

Ba Allen



The late Ba Allen was a colourful character who lived on the island for many years. Of Romany origin, he was born near Windsor a few years before the First World War. According to Ba it was his nanny who gave him his nickname. Evidently at the age of two years his parents were beginning to despair that he would ever begin to speak, but one afternoon, whilst he was being pushed along in his perambulator in Windsor Park, he saw and heard his first flock of sheep to then utter the words 'Ba-Ba'. It has stuck ever since.

An ex-Police Officer (he was the Kenya Police boxing champion), ex-Army Officer attached to the Ethiopian Army during the last war and ex-Locust Control Officer on Kenya's Northern Frontier, when he was speared in the arm by a Somali ('who knew nothing about Queensberry Rules, Old Boy — Haw! Haw! Haw!'), he was still tough and fit up to the time of his death, although his mind was beginning to wander a little. He had a shock of wiry grey hair, a largish flattened nose on a wrinkled, battered walnut of a face, deeply tanned like the rest of him, vague blue eyes with his body knotted and gnarled like an old tree. He was affable, witty and intensely pro-British. He dressed in gypsy-like fashion, yet neatly so with his Muslim hat, blue denim shorts, open-necked shirt and coloured bandanna around his neck. Somali sandals completed his attire. He used to laugh a lot and so was called *Kicheko* (the one who laughs). He adored women of whatever age ('but better when young Old Boy, Haw! Haw! Haw!'), colour or nationality and his fading blue eyes would light up with intense pleasure when in their company. He was reputed to have innumerable offspring dotted around the archipelago and to this day I am visited occasionally from one of them from Faza Island who introduces himself as *Toto ya Kicheko* (Child of Kicheko). His elder brother, Bunny, who must now be pushing ninety, has survived him. Taller than Ba, handsome, ex-white hunter and also renowned as an amateur boxer in his younger

days, he lives with his wife Jeri in a delightful home on the beach near Shela called Smugglers. He, too, adores the opposite sex but these days finds trouble in catching them as he ruefully confided to me recently. The third brother Denis, older yet again, much liked and respected, died some years ago and is survived by his wife Paddy who lives on Manda Island opposite.

'Anannashee', the house in which Ba used to live adjoins my own. It was here that Mwana Kuponu wrote her famous *Utende*, a long and most beautiful poem for her daughter in 1850. There is a plaque on the wall to this effect. It is a rambling, coral-built, traditional-styled house of the 17th century. Weathered and attractive it contains many pieces of old carvings and the front door is much admired. Tubs growing jasmine and bougainvillea stand on the verandah.

Lord Nelson, resplendent in his admiral's uniform, used to hang in the sitting room. Queen Victoria on his left and the present Queen on his right, both pictures suitably adorned with tattered, miniature Union Jacks. Hung on other walls, higgledy-piggledy, were an incredible number of faded, battered pictures of rowing, boxing and soccer teams. Taking pride of place on a shelf in the dining room were a couple of dozen or so silver cups, evidence of Ba's prowess as a boxer in days gone by. Also hanging on rusty nails to fill up any odd space on the walls were several strange paintings by Ba's European son, Jesse, now a famous surrealist artist living in San Francisco.

In Jesse Allen's world nature is cast in a new order. The lush terrain is compellingly fascinating to the romantic spirit. Under red, green or yellow skies and by the light of many suns, exotic plants contend for glory with variegated fauna. Every creature is invested with grace and sensitivity as it lives out its peculiar role in this complicated ecology. It is no Utopia, this fantacism. There is both good and evil depicted in Jesse's world as our own. There is life and death. Killing and coupling, but it all seems to merge in an overall natural scheme.

Against the advice of his brother, as well as that of his friends, Ba suddenly decided he had had enough of Lamu. In his own words

he would go home to England where he would be able to see the lambs frolicking about in the spring and to watch the daffodils and crocuses grow. This yearning for England became an obsession with him besides, as he confided to me, he was very friendly with a widow on the Welsh borders who had a farm. They might marry but he was against any more children. He must have been about 75 years old then. How old the widow was I do not know. He made it safely back to England, lived with his widow for a few weeks when he trotted down the path alongside the road from her farmhouse to the Post Office. A car with a caravan in tow came down the hill, lost control, hit Ba and took him through a stone wall.

Well, he had lived out his three-score-years-and-ten and a few more for good measure. When he left Lamu he was a little unbalanced so that it may be said that the timing of his death was appropriate though not the manner of his going. He was cremated and his son, Jesse, flew over from America. Together with a handful of friends they made their way to Old Windsor for, as Jesse explained, it had fond memories for his father. It was one of those miserably dark and grey mornings in October. The little party, plus a bugler loaned from the Army, set off into the woods. Still misty, still grey with more people walking about than might have been expected, for perhaps it was early closing day in Windsor. Finally they came across a glade, dominated by a large oak tree in the centre. Here they halted. Had this glade played a role in Ba's early life? Maybe Jesse remembered. He now spoke. He would scatter the ashes in this glade and then pluck a few twigs from the oak. These would be placed on a silver salver which he had taken out of an incredibly old-looking khaki haversack Ba had had from his early army days. As he lit the twigs on the salver he said that the rising smoke would symbolise Ba's final voyage. He would like us to remember our own favourite moments with his father as we watched the smoke rise.

The smoke died away and the bugler, in full regimentals, was given the signal to play the Last Post. That was all. A simple ceremony for a simple, kindly man.