
The Martyr

PART ONE

J. T. NGUGI

WHEN MR. AND MRS. GARSTONE were murdered in their home by unknown gangsters, there was a lot of talk about it. It was all in the front page of the daily papers and figured in importance in the Radio Newsreel. Perhaps this was so because they were the first European settlers to be killed in the increased wave of violence that had spread all over the country. The violence was said to have political motives. And wherever you went, in the market places, in the Indian Bazaars, in a remote African duka, you were bound to hear something about the murder. There were a variety of accounts and interpretations.

Nowhere was the matter more thoroughly discussed than in a remote, lonely house built on a hill, which belonged, quite appropriately, to Mrs. Hill, whose husband, an old veteran settler of the pioneering period, had died the previous year after an attack of malaria, while on a visit to Uganda. Her only son and daughter were now getting their education at "Home"—Home being another name for England. Being one of the earliest settlers and owning a lot of land with big tea plantations sprawling right across the country, she was much respected by the others if not liked by all.

For some did not like what they considered her too "liberal" attitude to the "Natives." When Mrs. Smiles and Mrs. Hardy came into her house two days later to discuss the murder, they wore a look of sad triumph—sad because Europeans (not just Mr. and Mrs. Garstone) had been killed, and of triumph, because the essential depravity and ingratitude of the natives had been demonstrated beyond all doubt. No longer could Mrs. Hill maintain that natives could be civilised if only they were handled in the right manner.

Mrs. Smiles was a lean middle-aged woman whose tough, determined nose and tight lips reminded one so vividly of a missionary. In a sense she was. Convinced that she and her kind formed an oasis of civilisation in a wild country of savage people, she considered it almost her calling to keep on reminding the Natives and any one else of the fact, by her gait, talk and general bearing.

Mrs. Hardy was of Boer descent and had early migrated into the country from South Africa. Having no opinions of her own about anything, she mostly found herself agreeing with any views that most ap-

proximated those of her husband and her race. For instance, on this day, she found herself in agreement with whatever Mrs. Smiles said. Mrs. Hill stuck to her guns and maintained, as indeed she had always done, that the Natives were obedient at heart and *all* you needed was to treat them kindly.

"That's all they need. *Treat them kindly.* They will take kindly to you. Look at my 'boys'. They all love me. They would do anything I asked them to!" That was her philosophy and it was shared by quite a number of the liberal, progressive type. Mrs. Hill had done some liberal things to her 'boys.' Not only had she built some brick quarters (*brick, mind you*) but had also put up a school for the children. It did not matter if the school had not enough teachers or if the children learnt only half-a-day and worked in the plantations for the other half; it was more than most other settlers had the courage to do!

"It is horrible. Oh, a horrible act," declared Mrs. Smiles rather vehemently. Mrs. Hardy agreed. Mrs. Hill remained neutral.

"How could they do it? We've brought 'em civilisation. We stopped slavery and tribal wars. Were they not all leading savage miserable lives?" Mrs. Smiles spoke with all her powers of oratory. Then she concluded with a sad shake of the head. "But I've always said they'll never be civilised, simply can't take it."

"We should show tolerance," suggested Mrs. Hill. Her tone spoke more of the missionary than Mrs. Smiles's looks.

"Tolerant! Tolerant! How long shall we continue being tolerant? Who could have been more tolerant than the Garstones? Who more kind? And to think of all the squatters they maintained!"

"Well, it isn't the squatters who—"

"Who did! who did!"

"They should all be hanged!" suggested Mrs. Hardy. There was conviction in her voice.

"And to think they were actually called from bed by their houseboy!"

"Indeed?"

"Yes. It was their houseboy who knocked at their door and urgently asked them to open. Said some people were after him—"

"Perhaps there—"

"No! It was all planned. All a trick. As soon as the door was opened, the gang rushed in. It's all in the paper."

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Mrs. Hill looked away rather guiltily. She had not read her paper.

It was time for tea. She excused herself and went near the door and called out in a kind, shrill voice—"Njoroge! Njoroge!"

Njoroge was her houseboy. He was a tall, broad-shouldered person nearing middle age. He had been in the Hill's service for more than ten years. He wore a green trousers, with a red clothband round the waist and a red fez on the head. He now appeared at the door and raised his eyebrows in enquiry—an action which with him accompanied the words "Yes Memsahib" or "*Ndio Bwana*."

"*Leta Chai*"

"*Ndio Memsahib!*" and he vanished back after casting a quick glance round all the Memsahibs there assembled. The conversation which had been interrupted by Njoroge's appearance was now resumed.

"They look so innocent," said Mrs. Hardy.

"Yes. Quite the innocent flower but the serpent under it." Mrs. Smiles was acquainted with Shakespeare.

"Been with me for ten years or so. Very faithful. Likes me very much." Mrs. Hill was defending her boy.

"All the same I don't like him. I don't like his face."

"The same with me."

Tea was brought. They drank, still chatting about the death, the government's policy, and the political demagogues who were misleading the people. On one point they were all agreed. Political demagogues were undesirable elements in this otherwise beautiful country. But Mrs. Hill with a great conviction that almost carried the point through, maintained that these semi-illiterate demagogues who went to Britain and thought they had education, did not know the true aspirations of their people. You could still win your boys by being kind to them.

Nevertheless when Mrs. Smiles and Mrs. Hardy had gone, she brooded over that murder and the conversation. She felt uneasy and for the first time noticed that she lived a bit too far from any help in case of an attack. The knowledge that she had a pistol was a comfort.

SUPPER WAS OVER. That ended Njoroge's day. He stepped out of the light into the countless shadows and then vanished into the darkness. He was following the footpath from Mrs. Hill's house to the workers' quarters down the hill. He tried to whistle to dispel the silence and loneliness that hung around him. He could not. Instead he heard the owl cry.

He stopped, stood stock-still. Below, he could perceive nothing. But behind him, the immense silhouette of Memsahib's house—large, imposing—could be seen. He looked back intently, angrily. In his anger, he suddenly thought he was growing old.

"You. You. I've lived with you for so long. And you've reduced me to this? In my own land! What have I got from you in return?" Njoroge wanted to shout to the house all this and many other things that had long accumulated in his heart. The house would

not respond. He felt foolish and moved on.

Again the owl cried! Twice!

"A warning to her," Njoroge thought. And again his whole soul rose in anger—anger against all those with a white skin, all those foreign elements that had displaced the true sons of the land from their God-given place. Had God not promised Gekoyo that he would give all the land to the father of the tribe—he and his posterity? Now all the land had been taken away.

He remembered his father as he always did when these moments of anger and bitterness possessed him. He had died in the struggle—the struggle to rebuild the destroyed shrines. That was at the famous Nairobi Massacre when police fired on a people peacefully demonstrating for their right. His father was among the people who died. Since then Njoroge had to struggle for a living—seeking employment here and there in European farms. He had met many types—some harsh, some kind, but all dominating, giving him just what salary they thought fit for him. Then he had come to be employed by the Hills. It was a strange coincidence that he had come here. A big portion of the land now occupied by Mrs. Hill was the land his father had always shown him as belonging to the family. They had found the land occupied when his father and some of the others had temporarily retired to Muranga owing to famine. They had come back and *Ng'olo!* the land was gone.

"Do you see that fig tree . . . Remember that land is yours. Be patient. Watch these Europeans. They will go and then you can claim the land."

He was then small. After his father's death, Njoroge had forgotten all about this injunction. But when he coincidentally came here and saw the tree, he had remembered. He knew it all—all by heart. He knew where every boundary went through.

Njoroge had never liked Mrs. Hill. He had always resented her complacency in thinking that she had done so much for the workers. He had worked with cruel types like Mrs. Smiles and Mrs. Hardy. But he always knew where he stood with such. But Mrs. Hill! Her liberalism was almost smothering. Njoroge hated all settlers. He hated above all what he thought was their hypocrisy and self-satisfaction. He knew that Mrs. Hill was no exception. She was like all the others, only she loved paternalism. It convinced her that she was better than the others. But she was worse. You did not know exactly where you stood with her.

All of a sudden, Njoroge shouted "I hate them! I hate them!" Then a grim satisfaction came over him. To-night, anyway, Mrs. Hill would die—pay for her own smug liberalism or paternalism and pay for all the sins of her settlers race. It would be one settler less. ●

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