Opening extract from

The Prince who Walked with Lions

Written by

Elizabeth Laird

Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

The PRINCE WHO WALKED WITH LIONS

Also by Elizabeth Laird and published by Macmillan Children's Books

The Witching Hour
Lost Riders
Crusade
Oranges in No Man's Land
Paradise End
A Little Piece of Ground
The Garbage King
Jake's Tower
Red Sky in the Morning
Kiss the Dust

ELIZABETH LAIRD

The PRINCE WHO WALKED WITH LIONS

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published 2012 by Macmillan Children's Books
a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-230-75243-6

The originals of the pictures in this book can be seen in the *London Illustrated News*.
They were drawn from life by the journalists who followed
the story of Prince Alamayu at the time.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

For Michael and Patsy Sargent

Before you start reading . . .

History books are usually written long after events are over and the people who lived through them have died. Historians can never know everything about the past, especially what was in people's hearts. It's their job to relate the facts as accurately as they can. Novelists have a different job to do. We try to help our readers understand how it felt to be involved in the events of the past, and why people behaved in the way they did.

A few facts to get you started:

Abyssinia is the old name for the African country we now call Ethiopia.

Prince Alamayu, his father the Emperor Theodore and his mother Queen Tirunesh were real people, and so were General Napier, Captain Speedy, Mr Rassam and many of the other characters who took part in the Abyssinia Campaign in 1868. Most of this story is based on accounts of what happened by people who were there. The Cotton family on the Isle of Wight and Dr Jex-Blake of Rugby School were real people too, but Alamayu's school friends are imagined.

A *shamma* is a heavy white cloth, like a thick shawl, which all Abyssinians, men and women, wore wrapped around their shoulders, as Ethiopians still do today.

Tej is an alcoholic drink made out of honey.

The correct spelling for Prince Alamayu's name is 'Alemayehu', but I have kept the simpler spelling which he used himself when he signed his name.

Elizabeth Laird

Prince Alamayu of Abyssinia as a child

The walls of this room have been whitewashed. Light streams in through the windows and hurts my eyes. It's not very bad in the mornings, when my mind is hazy and I only want to rest. But in the afternoon the fever takes hold and the white walls seem to bulge as if there were crowds of people behind them, trying to push their way through.

The worst time is the evening. Nurse Thomson comes in and stands over me with a glass full of an evil-tasting medicine. I can't clearly make her out. She seems to be someone else entirely. Instead of her round face with the white cap and its flying ribbons sitting on top, I see the brown skin and flashing black eyes of my father, or the flaming red hair and brilliant blue eyes of Captain Speedy, or even the plump pink cheeks of Queen Victoria.

'Who is this boy?' they seem to say.

'Don't you know me?' I try to say. 'I'm Alamayu.'

They shake their heads at me.

'You don't belong here, Alamayu. You ought to be at home.'

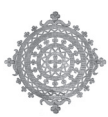
'I know!' My voice is dry and croaking. 'Where? Where's home? Where?'

'Shh, dear,' Nurse Thomson says, pressing me down on to the pillow again and putting the glass to my lips. 'Drink this.'

The medicine's strong and at last it makes me go to sleep, but only after it's filled me full of dreams. Not dreams, exactly. Memories. I thought I'd forgotten everything that happened to me when I was a child, a prince, in Abyssinia. I've spent the last years trying to become an English boy like all the others here

at Rugby School. Those old days and all those far-off things – the lions padding around outside my father's house, the eagles circling over the mountain tops, the bright African sun glinting on our spears and muskets and on the enemy's helmets and rifles – have been locked away for so long that I thought they were gone forever.

It seems that I hadn't forgotten after all. Every evening the bulging walls seem to burst open and I can see myself, a young boy, back at home with Amma, my mother, upstairs in the King's House in Magdala. It's as if everything that happened to me then is happening again. Part of me is inside that little prince, being him again. Part of me is my new, older self, watching him.



My father was a king. More than that, he was a king of kings. An emperor. And he loved me.

'My boy,' he called me. 'My prince.'

When he wasn't away at war he would send a slave to the house my mother and I shared with the other women. The man would come to the gate of our compound, and one of our own slaves would run silently up our house's outer staircase and cough politely outside the door to the upper rooms.

'Who is it? What do you want?' Amma's old servant Abebech would screech, dropping the comb

she was using on my mother's hair.

'His Majesty calls for the Prince, his son,' the slave would say in a respectful murmur.

'It's me! Father wants me!' I would shout, and I'd rush to the doorway.

Abebech was always too quick for me. She would shoot out one long skinny arm and catch me in a tight grip, and my mother would say, in her soft tired voice, 'Wait, Alamayu, straighten your tunic. Come here. Look, your face is dirty.'

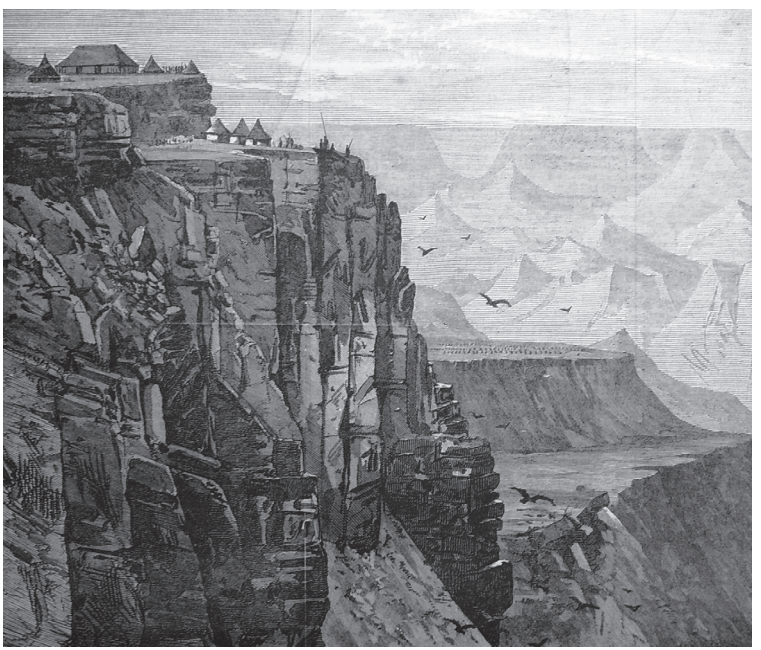
'Father doesn't care.'

I would be dancing with impatience, trying to wriggle out of Abebech's grasp. I would do it too. I'd be out through the door and tumbling down the stairs, racing across the compound to the gate, then the slave would take my hand and I'd trot beside him to the royal enclosure.

I was seven years old then. I didn't know anything about the world beyond our Abyssinian mountains. The sounds I heard were the whoop of hyenas in the night, the chanting of priests in the stillness of dawn, the trample of horses' hoofs, the shouts of men, the crackle of musket fire, the clatter of spears, the screams of the wounded and the croaking of vultures. The smells I knew were the smoke of our fires, the spices of our rich cooking, the incense that scented my mother's house, and my father's sweat, when he picked me up and I buried my face in his chest. I had never heard of the British, or of Queen Victoria, or railways.

Last night as I lay in this bed, in the sickroom here in Rugby School, the fever took hold of me strongly. The white walls and ceiling faded away and I could see my first home as clearly as if I was standing right there in front of it.

We lived in my father's capital. In Europe it would have been thought of as a village, a simple collection of huts and houses, but it was on the summit of Magdala, a dizzyingly high flat-topped mountain. Our house, the King's House, was the biggest



Magdala

building, bigger even than the church. In my feverish dream I climbed the steep path from Selamge, the flat plain on the shoulder of the mountain, and scrambled up the rough stony path to the outer gates. My father held me gently by the hand, and when the sentries saw us coming they put down their spears and leaped to open the wooden doors, bowing low as we passed.

The side of the mountain of Magdala rose in a sheer wall of stone on our right. On our left a cliff plunged down from the narrow path. And when I remember this, the nightmare begins. My father's grip shifts from my hand to my wrist. His eyes, which are usually soft and full of love when he looks at me, harden until they are twin black stones. His dark skin flushes a deeper brown. His thin lips are pulled back from his teeth. I can even smell the stench of death rising from the corpses that lie rotting at the foot of the cliff.

I am seized with panic. Will he cut off my hands and feet then throw me down to my death, as he did to hundreds of his enemies? As I stand, unable to move, my father picks me up in his strong arms. His eyes soften. His painful grip becomes a loving embrace. He holds me to his chest and as I draw in my breath to sob he strokes my hair and murmurs in my ear, 'You are a prince of Abyssinia. Never let them see you cry.'

I fling my arms round his neck and swallow my tears, and for a moment all comfort, all safety and all love are there.

Then, as we stand on the perilous path, the ground beneath my father's feet starts to crumble, and there's a roar as the

cliff gives way. He can't hold me any more.

'Alamayu!' I hear him call, and then I'm falling, falling, all alone.

The memory dream ends there. I land back in my bed in the cold middle of this cold island of England. The fever has gone, the night light has burned out and the night nurse is asleep and snoring in the armchair, with the grey light of dawn creeping in through the crack between the curtains.

The clock on the school tower chimes six.

'Magdala!' I whisper to myself.

I lie with my eyes shut, trying to transport myself back there again. I know that if only I can reach the top of the path and pass through the inner gates, I can run out on to the broad flat top of the mountain to the gate opening in the fence that surrounds our compound. Smoke from the cooking fires will be steaming out through the thatch of the kitchen huts behind the main house. In our upper room, the Queen, my mother, will be sitting cross-legged on her silk cushions with her favourite book, *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, open on its little wooden stand in front of her. Her lips will be moving soundlessly as she reads. She'll reach forward to turn the heavy parchment page, but then she'll see me, and her arched brows will rise, and she'll open her arms, and I'll run into . . .

I am so nearly there. I so nearly reach her. But however close I try to come, I can't see Amma's face.

So here I lie, and the memory dream has faded, and the long day stretches ahead. If today is anything like yesterday and the day before, I'll drift in and out of sleep this morning, and then, towards evening, the fever will climb again and bring the dream

memories back. I half long for them and half dread them.

At least I have something to look forward to today. My friend Beetle (his real name is John Forster) is coming to visit me. They won't let him stay long in case he tires me out, but it will be good just to see him and know that he's bothered to come. My other good friend Bull (his real name is Samuel Bulliver) has asked to come too, but they won't let him. I don't mind much. Bull is so big and restless and talks so loudly that he really would wear me out. It makes me tired just to think about him.

I suppose that Beetle's my friend because he's an outsider at Rugby, rather like me. It's not that he's a foreigner too, or dark-skinned, as I am. It's just that he's – different.

Beetle doesn't seem to notice what other people think. He doesn't seem to care about who's popular and who isn't. He doesn't try to make people like him. He is not really interested in cricket or football. (The football we invented at this school, which other people call 'rugby football', is just called 'football' here). It's all one to Beetle if our house (Elsee's) doesn't win a match. He stares at me through his thick round glasses if I try to explain to him how much I want to score a try.

Beetle likes insects and nature generally.

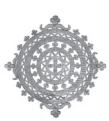
'Insects are a lot like people, if you think about it,' he says. 'They've all got their special ways of doing things.'

I don't understand what Beetle means exactly because I don't know anything about insects, but he certainly understands a lot about people too, more than many of the boys, anyway. He sees more about what goes on in school than I do.

The best thing about being friends with Beetle is that he has always accepted me the way I am. He's never been nosy. He sticks up for me too, in his odd way. He doesn't pester me to tell him about the Abyssinia Campaign. He doesn't say, like some of the other boys do, 'Your father was that darkie madman who thought he could fight the British, and win.'

You could say that Beetle's eccentric. That's what I think, anyway. The other fellows say he's a crank. A rum cove. Crazy as a bedbug. They laugh at the way his collar sticks up.

Beetle is no better at Latin and learning by heart and writing stupid essays than I am. I sit next to him in our form room. I don't think he tries very hard to learn, especially when he's bored. I do try, sometimes anyway, but my mind goes dreaming away. Then the thought jumps into my head that a prince of Abyssinia shouldn't have to learn Latin verbs and all that mumbo-jumbo like a low-born priest, and after that I can't take in anything at all.



This morning, the groundsmen, working outside below the window of the sickbay, have made a bonfire of the leaves that have been spinning down off the trees for the last couple of weeks. Tiny wafts of smoke have crept in round the loose-fitting window, and the smell has taken me right back to Abyssinia, to Mr Rassam's house, where a fire almost always burned on a hearthstone in the middle of the room.