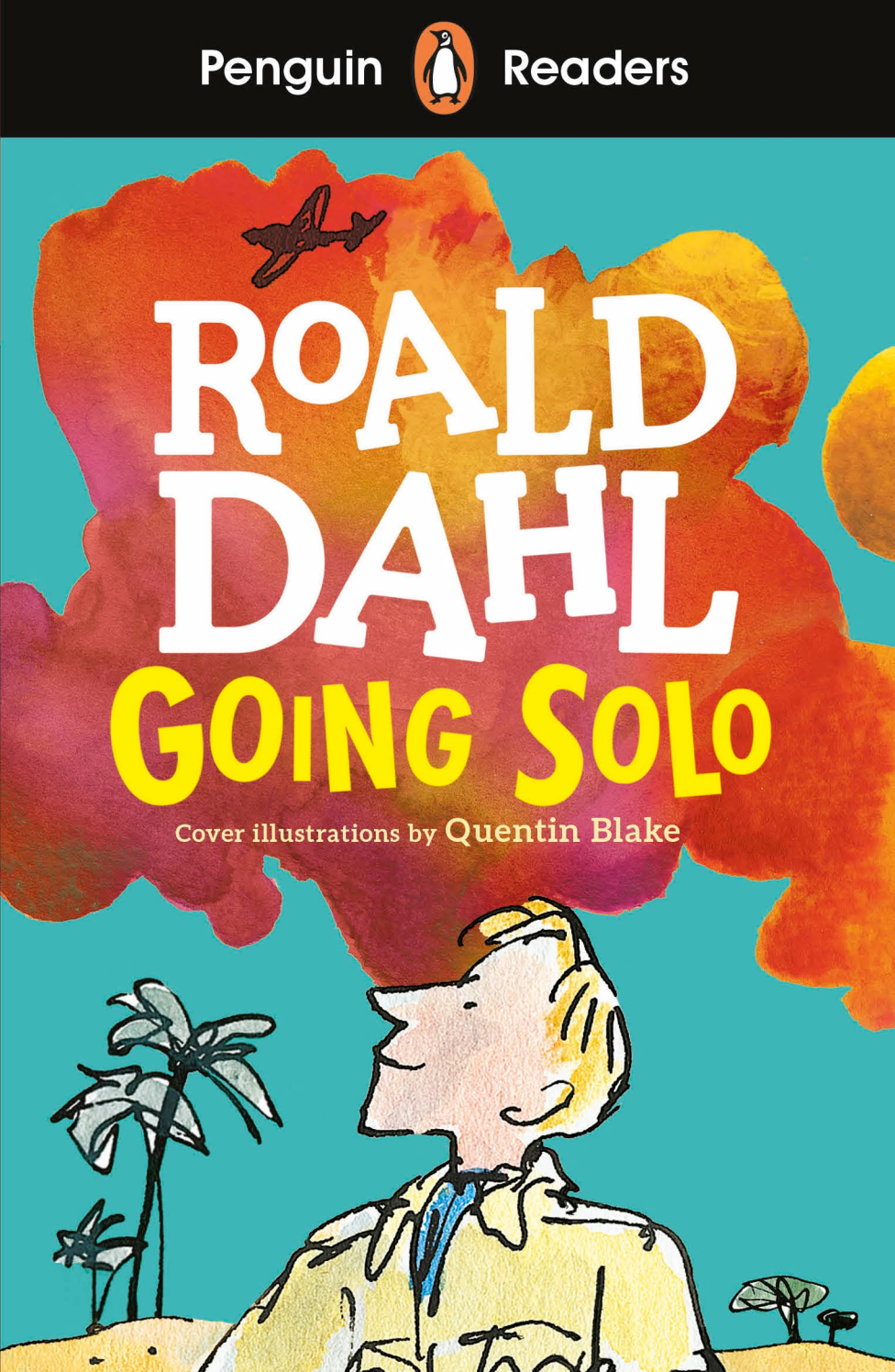


Penguin



Readers

The background of the cover features a large, stylized cloud in shades of orange and red against a teal sky. A small black airplane is flying above the cloud. In the foreground, a man with blonde hair, wearing a yellow shirt and a blue tie, is looking up at the cloud. To the left, there are palm trees, and to the right, there are small trees on a hill.

ROALD DAHL GOING SOLO

Cover illustrations by Quentin Blake

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CHAPTER ONE

To Africa

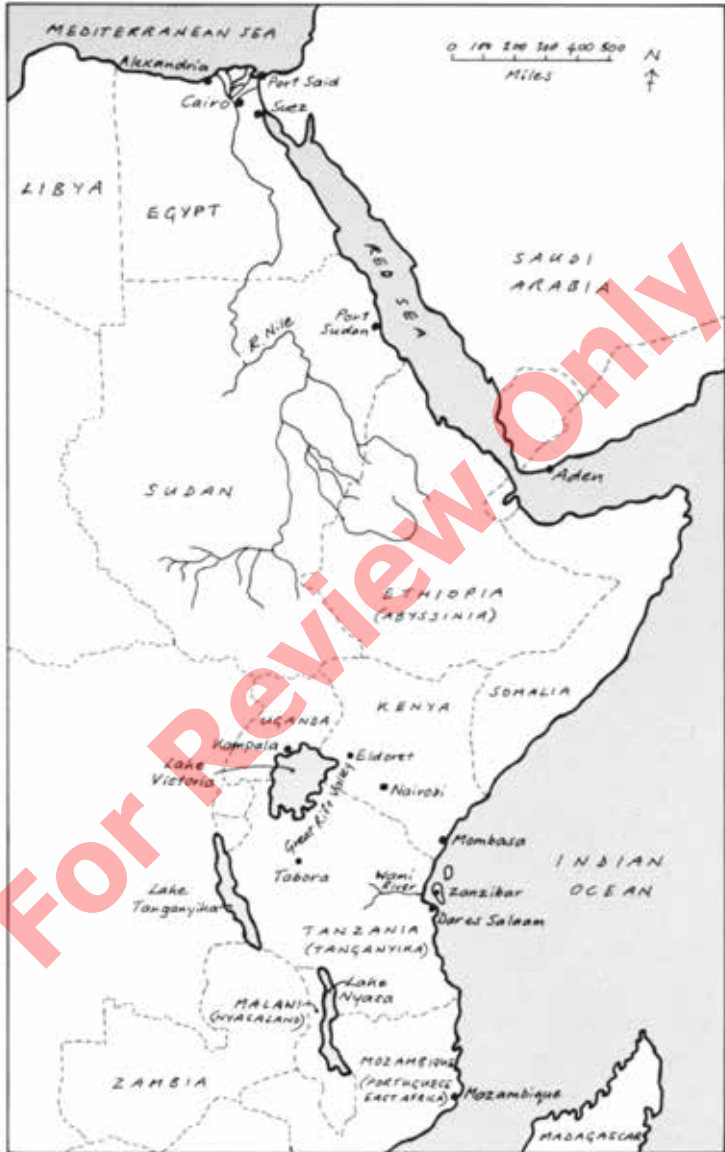
The ship that was carrying me away from England to Africa in the autumn of 1938 was called the SS *Mantola*. It was an old ship with an **engine** that made the cups on the table shake.

The journey from London to Mombasa in Kenya took two weeks, and on the way we visited Marseilles, Malta, Port Said, Suez, Port Sudan and Aden. Today you can fly to Mombasa in just a few hours. You do not stop anywhere, but you see nothing. In those days travelling took longer, but it was wonderful.

I was going to East Africa because I had a job there with the Shell Company – a business that sold **fuel**. It was a long way from home, and I had to stay for three years before I could visit England. I was twenty-two years old when I left England, and I did not plan to see my family again until I was twenty-five.

For me, the journey on the ship was very interesting, but the most interesting thing was the other people. In the 1930s Britain still had a large **empire**, and many British people lived in its countries. The ship was full of these people, and they were the strangest group I have ever met. On the SS *Mantola*, almost everybody had their own strange ways. I will tell you about a few of these people.

On the ship there was a man who got up very early



East Africa

every morning to run. He ran around the deck – the outside area of the ship – every day. Quite normal, you might say, but how he did it was not normal.

One day I woke up very early. I was lying on my bed and looking out of the round window. The Mediterranean Sea was **calm** and blue, and a bright yellow sun was beginning to appear. It was wonderfully quiet.

Suddenly a **naked** man appeared on the deck outside my window, then disappeared as quickly. I could not believe it. Surely the man was not real? The deck was so empty and quiet. But then, a moment later, the naked man ran past again. Yes, he was wearing no clothes at all. Not a thing. He was as naked as the day he was born.

This time I sat up quickly, climbed off my bed and put my head out of the window. Soon the naked man ran towards me for a third time. He was short and a bit fat, and he had a big black moustache on his face. When he saw me, he waved a hairy arm and called to me, “Come on, my boy! Come and join me for a run! Get some sea air into your body!”

Now I could see that the man was Major Griffiths. Just last night, I sat next to him at dinner. He was a Major – an important **army** man – and he told me about his life in India.

I decided to say something to Major Griffiths when he ran past again. I wanted to show him that I did not care that he was naked.

Here he came again. But, wait a minute! What was this?

There was someone with him! Another person was running with the Major and was as naked as he was, too. What was happening on this ship? Did all the men get up early and run naked around the deck?

The two people came closer. The second one looked like a woman! It *was* a woman! A naked woman . . . I could see now that this was Mrs Major Griffiths herself.

“Come!” the Major called to me. “If the little wife can do it, so can you! Fifty times round the deck is *only* four miles!”

“Lovely morning,” I said, quietly, as they ran past. “Beautiful day.”

Two hours later, I was sitting at the breakfast table, opposite the Major and his wife. I did not know where to look, and I tried to act normally.

“Ha!” cried the Major, suddenly. “You’re the young man who had his head out of the window this morning!”

“Who, me?” I said, keeping my nose down in my breakfast.

“Yes, you!” cried the Major. “I never forget a face!”

“I . . . I was just getting some air.”

“You were getting more than that,” the Major cried. “You were getting a look at the wife. That’s what you were doing!”

All eight people at our table became quiet and looked at me. I felt my face turn red.

“I’m not surprised,” continued the Major, and he gave his wife an enormous smile. “My wife is very beautiful.” He gave her another smile.

“Oh, shut up, Bonzo,” his wife said, but she was enjoying the conversation.

“At home in India,” the Major said to me, “I play six chukkas every morning before breakfast. I can’t do that on the ship, you know. So I have to run.”

I did not know this game of “chuckers”, but I was very happy to change the conversation.

“Why can’t you do it?” I asked.

“Why can’t I do what?” the Major said.

“Play chuckers on the ship?” I replied.

The Major **stared** at me with wide eyes. He thought I was stupid.

“Are you saying that you have never played polo?” he said.

“Oh, polo,” I said. Polo is a very old ball game from Central Asia. Players ride horses, and seven-and-a-half minutes of play is called a chukka. That is what he was talking about!

“Yes, of course, polo. We played it at school on bikes,” I told the Major.

Now the Major stared at me with hate, and his face turned bright red. After that, neither he nor his wife spoke to me, because they thought that I was laughing at their special game.

CHAPTER TWO

More strange people

Then there was Miss Trefusis. She was a very old, thin woman with grey skin. She owned a coffee farm in Kenya.

"All English people in Africa are strange," she told me.

"But you're not strange," I said.

"Oh yes I am," she said without a smile. "Everyone on this ship is strange. You don't see it, because you're young. Young people don't see things. They think only about themselves."

"I saw Major Griffiths and his wife running round the ship naked," I said.

"That's normal," Miss Trefusis said.

"I didn't think so," I replied.

"You're going to be surprised," Miss Trefusis said. "Lots of English people who live in Africa are strange. That's where you're going, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

"You'll become strange," she said, "like the rest of us."

Miss Trefusis was eating an orange, but not the normal way. She took it from the bowl with a fork. Then she carefully took away the skin and ate the orange, all with a knife and fork.

"Do you always eat an orange like that?" I asked.

"Of course."

"May I ask why?"