



Comprehension activity

GOING SOLO - FLYING TRAINING

By Roald Dahl

In November 1939, when the war was two months old, I told the Shell Company that I wanted to join up and help in the fight against Bwana Hitler, and they released me with their blessing. In a wonderfully magnanimous gesture, they told me that they would continue to pay my salary into the bank wherever I might happen to be in the world and for as long as the war lasted and I remained alive. I thanked them very much indeed and got into my ancient little Ford Prefect and set off on the 600-mile journey from Dar es Salaam to Nairobi to enlist in the RAF.

When one is quite alone on a lengthy and slightly hazardous journey like this, every sensation of pleasure and fear is enormously intensified, and several incidents from that strange two-day safari up through central Africa in my little black Ford have remained clear in my memory.

A frequent and always wonderful sight was the astonishing number of giraffe that I passed on the first day. They were usually in groups of three or four, often with a baby alongside, and they never ceased to enthral me. They were surprisingly tame. I would see them ahead of me nibbling green leaves from the tops of the acacia trees by the side of the road, and whenever I came upon them I would stop the car and get out and walk slowly towards them, shouting inane but cheery greetings up into the sky where their small heads were waving about on their long long necks. I often amazed myself by the way I behaved when I was certain that there were no other human beings within fifty miles. All my inhibitions would disappear and I would shout, 'Hello, giraffes! Hello! Hello! Hello! How are you today?' And the giraffes would incline their heads very slightly and stare down at me with languorous demure expressions, but they never ran away. I found it exhilarating to be able to walk freely among such huge graceful wild creatures and talk to them as I wished.

The road northwards through Tanganyika was narrow and often deeply rutted, and once I saw a very large thick greenish-brown cobra gliding slowly over the ruts in the road about thirty yards ahead of me. It was seven or eight feet long and was holding its flat spoon-shaped head six inches up in the air and well clear of the dusty road. I stopped the car smartly so as not to run it over, and to be truthful I was so frightened I went quickly into reverse and kept backing away until the fearsome thing has disappeared into the undergrowth. I never lost my fear of snakes all the time I was in the tropics. They gave me the shivers.

At the Wami river the natives put my car on a raft and six strong men on the opposite bank started to pull me across the hundred yards or so of water with a rope, chanting as they pulled. The river was running swiftly and in midstream the slim raft upon which my car and I were balanced began to get carried down-river by the current. The six strong men chanted louder and pulled harder and I sat helpless in the car watching the crocodiles swimming around the raft, and the crocodiles stared up at me with their cruel black eyes. I was bobbing about on that river for over an hour, but in the end the six strong men won their battle with the currents and pulled me across. 'That will be three shillings, bwana,' they said laughing.

Only once did I see an elephant. I saw a big tusker and his cow and their one baby moving slowly forward in line astern about fifty yards from the road on the edge of the forest. I stopped the car to watch them but I did not get out. The elephants never saw me and I was able to stay gazing at them for quite a while. A great sense of peace and serenity seemed to surround these massive, slow-moving, gentle beasts. Their skin hung



loose over their bodies like suits they had inherited from larger ancestors, with the trousers ridiculously baggy. Like giraffes they were vegetarians and did not have to hunt or kill in order to survive in the jungle, and no other wild beast would dare to threaten them. Only the foul humans in shape of an occasional big-game hunter or an ivory poacher were to be feared, but this small elephant family did not look as though they had met any of these horrors yet. They seemed to be leading a life of absolute contentment. They are better off than me, I told myself, and a good deal wiser. I myself am at this moment on my way to kill Germans or to be killed by them, but those elephants have no thought of murder in their minds.

At the frontier between Tanganyika and Kenya there was a wooden gate across the road with an old shack alongside it, and in command of this greta outpost of Customs and Immigration was an ancient toothless black man who told me he had been there for thirty-seven years. He gave me a cup of tea and said he was sorry he did not have any sugar to put into it. I asked him if he wished to see my passport but he shook his head and said all passports looked the same to him. In any event, he added, smiling secretly, he could not read without spectacles and he did not possess any.

Outside the Customs shack, a group of enormous Masai tribesman holding spears were crowding round my car. They stared at me curiously and patted the car with their hands, but we were unable to understand each other's language.

A little later on, I was bumping along a particularly narrow bit of road through some very thick jungle when all of a sudden the sun went down and in ten minutes darkness descended over the jungle land. My headlamps were very dim. It would have been foolish to push on through the night. So I parked just off the road in a scrubby patch of thorn trees to wait for the dawn, and I sat in the car with the window down and poured myself a tot of whisky with water. I drank slowly, listening to the jungle noises all around me and I was not afraid. A car is good protection against almost any wild animal. I had a sandwich with hard cheese inside it and I ate that with my whisky. Then I wound up the two windows, leaving just a half-inch gap at the top of each, and got into the back seat and curled up and went to sleep.

I reached Nairobi at about three o'clock the next afternoon and drove straight to the aerodrome where the small RAF headquarters was situated. There I was given a medical examination by an affable English doctor who remarked that six feet six inches was not the ideal height for a flier of aeroplanes.

'Does that mean you can't pass me for flying duties?' I asked him fearfully.

'Funnily enough,' he said, 'there is no mention of a height limit in my instructions, so I can pass you with a simple uniform which consisted of khaki shorts and a shirt and a jacket and khaki stockings and black shoes, and I was given the rank of Leading Aircraft man (LAC) which is one below a Corporal.'

Questions:

1. Why did the author decide to join the fight against Hitler in 1939?



2. What gesture did the Shell Company make when the author expressed his desire to join the war?

3. What animals fascinated the author during his journey to Nairobi, and how did he interact with them?

4. What encounter did the author have with a snake and how did he feel at this moment?

5. Describe the experience the author had while crossing the river.



6. What dissimilarity does the author make between him and the elephants?

7. What was the reaction of the Masai tribesman when they saw the authors car? Why do you think they reacted in this way?

8. Why wasn't the author afraid when darkness fell over the jungle?

9. What rank was the author given when he joined the RAF? How do you think he felt?

10. Summarise how the authors first trip to Africa unravelled and what lessons do you think he may have learnt so far?



Answers:

1. The author wanted to contribute to the war effort and enlisted in the Royal Air Force to fight against Hitler. Perhaps he felt it was his duty to his country.
2. The Shell Company magnanimously continued to pay for the author's salary into his bank for the duration he was at war or for as long as he remained alive.
3. The author was in awe at many animals he came across, such as the giraffe. He found pleasure in spending time talking to these gentle animals and being able to be so close to them.
4. The author was met with a snake and immediately felt fear, he remained in his car and slowly reversed so to avoid it. You can tell he was in fear.
5. While crossing the river, the author described how he felt fairly useless when his raft began to get carried down the river by the strong current. He came face to face with some crocodiles which he described as having 'cruel black eyes' indicating his fear of them. When the men had brought him to safety they joked with him.
6. When the author is admiring the elephants it reminds him how different their lives are. He mentions how the elephants lived a life of serenity and had not 'met any of these horrors yet'. He himself was there for war and either to kill or be killed. A stark difference and realisation between man and animal.
7. The Masai tribe approached the authors car with curiosity as they may not have seen a vehicle or this type of vehicle before. They tried to communicate with him maybe to ask him questions but there was a definite language barrier.
8. He must have felt relatively safe as he was protected by his car. He mentioned that no animal would be able to get him.
9. The author reached Nairobi and was given the rank of Leading Aircraft man (LAC) which was one below Corporal.
10. He was continually inspired and in awe of his surroundings, he enjoyed learning and seeing new things. As he travelled alone he felt as though every emotion and experience was intensified - Answers may vary. Give a summary and use evidence to support your answers.