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CONFESSIONS OF A BLACK MARKETEER

Nairobi, Kenya. The word was out: There's been a crackdown on the black market.

"Be careful, man," I was told while putting up my tent at Nairobi's City Park, that meeting-eating-sleeping place where sooner or later every bona fide African overland traveler ends up. The tall grease-spattered Australian--he was half through pulling the engine out of his battered VW bus--was miserable. "Things are bloody tight. Scotland Yard is down here helping out the local fuzz. You get busted, they throw away the key."

Just so the conversation wouldn't appear one-sided, I made what I thought to be all the right sounds: "Oh, yeah?..that's tough...Scotland Yard, geez, what next?" Frankly I was more interested in getting my tent up and, anyway, I only had the vaguest notion of what the black market was all about. (I seemed to recall it had something to do with cigarettes, nylons, and chocolate bars in Italy after the war).

The Australian just went on talking--I later found out that he'd been supporting himself for months, occasionally very grandly, by simply changing money for tourists--and nothing sank in until he mentioned that the current black market rate for U.S. dollars was at least 11 shillings, maybe more. Immediately my understanding of the black market became clear on one point: The banks were robbing me! Several hours before I had wandered into one of Nairobi's larger banks, past two ferocious guards fully equipped with helmets, attack dogs, and--believe it or not--shields, to undertake what should have been a simple banking operation: to change twenty dollars. Nearly an hour later I emerged haggard by endless lines and a bewildering bureaucracy with a sheath of receipts and somewhat less than 140 shillings. Now with the official rate at 7 shillings and the black market at 11, it doesn't take a mathematician to conclude that maybe this black market things isn't so bad after all. I mean, what's a few Scotland Yard men?

I promised myself that I'd give the whole question some careful thought

and then went off to enjoy my first genuine meal in three months. I had shed 35 pounds somewhere between Tunis and Nairobi and I now gradually forgot about my recent day-in, day-out diet of tinned mackerel, corned beef, and rice, as I sat in The Steak House, one of Nairobi's best bargains, and savored a fillet steak covered with thick garlic sauce. Now that meal came to about 12 shillings, roughly equal to one black market dollar. My stomach took over at this point and I soon saw all too clearly that gastronomically I was a lost man without this extra leverage. I could settle for Welsh rarebit at the sidewalk Thorn Tree Cafe or sacrifice decor and cleanliness with a mixed grill at the New Balissa Day and Night Club, but I greedily wanted more than that. I wanted steaks at The Steak House and even filet of sole at Alan Bobbe's Bistro, the best place in town. I was hooked: I needed the black market like crazy.

But where to find it? I knew the Australian was in temporary retirement. The Public Market was mentioned in the little booklet put out by the Visitors' Bureau but not a thing about the black market. American Express certainly couldn't or wouldn't tell me anything. Perhaps all I need do is casually prowl the back alleys. Or maybe those omnipresent 'Time' and 'Newsweek' hawkers are the guys to see.

Pondering all the possibilities I wandered down Kimathi Street and walked into the Hilton. There's a large lounge on the second floor and in the far corner a big black armchair. Now in Omaha or Baltimore I wouldn't of given much thought to that chair or for that matter to the rather sterile air-conditioned environment around it. But here it was like a magnet to my hot and dirty, bruised and battered body (Land-Rovers are not comfortable and don't let anyone tell you they are). This chair and one I came upon in the Ethiopia Hotel in Addis Ababa were the only comfortable ones I was to find in the whole of Africa. I wasn't to be denied my pleasure: I immediately sank down and closed my eyes and erased all contemplation of criminal activities from my mind.

Peace wasn't to reign for long, however. The comfort shock was still blissful when an indistinct "Pssst! Pssst!" broke the spell. There before me stood a man I had never seen before. He appeared normal enough except that he possessed the most outlandishly large feet I had ever seen. He shuffled closer (with those feet he could manage nothing better), eyes darting to the right and left. A coy wink or two and some strange hand movements followed. The village idiot? I wondered. No, he must be selling

hot elephant hair bracelets.

These silent speculations were soon dispelled when he whispered in clipped Calcutta-Cockney tones: "Excuse me, sir, but would care to change some money?" His eyes were now looking straight at me, his fingers drumming rhythmically on his Samsonite attaché case. I nearly choked: The mountain had indeed come to Muhammed; here was my contact, my black marketeer.

I quickly warned myself against seeming too anxious. Must be cautious, too, I thought, remembering my Australian friend's Scotland Yard disclosure. I made a noncommittal grunt. He, in turn, asked a few professional questions as to the currency I had and how much I might wish to change. I countered by inquiring his rate.

He was giving 11 1/2 shillings to the dollar. "Make it 12," I threw out calmly.

He laughed almost contemptuously: "Oh no, no, sir. Things are very bad now." I sensed he was about to bring up the Scotland Yard threat and replied that 11 1/2 would be fine. (I trusted him implicitly. Somehow I knew that no undercover cop could have such large feet.)

I began to fumble with an assortment of one, five, and ten dollar bills which caused my contact to nearly expire in front of me. His eyes darted quickly in every direction. "Oh no, no, no, sir, not here," he moaned in staccato. "I shall go to the gentlemen's room and you follow in one minute."

With that he shuffled off, leaving me to lapse briefly into a sort of Walter Mitty excursion. I saw myself as Bogie in Sydney Greenstreet's back room in Casablanca, perhaps only minutes ahead of the gendarmes. Real solid exciting stuff, I thought, and in the Hilton, too. Shaken back to reality by an advancing throng of safari-suited German tourists, I casually wandered off for the fateful rendezvous.

In I went, nervously excited, to find Big Feet inspecting his teeth in the mirror. Grinning widely, he shuffled into the most distant stall, quickly opened the attaché case, extracted a wad of notes (from the top one a sombre Jomo Kenyatta seemed to stare up at us disapprovingly), counted out 1,150 shillings, and held them tight to his chest. Apparently this was my cue, so I produced \$100 and the exchange was made, the deal concluded.

With a "I'll be around if you need me" farewell, he promptly returned to the mirror and his teeth.

How extraordinary! I thought as I pushed my way out again.

I nimbly descended the curving stairs to the lobby and passed out into

the bright Kenyan sunshine, but not without first sauntering past the cashier's desk and gloating over the poor fools changing their money at the official rate. If a Scotland Yard man had chanced to see me at that moment--and by now I was convinced none were within 5,000 miles of Nairobi--he would certainly have detected a slight snicker coming from my lips.

I stayed on in Nairobi for several weeks and soon learned that my transaction with Big Feet was far more cautious than is normal. Certainly it was more melodramatically bizarre. I later got wind of a curio shop that carried on a far more straightforward operation. I'd walk past the rows of ivory carvings and leather pocketbooks to the back of the shop, sit down in front of an inlaid desk, banter a bit with the grandmotherly Indian lady on the other side, make the exchange, and leave.

Once just outside I overheard an elderly woman tourist tell her visibly nervous husband who was about to enter the shop: "Now do be extra careful, dear, and walk right out if anything suspicious happens." Obviously it wasn't just the impecunious and greedy overland travelers playing the money game.

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Approximate word count: 1,450 words