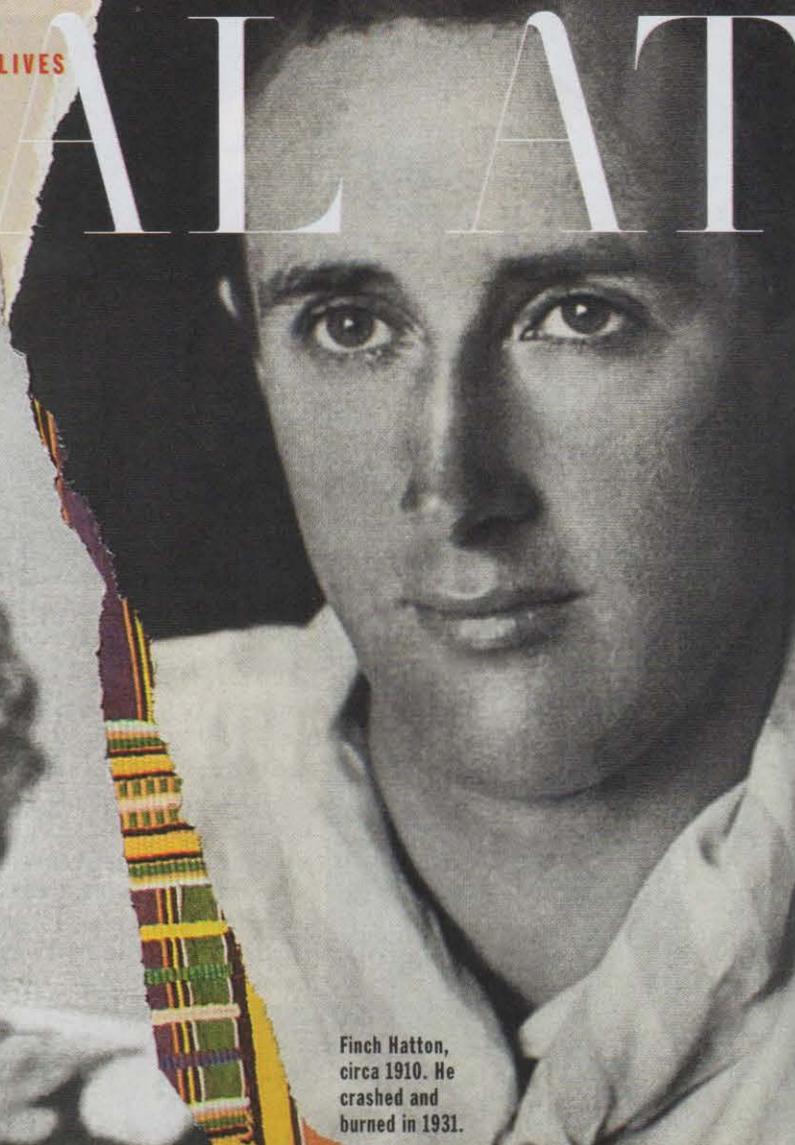


# ANNALS AT

SECRET LIVES



Beryl Markham pursued Denys Finch Hatton for 10 years.



Finch Hatton, circa 1910. He crashed and burned in 1931.

Possibly the last photograph of Finch Hatton, on safari in 1931 in southern Kenya.



*Handwritten text:*  
Beryl  
Finch  
Hatton

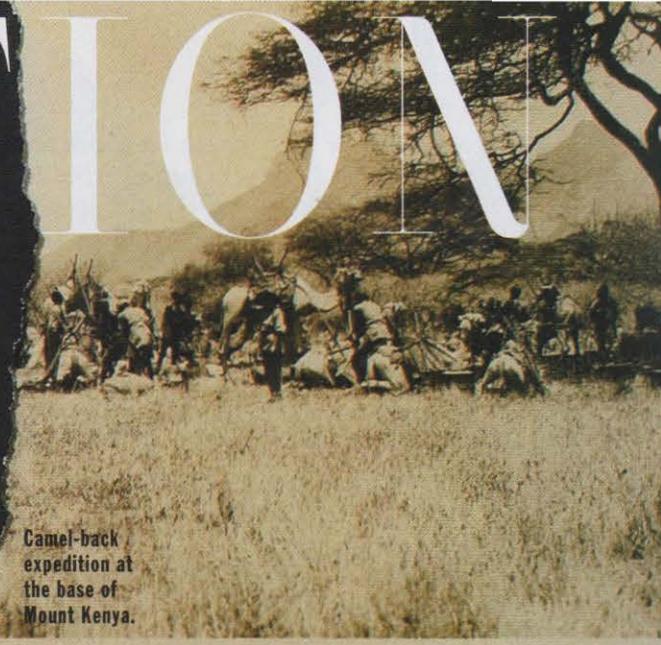
An Out of Africa-worthy flight at Lewa Wilderness Conservancy.



# TRACTION



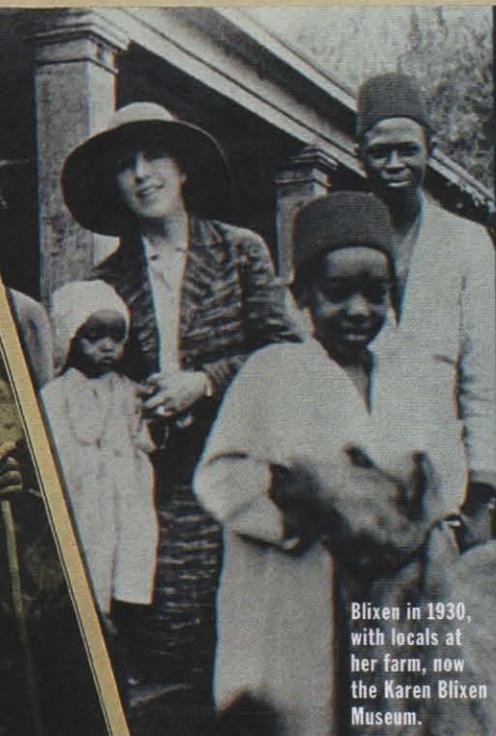
The baroness Karen Blixen (a.k.a. Isak Dinesen), author of *Out of Africa*.



Camel-back expedition at the base of Mount Kenya.



A colonial-era portrait of Kenya's Meru warriors.



Blixen in 1930, with locals at her farm, now the Karen Blixen Museum.

Markham in 1937.



IT'S NO OVERSTATEMENT TO CALL THE PLAYERS IN COLONIAL KENYA'S

SECRET TRIANGLE *WILDLY COMPLICATED*: THE HUNTER AND HEARTTHROB DENYS FINCH HATTON, THE BARONESS AND WRITER KAREN BLIXEN, AND HER FRIEND, THE *BOLD AND BEAUTIFULLY RECKLESS* BERYL MARKHAM.

By Paula McLain  
Collages by Bruno Grizzo

→ **I** conoclasts are born, surely, but more often they come smoking from the forge of highly particular circumstances and (unfortunately requisite) suffering. Beryl Markham is such a one. English born, the pioneering aviatrix lived most of her life in the British East African Protectorate, which became the Kenya Colony in 1920 before breaking from foreign rule in 1963, under the leadership of prime minister and president Jomo Kenyatta, to become the Republic of Kenya.

Through each of its violent moltings, Markham's bit of Africa was never less than her anchor and an argument for living boldly, sometimes on nerve alone. Her father Charles Clutterbuck was a horse breeder and trainer who in 1904 transplanted his family from tame Rutland, in the English Midlands, to 1,500 acres of untouched bush in the Rift Valley, 100 miles upcountry from Nairobi. Since building a farm out of nothing monopolized Clutterbuck's energy, and Markham's mother Clara very quickly abandoned the family to return to England, Markham became every inch the *enfant sauvage*, spear-hunting in the bush and in the Mau Forest with her childhood friend Kibii, a Kipsigis warrior-in-training, and testing herself on the thorny edges of her world. She rode a horse before she could walk, learned Swahili as her first language, and grew into a leggy, complex beauty hardwired to trust animals and the brutal landscape more than people, and to seek danger lest it seek her first.

But there was more loss to come. When a looming, highly public bankruptcy forced Clutterbuck to sell off his farm piecemeal, the 16-year-old Beryl was offloaded at a price as well (as she would later tell friends), to Jock Purves, a neighboring farmer twice her age. Reeling and humiliated, she scrambled her way toward precious independence, and by age 18 had become the first licensed female racehorse trainer in Africa, and very possibly the world.

Later she would fall in with a cohort of glamorous European expats that included the Danish writer/farmer/baroness Karen Blixen, author of *Out of Africa* (written under the pen name Isak Dinesen), and the big game hunter Denys Finch Hatton—a man Markham would pursue heedlessly, like no other, for more than a decade. It was Finch Hatton who first encouraged Markham to take up flying, setting her on a course to become the first woman (in 1936, at the age of 33) to cross the Atlantic solo, nonstop, and “the hard way,” east to west, harassed by storms and wicked headwinds.

In Markham's memoir, *West with the Night*, first published in 1942, there is a lot of pluck and derring-do in her descriptions of her transatlantic flight and other adventures. The book kick-started my girl crush on Markham and inspired me to novelize her life—but I soon learned there were many, many closer-cutting stories she didn't touch on in her book, stories she guarded like a sphinx. Her talent was for secrecy, rather than discretion, and the practice of arch silence in the face of the gossip that arced behind her every move like a neon contrail.

Speculation about Markham has, in fact, outlived the woman by going on 30 years. She died in Nairobi in 1986, at the age of 83,

but there are still claims that *West with the Night* wasn't hers at all but rather the effort of her third husband, the journalist and ghost-writer Raoul Schumacher. Also that her only son, Gervase, was the product of a liaison with Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester (he toured Kenya on safari with his brother Edward, Prince of Wales, in 1928), that Beryl's second husband, Mansfield Markham, threatened to name the duke as corespondent in his divorce claim against her, and that monies put in trust by Prince Henry's mother, Queen Mary, to keep everyone's mouth shut paid out an annuity to Markham for the remainder of her life.

If one were inclined to take these and other rumors straight from the spoon, it would be nothing to write off Markham as an illiterate alcoholic who rarely, if ever, got off her back. But after spending more than a year plumbing her voice and psyche, I was weary of innuendo and began to think it was high time I left my desk and stacks of sources to search her out on her own turf. Was Markham's Kenya still findable, I wanted to know, and was it possible to grasp firsthand the power her distinct world exerted on

her consciousness and on the map of her life? Nothing was obvious but the trailhead. Hooking in with Micato, a highly regarded safari company with roots in Kenya, I let them know what I was after and why, and then launched myself at Nairobi.

“So there are many Africas,” Markham wrote in *West with the Night*. “There are as many Africas as there are books about Africa.” Indeed. My research had supplied me with a glorious sepia-toned image of Nairobi, but I also knew to expect the lurching modern world, sprawling slums and high-rises, traffic snarls and armed *askari* checking trucks for bombs. Radical Islam and Ebola have sent Kenya's economy teetering. Tourism—so essential to the country's well-being—is in free fall, but it's not altogether obvious to me

that traveling to Africa today takes any more nerve than it ever has.

**W**hen Markham first knew it, Nairobi was a tin can outpost in a particularly uninhabitable stretch between Mombasa and Lake Victoria made reachable by the Uganda Railway, otherwise known as the Lunatic Express. Constructed between 1899 and 1903, in the midst of an all-out British land grab, the railway was the first strategic imperial project in Africa to push into the interior. With it came those bold (and, yes, very probably lunatic) Anglo-Irish and European pioneers, who endeavored to make a life in this unlikely place, where malarial papyrus swamp met red murrum dust met marauding lions.

Postcards and flyers promised Eden for the taking. A stake of 1,000 pounds could get you a thousand fertile acres and the Adamic fantasy of limitless beginning—but also tsetse flies and puff adders and ants vicious enough to take down a horse. Africa required grit and a certain stubborn romance, and if you came as a child, as Markham did, the place itself appeared to wake up those qualities. The undiscovered country seemed to correspond perfectly and mysteriously to something within that was primitive and bottomless. →

**ARE YOU MARRIED,  
OR DO YOU LIVE IN  
KENYA? THE JOKE WENT  
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THAT KEPT THE RIGHT  
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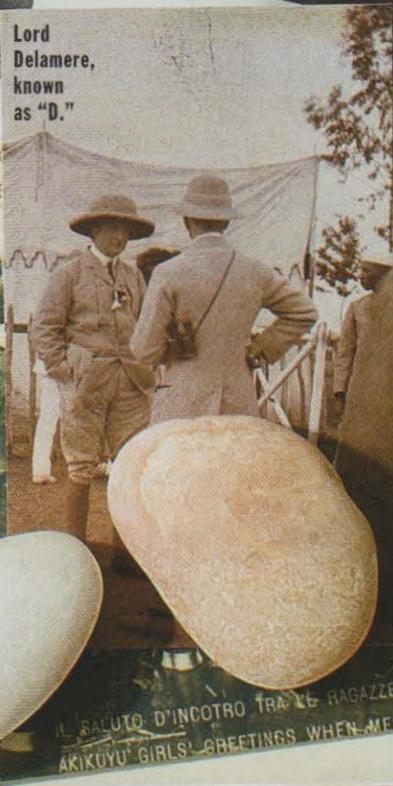
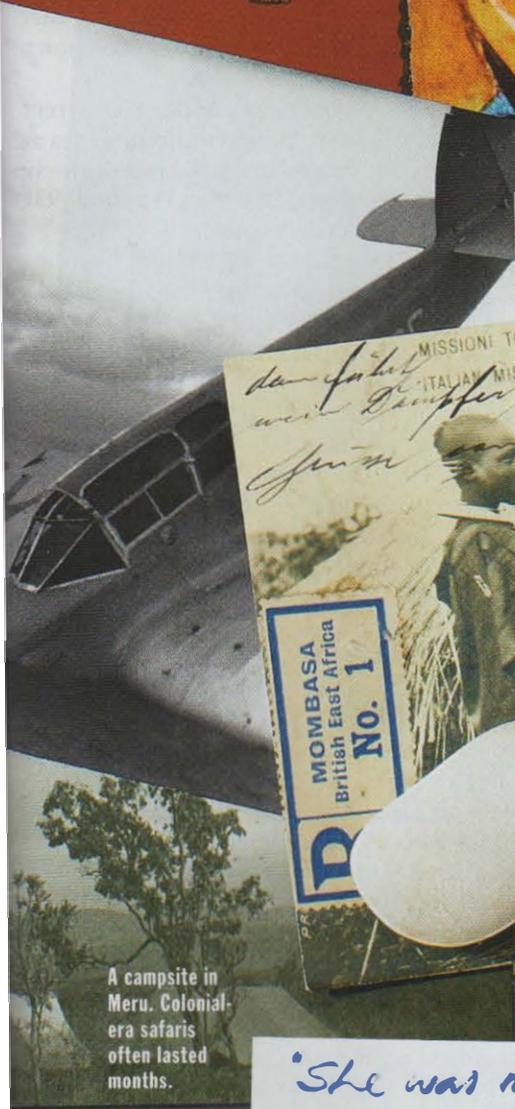
Markham's  
she ran out  
fuel and  
ash-landed  
Nova Scotia  
1936. She  
sustained a  
serious injury.



Her  
storybook  
girlhood  
cottage,  
in Njoro.



Markham (above  
and below) just before  
her pioneering solo  
transatlantic flight,  
September 1936.



Lord  
Delamere,  
known  
as "D."



MOMBASA  
British East Africa  
No. 1



Kikuyu  
girls  
1913.

IL SALUTO D'INCOTRO TRA LE RAGAZZE AKIKUIU  
AKIKUYU' GIRLS' GREETINGS WHEN MEETING

A campsite in  
Meru. Colonial-  
era safaris  
often lasted  
months.

*"She was much disliked by other people's  
wives, but we adored her"*

➔ The early settlers' first stop was invariably the Norfolk Hotel—my first stop as well. Built in 1904, Nairobi's first hotel was a critical player in its social history, the only toehold of "civilization," where any newcomer could get a cool bath, some nice gin, and the lay of the land. It's currently set in the middle of the University of Nairobi, the city pulsing and roaring until you step through the lobby and into the courtyard. And then: birdsong, Jacaranda. Time collapsing like a paper fan. In the veranda bar, the Cin Cin, slung with deep-cushioned rattan, I need only one bracing Negroni and a bit of squinting to see it as it was 100 years ago, settlers and hunters and dignitaries, as well as every British peer of note, gathering for gossipy high tea, or preparing to go on safari.

Markham danced here on her wedding night, in 1919, in ivory satin with pearl trimmings and yards of silk ninon. I've pored over every photo of her I can find, but being here, where she was, gives me a more visceral empathy. Not yet 17, and shell-shocked from the

## TRAILING BERYL

Almost a century on, much remains of Markham's, Finch Hatton's, and Blixen's sepia-colored Kenya. My 15-day trip was organized with great style by Micato Safaris, which has deep roots in the country and, admirably, sponsors a local child to go to primary school for each safari booked (MICATO.COM).

**Fairmont the Norfolk**, my Nairobi base, has always prized its colonial heritage; historical photographs abound, and breakfast is served on the Lord Delamere Terrace. From there it's easy to visit the Karen Blixen Museum, Finch Hatton's grave at Ngong Hills, and the Ngong Racecourse.

The Laikipia Plateau, which surrounds the deluxe **Segera Retreat**, is hauntingly austere: bleached rock formations and



**BUSH BEAUTY**  
From top: Segera Retreat; the Norfolk's bar; the view to infinity at the Sleeping Warrior Lodge.

whistling thorn. Other extraordinary assets include owner Jochen Zeitz's collection of contemporary African art, his replica of Finch Hatton's Gipsy Moth plane, and a collection of rare correspondence from Africa's pioneers (extracts from Blixen's letters adorn the bed throws).

**Lewa Wilderness**, originally a ranch founded by the Craig family in 1922 and now nine guest cottages, offers visitors various ways to explore and engage, including an *Out of Africa*-worthy ride in Will Craig's open-cockpit biplane.

Nanyuki's **Mount Kenya Safari Club** was created as an elite private club in the 1950s by William Holden (members included Steve McQueen and Conrad Hilton). It sits right on the Equator—you can have a room in either hemisphere.

The Lake District, near Nairobi, was the stomping ground of the Happy Valley Set. For full immersion, stay at **Kembo Cottages**. Owners Zoe and Andrew Nightingale have moved Markham's cottage (which you can rent) to their property.

The **Sleeping Warrior Camp** is in the Soysambu Conservancy, once Lord Delamere's private hunting ground, now a starkly beautiful nature preserve on Lake Elmenteita.

The **Fairmont Mara Safari Club** was my home on the Maasai Mara. Markham was a bush pilot here. Epic game viewing and high-end tent living. P.M.

impending sale of her father's farm, she would have been bewildered about the future and her new husband—and poised to make some of her notorious mistakes.

Are you married, or do you live in Kenya? the joke went then. Infidelities were expected, if not mandatory—but so too was a scrim of civilized deception that kept the right people shielded and the surface intact. Markham couldn't or wouldn't follow the rules. When news of his bride's sexual impulsivity leaked back to Jock Purves, he picked loud, public fights, which horrified the community. He couldn't handle his liquor, some said. He might have been impotent, too. Before long Markham had had enough and went to train racehorses for Lord Delamere at his vast Soysambu Ranch, in the Great Rift Valley.

Delamere (known as "D") had been a neighbor during her childhood in Njoro and was a surrogate parent after her mother left for England. He was also the unofficial emperor of the white settlers and is still considered the most influential landowner in Kenya's history. His ranch has been run by his family continuously since 1906; since 2007 the property has also been a wildlife conservancy. The land holding, now 48,000 acres, is home to 12,000 head of wildlife, from aardvarks to zorillas. When I visit, the area is in the worst stretch of its dry season, and the animals are in hiding. I see mostly zebras, gazelles, and dust devils stitching the parched valley that surrounds the dormant volcano, Sleeping Warrior—also known by the local population as Delamere's Nose.

"It's just like Grandfather sleeping on his back," the current Lord Delamere, Hugh Cholmondeley, says over afternoon tea at the ranch. "With a nose like that," he plunges ahead provocatively, "you'd think he'd be able to make money." But when D died, in 1931, he was in debt to the tune of half a million pounds.

Cholmondeley is a "mere youngster of 81" and still imposing at six-foot-five, with legs that jut across the very lived-in veranda, which overlooks the sulfurous Lake Elmenteita. As his wife Anne feeds lemon cake to their Labradors, Cholmondeley tells me that when he was a teenager home on holiday from Eton in the mid-1950s, Markham came around looking for work. She was far too good-looking, so she was sent packing. "She was much disliked by other people's wives," Anne adds, "but when we saw her in town we would scoop her up and feed her: We adored her."

When the cake is gone, the bored dogs follow me as I scout the property. I find that the stable, paddock, and even the squat Norwegian wood cottage that housed Markham when she first left Purves to work for D are all pretty much as they were in 1922. D "knew nothing about building, or farming," Cholmondeley insists irascibly, and yet his grandfather's physical legacy persists, recalcitrant as the threads of colonialism itself. The crown ruled over this bit of Africa for only 60-some years—the width of an eyelash, really, in the canyon of geologic time—and yet here sits Cholmondeley, his long shadow tracing the veranda. For the moment, in any case. The wildcard inheritor of the baronetcy, his and Anne's only son, Tom Cholmondeley, was convicted of manslaughter in 2009 after shooting a farm worker he suspected of poaching. After a much-written-about trial, Tom served a portion of his sentence and was released. Hugh doesn't touch on the scandal, but he seems delighted to run through the roster of possible culprits in the Happy Valley murder of 1941, luridly treated in the book and film *White Mischief*.

"But it was Diana, wasn't it?" he asks cheerfully. "After all, she was covered head to toe in [the Earl of] [CONTINUED ON PAGE 118]



A viaduct on the British-built Uganda Railway, circa 1900.

Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, rumored Markham paramour.

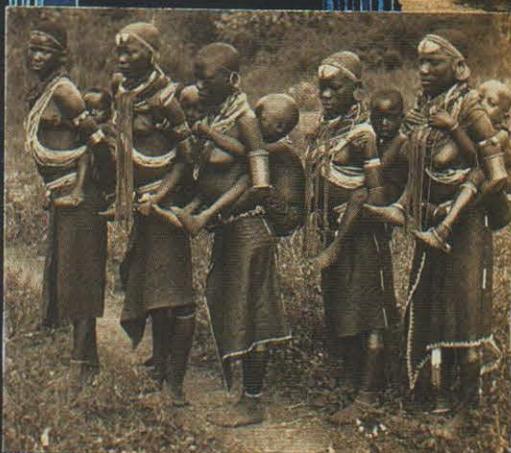


The private Muthaiga Club, Nairobi.



An expedition fording the Molo River.

*expanses had never, scared her, but love did.*



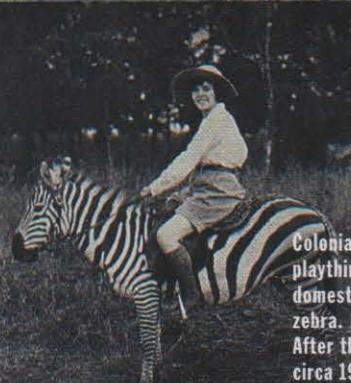
Maasai mothers in the forest of Kilimanjaro, 1920.



Markham with New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia after her 1936 Atlantic crossing.



The Trophy Room at the Muthaiga Club.



Colonial plaything: a domesticated zebra. Right: After the hunt, circa 1915.





## ANIMAL ATTRACTION

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 100] Erroll's blood." He means Lady Diana Delves-Broughton, who married his father in 1955. (It was Diana's fourth marriage, his father's third.) The colonists often threw each other over for neighbors in various spouse-swapping recombinations. The social Rolodex was only so big then, as now, and the descendants, like the current Lord Delamere, are well familiar with one another's skeletons. But Cholmondeley somehow hasn't heard about the time Purves, on a drunken tear in nearby Nakuru, attacked his grandfather for letting Markham run amok on the ranch. Suffering a number of broken bones, D was in bed for six months, recovering. Purves went scot-free, and most of the colonists believed the whole thing was Markham's fault. D was forced to fire her, and many in her circle turned away, insisting she should have known better than to test Purves.

One of these friends was Karen Blixen; they fell out briefly too, but it didn't last. When things with Purves grew sour early on, Markham often fled to Blixen's coffee farm outside Nairobi for solace, crossing the 75 miles of open bush on horseback without a thought for lurking predators. Leopards never scared her, but love did. The bulk of her questionable life choices were made on the run from or toward a romantic entanglement, and yet I don't believe Finch Hatton was a mistake. He belonged to her friend the Baroness Blixen, true...as much as he could "belong" to anyone. But his iconoclasm and wildness ran parallel to Markham's in such a way that he opened her—in my view—to herself. In pursuing him fiercely, against good sense, she solidified, even as she pushed past her own edges. She began to do those things (to paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt) she could not do. She learned to fly.

It is little known that when Finch Hatton died tragically, in 1931, at age 44—plummeting to earth in his de Havilland Gipsy Moth like Icarus spinning away from the sun—he was estranged from Blixen and very much involved with Markham. Neither woman so much as

hints at the triangle in her memoir, nor does either intimate that on separate occasions each believed herself pregnant with Finch Hatton's child. Markham fled to London to terminate the pregnancy in 1925, and she knew better than to tell Finch Hatton, who seemed incapable of long-term monogamy, or of shouldering the burden of emotional obligation. Blixen miscarried twice, by her own estimation, losses that saddened her deeply and drove a wedge between her and Finch Hatton. These shadows aren't visible in *Out of Africa*, which mythologizes Finch Hatton and overperfects their love story, but in Blixen's letters to her family she admitted to feeling so weakened by her love for him that she sometimes considered suicide.

"I must *be myself*," Blixen wrote to her brother Thomas in April 1926, "achieve something that is mine and is me, in order to be able to live at all." That she was desperate for the kind of independence that came naturally to Markham is almost painfully ironic, since Finch Hatton's death unequivocally sealed Blixen to another fate, as his inalienable widow. He, her vanished lover, was fixed in amber. So too was the farm she lost to bankruptcy in 1931.

It was the success of Sydney Pollack's 1985 film adaptation of *Out of Africa* that catalyzed the creation of the Karen Blixen Museum. For a small tariff you can be transported to a more graceful age. As I stand marveling at the lovely preserved mahogany in Blixen's parlor, her pitted bluestone hearth and redolent frangipani trees, it comes to me that every inch of this house is a museum—not only to her life but to the complexities of the human heart. Markham, Finch Hatton, Blixen: These three were not simple people. And if they were cagey and difficult sometimes—unreliable narrators of their own lives—even so I can find something to admire in it.

After Finch Hatton's death the traumatized Markham swore she would never attend another funeral, and she kept her word. Instead, as often happened, she used pain as a lever to propel herself into the heart of what she feared most. One month after the accident she soloed for the first time, also in a Gipsy Moth, above the airfield at the Wilson Aero Club in Nairobi.

One of the oldest flying clubs in the world, the Wilson stands intact, and it's there, overlooking the airstrip where Markham first learned to fly, in 1929, that I meet and have lunch with Mark Ross, an American wildlife biologist turned bush pilot and safari guide, in the hope that I might understand something about adven-

ture and fearlessness. Ross is obviously a spiritual descendant of the brave and eccentric pioneers I've come looking for. He earned his A license in 19 days of instruction, taught himself aerobatics by reading a book about it, regularly drops his 9,000-pound bush plane onto a murrum strip 450 yards long—10,000 feet up Mount Kenya—and once punched a leopard in the face when it jumped into a vehicle with safari clients.

"What drives people," I ask him, "to do dangerous things?"

"I take only calculated risks," he says, narrowing sharp blue eyes lest I challenge him. Then he goes on to say that one of his jobs as a safari leader is to get people to release their fear of the unknown. But I have long suspected that for a certain type of adventurous soul, like Ross, something in Africa works irrevocably on courage, driving such people to test themselves against the edge of experience, just as Markham did chronically.

She was constitutionally incapable of doing safe, ordinary work, or of letting things grow dull for even a moment. "A life has to move on or it stagnates," she wrote in *West with the Night*. "Every tomorrow ought not to resemble every yesterday." Not long after Finch Hatton's death, she became one of the few pilots in Africa, male or female, to have a commercial license, and she used her Avian to cart mail and passengers for a shilling a mile, and also to scout elephants by air for Blixen's husband Bror under impossibly dangerous circumstances. At the time, elephants were so plentiful in East Africa that Markham could fly over a herd for 10 minutes and not see the end of it. She and these early sport hunters—glorying in Nature's Zoo—likely would not have been able to fathom a time when Kenya would be desperate about its wildlife.

Many descendants of these pioneers—like Hugh Cholmondeley, or Will Craig and his family, in the Lewa Wilderness to the north, which I also visit—have turned vast family holdings into conservancies. The German entrepreneur and philanthropist Jochen Zeitz has created Segera, 50,000 acres of preserved land on the Laikipia Plateau, which houses a socially responsible retreat and game reserve with a balance of the 4Cs: conservation, community, culture, and commerce. This is a very different way of being a pioneer in Africa from the one his predecessors practiced, and yet Zeitz is not so far from landholders like Delamere or the Honourable Berkeley Cole, or even Clutterbuck. He has the soul of an adventurer and has long collected the unpublished letters of others who have explored Africa, including

David Livingstone, Karen and Bror Blixen, and Ernest Hemingway. Zeitz owns the 1929 Gipsy Moth used in the filming of *Out of Africa*, as it was a perfect match for Finch Hatton's plane. Yar and gleaming in a small hangar, it's a gorgeous time capsule.

I want only to climb in, to wear it like a skin, fly away over Mount Kenya's graphite tip. Instead I'm taken on a long game drive through the Segera Preserve; the limpid sky, thorn trees, and dramatic rock formations are all essentially unchanged since Precambrian times. Almost immediately we spot a herd of elephants in the watering hole. This is the daily ritual, Philip Rono, our guide, explains, of drinking their fill—a family affair. When the herd lurches out, slick and streaming, their path into the fever trees takes them within a few feet of our Land Cruiser, so close I can hear their huge wet feet making contact with the red dust, and also the water sloshing in their bellies, a heavy wineskin sound.

We see a journey of giraffes, running in what looks like slow motion, pendulum tails swinging. There are Grevy's zebras, elands, stolid buffaloes in a dry wallow—and always Mount Kenya, piled high with clouds just now, like curls of meringue. There is an *Out of Africa* picnic along the Ngare Nyiro River (piles of plush cushions in dappled shade, a table set with silver and bone china), and later I return to my cottage for a deep soak in the veranda's stone tub just after sunset. Stars push through dense black one by one, and then comes the thinnest sickle moon. This is the same immutable sky that Markham knew sleeping out as a bush pilot, and also as a girl in Njoro.

"Africa was the breath and life of my childhood," Markham wrote. "It is still the host of all my darkest fears, the cradle of mysteries always intriguing, never wholly solved." The mystery of the woman herself is only deepened by her writing—lyrical descriptions of paradise layered with pointed subterfuge. Instead of exposing the things that hurt her—her mother, for instance, or her father's betrayal—she romanticizes the difficulties of the natural world and of Green Hills, her father's farm, faultless as any Eden before the Fall.

The rich valley in Njoro where Markham spent her childhood is still a horse farm, now run by Bruce Nightingale, one of the most successful breeders of thoroughbreds in Africa. His son and daughter-in-law, Andrew and Zoe Nightingale, manage Kembu Farm and a collection of guest cottages, just below Clutterbuck's old gallops.

For 20 years Andrew tried to get a neighboring farmer to sell him the storybook cottage Markham's father built for her when she was 14—three cozy hexagonal rooms under a shingle roof. It was near condemnable when they finally brought it down the hill to its current spot. I spend one of my last few precious nights in Kenya there, waking before dawn to see Markham's favorite view, the eponymous green hill in the distance swaddled in blue mist, the distant Aberdare Mountains, the Menengai Crater, and, nearer by, a few dozen yearlings nosing the fence line, waiting for one of the grooms to bring breakfast. The past hasn't held still for me, not exactly. Markham hasn't either, yet I know something intangible about her from staring at the same ceiling and walking in the dust under the same searing equatorial sun. How could I not?

Down the hill stands a railway station the locals call Cluttabucki, after Markham's father; it's where D first stepped into the Rift Valley in 1902 to settle here, and where the pioneer experience really began. Markham is surely a daughter of colonialism, but she would rather have belonged to the Kipsigis village on her father's land. By night she would slip out her window to join Kibii's family around the fire in their hut, hungry for their stories rather than her own.

Before I leave Africa I'm invited to a similar village—this one Maasai. Behind a high thorn enclosure, there to shield the village cattle and children from predators, mud and daub huts sit as they have for hundreds of years. Inside I rest on a low hide pallet, parchment-smooth, and close my eyes. The walls smell like ancient fire, as do the morani, or warriors, who dance in red patterned shukas and carry ornamental spears. They ululate in quickening rhythm around a bonfire spitting cinders, pulling song from the deepest places, their feet swirling dust.

In *West with the Night*, Markham writes about competing with Kibii to see who could leap higher, something I have always understood as a simple child's game until I see the Maasai morani do it as the women watch, wrapped in splendid lengths of cloth. Then it strikes me that Markham was a warrior more than a woman—or a warrior and a woman. Because of this distinct beginning place. Because her mother vanished. Because the world robbed her of safety, and the rules dissolved. Violently and bit by bit she was fitted perfectly to her Africa, and it to her. Here, in the place that made her, beautifully damaged, she flung herself at the sky, believing she could tame it.

And she did. «