

The Linchela Rebellion

A Very Clever Story of a Very Clever Man

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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AS a variation of the tag that nothing new comes out of Africa I commend the saying of His Excellency the Governor-General of Manica and Sofala that "In Africa, all things are possible."

This is partly a story of Africa, and partly a story of journalism, and partly a biographical sketch of the rise of William James Gill, that eminent explorer and man of letters.

There is a great blob of country that lies between the Congo basin and German South-West Africa. Its exports are slaves for the cocoa fields, its imports are mainly gin, and it is referred to in all the learned geographies in the chapters on "The Civilisation of Africa." Some say that there are parts of that

wild country that have never been tamed, and certainly from time to time Portugal sends a few thousand soldiers who land at Mossamedes and march into the interior. I have never heard that any of them returned.

Because of this perpetual unsettlement, the Linchela Rebellion was always possible, and, if William James Gill had not exploited it, I do not doubt but that somebody else would have done so.

William James Gill, being accepted as the fool of the family, set his heart upon being a pirate; his father, being the bigger fool, chose the Church for his son. By some misadventure William James found to his unbounded surprise that he had passed the necessary examination that took him to the Ecclesiastical Schools at Wells. When he recovered from his astonishment he ran away. He had outgrown his early desire for piracy, but in a letter written from Plymouth to his outraged parent, he expressed (inter alia) his intention of making a fortune in the wilds of Africa. His father hastened to inform him that he had cut him out of his will, and out of his heart, but this trite, theatrical, and pompous pronouncement was returned through the Dead Letter Office, William James having sailed by an Elder-Dempster boat for the Coast.

The conversation between William and the Elder-Dempster agent is a sad commentary on the ignorance of the modern young man, and the value of a University education.

"I want to go to Africa," said William James, with the high light of resolve in his nice blue eyes.

"Yes, sir?" said the agent, and waited.

"Africa," repeated William, with an air of finality.

"Dahka, Sierra Leone, Flagstaff, Bassam, Lagos, Boma, St. Paul de Lonanda, Benguella, Mossamedes?" recited the agent patiently. He was getting perilously near to the end of the Elder-Dempster itinerary.

"St. Paul de Lonanda," hesitated William, "that sounds all right." So he took his ticket.

The Cape Verde Islands, no less than the Grand Canaries, were exactly as William James had pictured them, but Sierra Leone came as a shock. He had thought of this place conventionally as "the white man's grave"—a stretch of yellow sand under a hot sun, with palm trees and things. Instead, there rose out of the sea, to his astounded gaze, a great mountain covered with verdure, with tiny white houses on its slopes, and a prosperous little city at its base.

"This can't be Sierra Leone?" he said in amazement.

Then somebody explained that "Leone" meant "lion" and "Sierra" stood for mountain in the Spanish tongue, and that "Sierra Leone" meant the "Mountain of the Lion."

William James was tremendously impressed, and made a note of the interesting fact in his diary. Little Bassam was more like the coast of his dreams. The ship landed forty huge barrels. They were roped together and made a monstrous string of beads as a panting tug boat hauled them to the shore.

"What might they contain?" asked William, and his informant said tersely, "Rum," and added, "for the natives."

This was the beginning of the boy's education. It was continued at Lonanda, where he went to make his fortune, and found that whilst a fortune might be made in the course of time, the hotels charged at the rate of 10/- a day during the period of waiting.

Life would be very pleasant if the unhappy patches could be ...'d, and it is infinitely more simple to write of the education of W.J. than it would be to experience. He found a job at £12 a month transport-riding to the Katanga... When he recovered from his fever he went with a Portuguese half-breed down on to the Kalahari edge of Angola... fortunately he was found in time by a patrol of the B.B.P.

He explained to the corporal that the Portuguese gentlemen had deserted him, carrying away his supplies, his rifle and ammunition and the rest of his visible means of support.

So he had wandered on and on, living on the charity of natives (there was a palaver at one village, did he but know it, and the question of "chopping" W.J. was vigorously debated). So he came to the edge of the Kalahari and foolishly essayed the crossing ... stands for a torturing thirst, a maddening hell of misery, a sun that blistered, and everlasting Dust Devils.

"How you got out of that dam' streak alive beats me," said the admiring N.C.O. of the Bechuanaland Border Police.

"He's born to be hung, Gus," said his familiar... At Cape Town W.J. found work in an Adderley Street store.

This was twelve months later and he had come to the Cape via Taung, Klerksdorp, Johannesburg, Klerksdorp again, Kimberley and De Aar. At De Aar, weary of walking, he found shelter in an empty railway wagon. He was wakened in the night by some very unpleasant shunting operations, went to sleep again, and woke up to find himself travelling at 30 miles an hour on route for Cape Town... Men were wanted for the new railway from Lobito Bay to Katanga, so he drew his month's salary, took a ticket for Lobito Bay (he knew all the ports by heart now), and left Cape Town on a floundering tramp steamer with a light heart.

Ernest Frederick Gill, W.J.'s father, never referred to his son; Millicent Mary Gill, W.J.'s mother, used to weep in secret, and had sundry premonitions that her son was dead. She had these on an average twice monthly. She knew nothing of W.J.'s adventures, because the only letters he ever wrote were posted at Lonanda, where their bulky appearance attracted the attention of a postal official at that port and were opened. Finding no tightly-packed banknotes, as he had expected, he put the letters in his fire. So W.J.'s mother knew nothing of the doings of Lonanda.

Naturally, she did not know of the trip to Lobito Bay, and how, not finding work, W.J. started to tramp across country to Rhodesia, of how W.J. came upon his friend, the half-breed Portuguese.

She knew nothing of the explanations and voluble excuses the Portuguese offered, or of how W.J. jerked out a revolver and shot Senhor Saumarez through the stomach. Even the Angola authorities knew nothing of this.

W, J. struck a Rhodesian town somewhere near the Angola border. I will not disclose the name of the town, because the citizens might not like it. I will call it Umtambo, and tell you it was a township which had grown up around a rich little reef, that boasted a Zeederberg coach service, an hotel, a court-house, a newspaper, and a gaol.

W.J. wandered all round the reef looking for work, but he'd arrived in an evil hour, when the Rhodesian Government over in Salisbury was debating the question of the new gold law, and work had been suspended until the question of Retrospective Taxation had been finally settled.

Sitting in the shadow of the courthouse, wondering where his dinner was coming from, and gazing pensively at the big toe that peeped through his dilapidated right boot (this would have shocked Millicent Mary Gill almost as much as the shooting of Saumarez), he was beckoned by a young man, who was sitting astride a restless horse and was unable to get any closer to him than the middle of the ramshackle street.

"Hi!" said the young man.

"Go to blazes!" said W.J. sourly.

"You have just come through Linchela's country?" shouted the youth. W.J.'s form of address brought no sense of novelty.

"Yas," drawled W.J.

"Hear anything about the fightin'?"

"Ya-as!" said W.J.

"Then you're the man!" said the youth, and recklessly dismounted. He introduced himself as the editor and part proprietor of the *Umtambo Message*, and seating himself by W.J.'s side prepared to make a note.

"Hold hard," said the young man from the Theological School at Wells. "Where do I come in?"

"If your stuff is worth printing, I'll stand you a drink," said the young man magnificently, and W.J. guffawed.

"I'll see you in the hot watertight bulkheads of steaming Hades," said W.J. picturesquely, "before I let you suck my brains for a three-real drink. I'll see you saggin'."

"Let us talk business," said the young man earnestly, and explained that in addition to being editor and part proprietor of the *Umtambo Message*, he was the Umtambo correspondent of most of the papers that are issued from Fleet Street, and not a few of those that live in the provinces.

Whereupon W.J. struck a bargain, and for two pounds sterling, a week's board and lodging, and a new pair of boots, he told the thrilling story of the Linchela Rebellion, of the turmoil, then burnings, killings, raids, massacres, that had been a feature of the outbreak. It was dead easy.

"This is my forte," said W.J. to himself. "I can live on—what did he call the brute?—Linchela, for months."

So the editor of the *Umtambo Message* sent a wire to his various London newspapers that began, "Intrepid Explorer, William James Gill arrived from Linchela country, tells thrilling story of massacre..."

"And who the dickens is William James Gill?" asked thirty-five foreign editors simultaneously.

Ernest Frederick Gill, reading his morning newspaper the following morning, said, "Ha!" and folded his paper to read more comfortably, and the family of Gills that sat round the breakfast table preserved a respectful silence, as was its wont when E. F. Gill condescended to read things aloud from his newspaper.

"Ha!" said E. F. Gill again.

"There is some news about that African trouble at last." He mumbled through an introductory paragraph, and began:

"Our special correspondent at Umtambo wires: 'The intrepid and famous traveller, William James Gill——'"

He stopped.

"William James Gill?" he repeated, like a man in a dream.

"It's not Willie?" fluttered Millicent Mary, on the verge of tears.

"William James Gill?" repeated the head of the family slowly. "That's very curious—I've never heard of any other William James Gill."

(Which was exactly what thirty-five foreign editors had said, only they omitted the word "other.")

"If it is Willie?" said Mr. Gill, senior, "and then I don't see why it shouldn't be, the boy has any amount of grit, determination, initiative. He comes," said E. F. modestly, "from a stock which has given, time after time, its best work to the service of the State."

(E. F.'s grandfather had held a post of honour in the Inland Revenue Department.)

It was Willie, of course. William James, sitting in Umtambo's best hotel, was famous without realising it. Numerous foreign editors wired furiously to the editor of the *Umtambo Message*, and their messages were to this effect:

"Send Gill back to Linchela country; get good exclusive story for us."

The Government at Lisbon wired to the Governor at Benguela to the following effect:—

"What is this yarn about rising in Linchela country? Thought it was squashed."

To which the Governor replied that it was squashed, and that any statement to the contrary was "a lie."

This Lisbon published broadcast, but the wily foreign editors in London said, "Oh, yes," and "I know," and "We've had these official denials before." By this time W.J. was on his way back to the Linchela country with strict instructions to get exclusive stories for *The Daily Times*, *The Telegram*, *The Standard News*, *The Evening Post*, *The Morning Mail*, and several other papers.

W.J., never having been in the Linchela country before, never having heard of it, until the devil put it into his heart to invent grisly scenes for the edification of a young editor and part proprietor, found some difficulty in reaching his objective.

When he did, he discovered Linchela in the innocent pursuit of domestic happiness, and the warriors, on whose ferocity he had erected the fabric of his story, peaceably engaged in the Central African equivalent for marbles.

"This will never do," said the shocked W.J., and saw the chief, the great Linchela himself.

"War?" said the chief. "Master, there is peace in the land. Linchela's heart is soft toward the Portuguese, his hand is outstretched in friendship, his feet turn——"

"When you've finished this anatomical palaver," said W.J. coldly, "will you be good enough to listen to reason?" And W.J. spoke eloquently of the valour of the chief's people, of how their enemy's hearts turned to water at the sight of them, and what a wicked waste of talent it was possessing all these qualifications for riotous living, Linchela let his people stagnate.

The chief listened in silence. "Master," he said, when W.J. had finished, "I am for peace; I love the Portuguese——"

"That is not only a lie but an unnatural one," said W.J., and went off in a huff.

He returned to Umtambo with six separate and distinct stories of assaults, repulses, heroisms, barbarities, and desolations, and the editor and part proprietor fell on his neck and advanced him £70 on account of expenses.

For three years he kept the Linchela country in a state of uproar. Sometimes whole districts would be devastated, sometimes the natives would storm a Portuguese fort, sometimes (when he was in a generous mood) they would be repulsed with slaughter. After a while he'd earned enough money from his correspondence to buy a half-share in the Umtambo Message, also he bought a gold watch and chain and a house. Best of all, one night he bought the bank in a hot game of baccarat and took £6,300 out of the citizens of Umtambo... and the war with Linchela nearly came to an abrupt end, there being no further occasion to continue same.

"My son?" said E. F. Gill proudly, "yes, William James Gill, the great explorer and correspondent, is my son." He was being interviewed by a representative of the *Stayboro' Herald*, which was a sort of civilised *Umtambo Message*. "He was originally intended for the Church, but his mind running upon adventure I sent him to the Cape, where, after holding a Government appointment, he set out on behalf of the Government to make a report on the minerals of Rhodesia..."

You will observe that there are certain qualities that all the Gills possess in common.

Now the Linchela Rebellion was an important rebellion without being a serious one—I am speaking from the point of view of the newspapers—and when editors and their satellites met together with the object of planning the next day's newspapers some conversation like the following would ensue:

Editor: "Anything startling?"

Satellite (humbly): "No, sir. Fire at Bermondsey."

Editor: "Huh?"

Satellite: "Bye-election."

Editor: "Bah! What about the Linchela Rebellion? Send a wire to William James Gill and ask him for the latest developments."

By this will be seen the value of W.J.'s little war.

By-and-by it took on a new aspect. On the back pages of popular weeklies would appear such useful information as:

The Wars of the Roses lasted forty-seven years.

The Linchela Rebellion has lasted three years and is not yet suppressed.

The tallest soldier in the British Army is Captain Ames, who is 6 ft. 7 1/2 in.

It was in vain that Portugal protested that there was no war. In vain that they brought home Linchela himself to prove it. (W.J.'s scathing exposure of that trick was a notable contribution to the literature of the subject.)

In vain that independent investigators penetrated to the Linchela country, and wrote fluent and special articles in the *Diário de Lisboa* on the peaceful condition of the land.

"Hireling pens," said W.J. scornfully, and sent a column news letter descriptive of a raid made upon the Portuguese camp and the annihilation of the European force.

"In my ears," wrote W.J., "still ring the fierce shouts of the painted warriors, the boom of the tom-tom as it led them to the attack. I hear again the shrill cries for mercy..."

In the end Portugal sent out to Angola a special commissioner with unlimited powers. This Senhor de Silva was an intelligent and amiable gentleman, and he

did not attempt to go to the Linchela country. Rather he went straight to Umtambo and found William James Gill in the act of writing a leader for the Message on "Government Morality."

Senhor de Silva asked W.J. if he would come outside, and the editor and proprietor (as he now was) accepted the invitation.

"The fact of the matter is, Mr. Gill," said the special commissioner, "we are getting rather tired in Lisbon of this war of yours."

"Not mine, I assure you," W.J. hastened to remark.

"Yours," said the commissioner firmly. "The description of the Portuguese attack on Linchela's village could only have been written by a man who knows as much about military tactics as a cow does of painting china."

W.J. got very red.

"But we are not amused," Senhor de Silva went on, "and what is worse than all, our Republican papers are taking your war seriously and are attacking the Government for hushing it up."

"Well?" said W.J.

"Well," said the special commissioner, "we regard you as a gentleman of infinite tact and judgment. You know the country, you know Linchela, you know the cause of the war."

"Naturally," said W.J., and coughed.

"What I want you to do," said the commissioner, "is to go down into the Linchela country and settle the war. Settle it for good and I will pay you a fee of £3,000—we will throw in a couple of decorations if they have any fascination for you."

"But," said W.J., "on what basis do you fix my remuneration at £3,000?"

Senhor de Silva shrugged his shoulders.

"We regard this as your war, we will give you three years' purchase—is it a bet?"

"It's a bet," said W.J., and shook hands on the bargain.

W.J. now lives in England. The local flyman will point out his house to you.

"That's William James Gill's house, sir," he will say, "the great war correspondent, him that settled the war in Africa."

It was suggested by Gill, senior, in a letter signed "Lover of Justice," which appeared in the Times newspaper, that for his services in the interest of Peace, W.J. was entitled to the consideration of the Nobel trustees; but somehow the Nobel Prize never came to Stayboro', and W.J. bore the neglect philosophically. "He cherished much higher," he said (speaking at a garden party given in his honour), "the embroidered motto worked and presented to him by the Young Ladies' Guild of Stayboro', 'Blessed are the Peacemakers.'"

But then, of course, W.J. had been intended for the Church.

