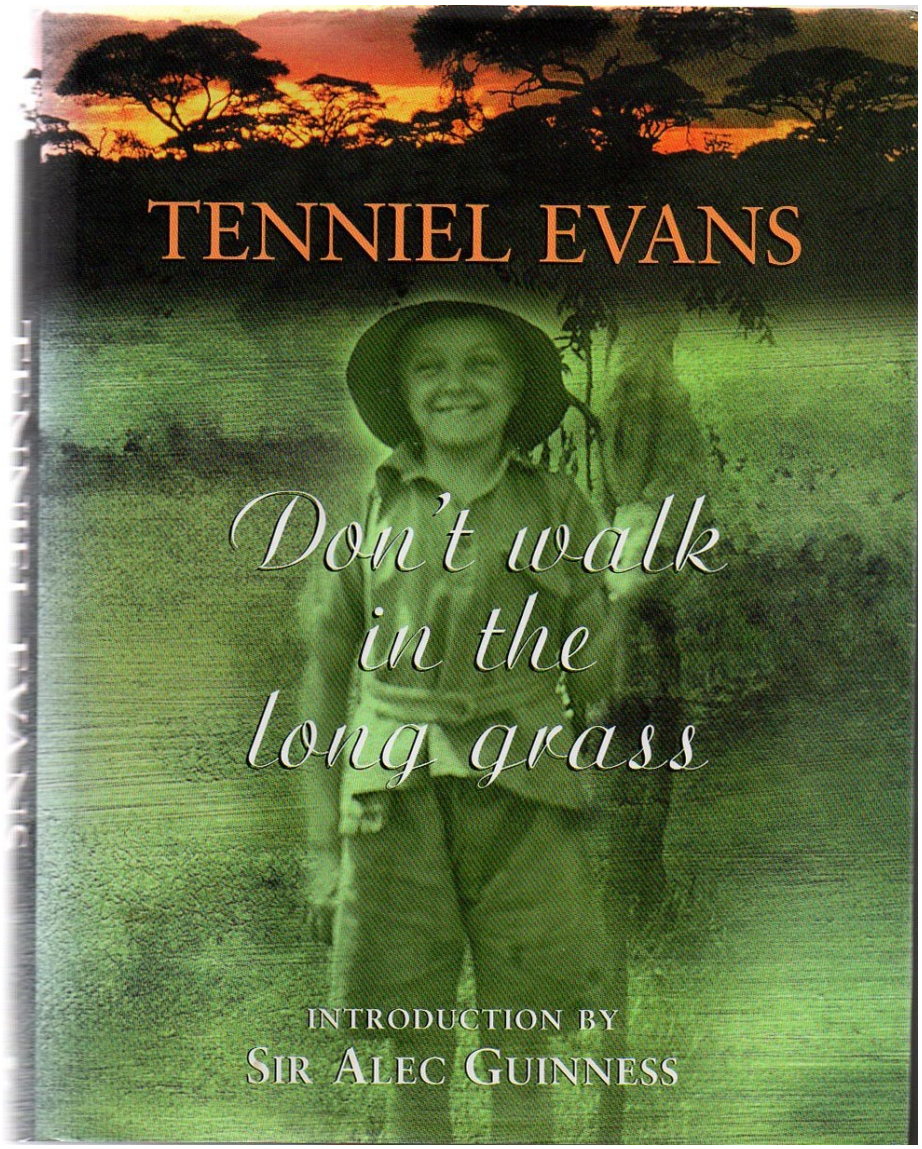
Tenniel Evans (1926-2009) is best known for his long-running role as Leading Seaman "Taffy" Goldstein (plus other occasional characters) in the Navy Lark, which also starred Jon Pertwee, Ronnie Barker, Leslie Phillips and Richard Caldicot. He went to Kitale School for five terms from 1935, and has given us perhaps the only published account of his experiences there in his autobiography below.



decided to pack up and leave Porgies, I would have been an encumbrance to my parents while they looked for work and a place to live. Much more convenient to have me safely at school. Besides, I was eight, so it was time I began to climb the educational ladder. I was dreading it. I had never left home before; I had not taken to the other white children I had so far met, and I would have to wear shoes. I had no idea what to expect, but that was enough to be going on with.

So in January 1935, grey with grief and terror, but at least with my sister Tricia holding my hand, I was deposited at Kitale European School, in the care of the headmaster, Mr Barton, a cadaverous gloomy man with dark sad eyes and a disappointed mouth.

Homesickness is a tunnel of despair and loneliness from which there seems to be no escape, and to which there is no apparent end. I did not rationalize homesickness until many years later, when, due to the demands of work, Evangeline and I were separated only months after being married. We were very hard up, and I could not see any possible end to our long separation. I had forgotten what homesickness felt like, and how incapacitating it is. I suppose it is a form of bereavement and like bereavement it is the inability to see an end to it that makes it so overpowering. You grow out of it eventually, but not before it has had its pound of flesh.

Be that as it may, it was homesickness that overshadowed and spoiled my five terms at Kitale. There was a long avenue of flamboyant trees that led from the main road to the front of the school; I would look on this avenue as the road to prison,

or the road to freedom, depending upon which way I was facing. In the same way, we sang a hymn to an identical tune at the beginning and end of every term: 'Lord, behold us with thy blessing,' at the beginning of term, and 'Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing,' at the end. The words 'behold' and 'dismiss' came to represent enslavement and release. Being left under Mr Barton's disillusioned gaze on that first day did nothing to reassure me.

Mr Barton was, I have every reason to believe, a perfectly ordinary, reasonably harmless man. But I had never been left in the charge of a stranger before and to see the dilapidated old Chev putter off down the avenue with my parents inside, and to realize that I was at the mercy of this grey remote man, made me uneasy. It was an unease that remained with me until Mr Barton left the school a couple of terms later. Tricia was not much of a comfort; she, too, looked pretty scared. I did not understand until later that that was her habitual expression when confronted by authority.

I seem to remember that we stood around in silence until Mr Barton sent us off to collect our things, and make ourselves known to Miss Roberts, the matron.

Kitale School was a handsome, white, red-roofed colonial-government style of building of two storeys. There was a long cool colonnaded verandah running the whole length of the building on both floors. I seldom ventured upstairs, because that was where the seniors had their classrooms, and I left before I had a chance to become a senior.

In front of this main building was a circular driveway, at the

end of the avenue, with a round bed of canna lilies and a flagpole, all very neat and formal and Public Works Department style. Tricia and I used to walk round and round this flower bed, and down to the end of the avenue and back, during break, which was about the only time we had to spend together. As I remember it, I was usually crying and Tricia comforting me. Only once was it the other way round when, about a fortnight into my first term, she suddenly spotted the old Porgies sofa on the back of a lorry, with Africans sitting on it, going past the end of the avenue – presumably on its way to the sale rooms. I did not realize the significance of this, but Tricia gave a loud wail, and the image has stayed with me ever since, as a sort of symbol of the ending of our Porgies idyll.

To the side of the main building was another, also white and cool and tidy, with red rooftiles. This contained the dormitories, ablutions, kitchens and dining hall, and was the domain of the aforementioned matron, Miss Roberts. Clarissa. She was a large, Junoesque person who looked like an angry Wyandotte hen. She was a prying bully and was the first human being of whom I was mortally afraid. Philip Abrahams, the headboy, ran her a close second – but more of him anon. Clarissa Roberts succeeded in making me cry every other day, for every other day we were given clotted cream instead of butter and jam for tea. I had never been good about cream, particularly the clotty sort; it made me feel sick and I heaved at every mouthful. Clarissa would not let me get down till I had eaten it all. It was not like ordinary clotted cream – more like the skim off the top of boiled milk; so it was runny, and

covered the whole plate, and made the bread soggy. Clarissa who, on a subsequent visit to England, told Aunt Edie what a sweet, cheerful little boy I was, would stand over me as I heaved and wept in the by now deserted dining hall, exercising what I suppose she thought was improving discipline.

My other ogre was Philip Abrahams. He cannot have been more than thirteen or so, but to me he was a grown-up. Tall and blond, with a permanent frown on his handsome brow, he was in charge of 'no talking' in the dorm. His favourite trick was to creep up behind a chattering junior – usually me, for even then I was garrulous – and deliver a stinging blow to the side of the head. Bedtime was often accompanied by a ringing skull and a warm ear, for I never learnt to be more circumspect. Philip had a younger brother, with red hair and freckles, who was as gentle as his brother was harsh.

But Miss Tatham I adored. She had a spanking new Ford V8 tourer, with shiny wire wheels and a dicky. She drove up to the school every morning with a spritely crunch of tyres on the gravel, and strode smartly into the commonroom with a cheerful wave. She wore long dark skirts and high-necked white blouses – invariably, it now seems to me – rather tight over the bosom. And very modern rimless spectacles. I suppose she was a true spinster, but I thought her very glamorous. This was probably because she encouraged me, and was kind. To get an EXCELLENT stamp in my exercise book from her was the high point of any day. The stamp had a sort of Stakhanovite picture of a steel works – all red and steaming and *achieving*. Of course, I fell in love with her.

Apart from the scourge of homesickness, I do not think that I was particularly unhappy at Kitale; I simply never understood why I had to be there. I liked the work, and was good at it, because I had started later than the others; I was older and therefore quicker to learn. I was gregarious and made friends easily. I was fairly good at games (though terrified of the hard hockey ball). And, because of Dick, I knew quite a lot about butterflies, which gave me a certain cachet. But my regular bouts of homesickness were a real scourge. What made it worse was that other children did not seem to be affected by it, so it was always something of which I was vaguely ashamed. The only other person – apart from Tricia, but she was a girl so different – who seemed obviously to suffer from it was a Dutch farm boy called Nels. The British Boers were rough and guttural and we were supposed to despise them. But I liked Nels because he was homesick too. He was big and raw-boned with almost white hair, *en brosse*, and almost illiterate, but lonely and miserable, and my heart went out to him. We used to sit in the classroom writing home, while everyone else was shouting and playing outside, and we fed each other's suffering. I remember outlining the mark of a tear which had plopped onto the paper, and labelling it, 'Sob, sob.'

That first term came to an end at last. We sang 'Lord dismiss us,' at assembly, and a motley collection of luggage was piled up on the front verandah, to be loaded onto cars, trucks, lorries, even a horse and cart, as parents arrived to collect their offspring. The Dutch boy, Nels, was mercilessly teased that his father would turn up with a wagon and a full span of

oxen; actually he came in a neat, rather modern saloon car with about four handsome brothers, who gathered up Nels with great whoops of joy, and bore him off in triumph. Our near neighbour, Captain Buswell, picked up Richard and Agnes and Pauline in a tall, dignified Model T Ford whose very high clearance was much favoured on the muddy and rutted Kenya roads. Mr Barton stood around smiling remotely, to see off his charges, while Tricia and I waited anxiously as more and more children were carted off. We knew we were not going back to Porgies, and, as the waiting numbers dwindled, we began to wonder whether actually our parents had got the day wrong and would not turn up at all; or that they had lost their way; or, worst of all, as far as I was concerned, they had got stuck. But finally, and not quite the last, the battered old Chev clattered up the avenue and we ran to meet it – the chariot that was to bear us to heaven, even though we did not know where heaven was going to be this holiday.

Joe and Kath Babington lived in a pleasant homestead on a wooded ridge some way up the slopes of Mount Elgon. Father had had to take a job as underground manager in one of the gold mines near Kakamega, a fairly rough and raucous township on the edge of the goldfields, and our parents decided that Joe's place was more suitable for Tricia and me to spend that first post-Porgies holiday than the rather raffish boarding-house in which they had landed up. If I had had any choice in the matter, I would probably have agreed with them, but Tricia would have begged to differ.