

GREED FOR GOLD

The ancient goldmines of Ethiopia

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Novel

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The country known by the name of Ethiopia today was formerly called Abyssinia. Together with Liberia, it was one of the first states in Africa to gain independence. It is also one of the areas where they discovered the oldest traces of a human settlement. It is possible that modern Homo sapiens even had their origin there. The first mention of this land is in the records of Egyptian traders who spoke of an area south of Nubia and called it Punt. People were already active there during the 3rd millennium BC, trading myrtle and gold. The first voyage of such traders, mentioned in written sources, took place in the 25th century BC during the reign of Pharaoh Sahure. Inscriptions on stone slabs from Ramses II, still preserved today, confirm the existence of gold mines in ancient Ethiopia. Similarly, in the temple of Deir el-Bahri, archeological finds testify to a journey by Queen Hatshepsut in 1495 BC and mention the trade in myrtle, gold, tusks of elephants, wood, and exotic animals.

Furthermore, a path on the Turin papyrus map is recorded, which leads from the Wadi al Hammamat in Egypt through the mountains of today's Eritrea and Ethiopia to Quseir on the Red Sea. Gold was mined in large quantities from Ethiopian mines for processing in Egypt. Whether it came from King Salomon's fabled mines of Ophir remains unanswered, and the rumor about the alleged existence of this treasure will probably always be a mystery in the minds of adventurers and treasure hunters. In the 6th century AD, Ethiopia developed into a civilized population known by the Arabic name of D'mt, who settled in Yeha. According to ancient documents, they had close ties to the kingdom of Sheba. Even today, the remains of a large, stone-built temple in Yeha testify to

these people's high culture. Around this time, under the name of Axum, a vast empire in Ethiopia was confirmed in records from the first century AD. According to Persian tradition, Mani Axum was, along with Rome, Persia, and China, one of the great empires of the world where the processing of gold to valuable jewelry and utensils for the table reached a zenith. The extensive destruction that can still be seen in Axum today in the tombs of high dignitaries testifies to the grave robbers' enormous greed, who knew of such treasures.

The following centuries are known as the "Dark Ages" of Ethiopia. Around 1000 AD, a pagan princess named Judith made it her mission to assassinate all royal family members and proclaim herself Queen. During her reign, which lasted more than 40 years, she destroyed all the Christian churches and stole all the gold and silver crosses and cult objects dedicated to those churches. The founder of the subsequent Zagwe dynasty, Mara Takla Haymanot, finally dethroned the last of Judith's successors and married a descendant of the Axumite crown. Around 1270 AD, Yekuno Amlak overthrew the last king of the Zagwe dynasty and established a new ruling dynasty in Ethiopia's highlands based on the former "Solomonic dynasty." As (alleged) heirs of the biblical royal family, they legitimized their right through their direct descent from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The legendary gold mines in the country always remained the property of their respective rulers.

Towards the end of the 15th century, the Portuguese founded their first missions in Ethiopia. In 1490, Pero da Covilha came to the country, believing that he had finally found the fabled kingdom of Africa that had possessed an invaluable wealth of gold in ancient times but had since been forgotten. The next few centuries are known as the "Age of the Princes." After which, Ethiopia sank into almost complete isolation until the middle of the 19th century. It

was not until the reigns of Tewodros II, John IV, and Menelek II that Ethiopia's kingdom began to open up again. In 1855 Tewodros was crowned Negusa Nagast of Ethiopia. Terror and oppression shaped his reign.

In anger at the failure of a reply to his letter to Queen Victoria in England in 1865, Tewodros had almost all Europeans and the British Consul Cameron imprisoned in the mountain fortress of Magdalla. Enraged by this bold act, the English Queen ordered Lieutenant General Robert Napier to set up an expeditionary force of British and Indians in India and transport them to the Ethiopian coast with a large fleet of ships. In April 1867, under Napier's leadership, this army launched an attack on the fortress of Magdalla, in which Emperor Tewodros had sought refuge. The defense collapsed after cruel slaughter, and the British troops stormed the stronghold. To avoid the humiliation of capture, Tewodros shot himself. As a result, the victorious forces plundered the city, the palace, and the two churches, taking everything valuable: gold and silver crosses, bowls, drinking vessels, massive gold crowns, jewels, precious robes, and scrolls. Everything of value got ruthlessly carried away. After that, they completely burned Magdalla down, along with all its houses and churches. The British needed about two hundred donkeys and fifteen elephants to transport these precious spoils back to the coast.

The subsequent founding of the Italian colony of Eritrea started a conflict that lasted for years because the parties could not agree on Ethiopia and Eritrea's borders. At the battle of Adwa, this conflict ended with a shocking defeat for the Italians on March 1, 1896. However, they could not easily accept this disgrace. Hence, disputes arose in 1935, culminating in a large-scale invasion by Italian troops from Eritrea and Italian Somalia and ending on the

5th of May 1936 with the Italians' entry into the capital of Addis Ababa. The subsequent colonization phase lasted until 1941.

The primary goal of the colonial government of "Italian East Africa" was to develop farmland for a large group of settlers. The associated measures were interrupted after Italy entered the Second World War in June 1940, but not before roads were built through the country's most inhospitable regions and mountains. Addis Ababa was also entirely rebuilt and, within just six years, provided with an airfield, a modern road network, government buildings, banks, and bridges. The Italians also had an eye on the gold deposits in the country. The mines of Asosa in the west of the country and those in Sidamo province were well protected by the military. As in the millennia before, the name Ethiopia became synonymous with treasure.

After the British and their allies invaded Sudan, Kenya, and Somalia in the autumn of 1940, Italian colonial power ended in Ethiopia. In May 1941, a decisive battle occurred on Amba Alagi when Jimma, a hiding place for the Italians, fell to the British. The gold bullions kept there were no doubt a welcome boost to the English war chest.

PROLOG

After the Italian colonial army's capitulation, the previously exiled Emperor, Haile Selassie, reentered Addis Ababa. The British administration ordered the dismantling and export of the technical equipment the Italians had set up. The situation between the English and the new Ethiopian government became increasingly tense. The loss of taxes and the merciless British influence increasingly impoverished the country. Emperor Haile Selassie finally looked around for new allies, which he found in the US, Canada, and Sweden.

In 1942, the first British-Ethiopian agreement on the future political status of the country was signed. It was initially valid for three years. Ethiopia was to become a member of the British Commonwealth, which, among other things, meant that the support from other countries for reconstruction projects was an unwelcome interference. British rebuilding focused mainly on forming a new Ethiopian army and establishing an efficient police force.

Almost simultaneously with the signing of this treaty, the London-accredited Ethiopian envoy, Abebe Retta, sent an increasing number of missionaries from the Swedish Evangelical Church to Addis Ababa. They ensured that the emperor's desire to develop a suitable school and health care system in the country could be met.

The relationship between the two countries deteriorated progres-

sively over the years. However, Haile Selassie's urgent desire to see his country independent was finally realized by signing a new agreement in December 1944. This paper ended British control of the country and, for the first time, gave the emperor the freedom to request aid from other countries without having to seek the approval of the British government. Again, this new three-year treaty provided generous support by establishing a British-style Ethiopian army and a new police school. Both were led by the British Military Mission in Sendafa.

In Sweden, an "Abyssinian Committee" was founded under the patronage of Crown Prince Gustav-Adolf. This organization included many Swedes employed in Ethiopia before the Second World War. In October 1945, the "Abyssinian Committee" began recruiting agricultural experts, missionaries, physicists, teachers, and volunteers who felt called to participate in Ethiopia's reconstruction. As desired by emperor Haile Selassie, a large part of this contingent helped construct an Ethiopian Air Force.

However, this task turned out to be very complicated. The African-American "Colonel" John Robinson, who had been active in Ethiopia before the Italian colonization, returned to Addis Ababa as early as 1944 with about a dozen comrades from the U.S. Army Air Corps. He set up a private flight school to build the new Ethiopian Air Force. Robinson had earned a well-deserved reputation for his evacuation and supply flights during the 1936 invasion. Through luck, he had escaped fatal enemy gunfire but had returned as a wounded aviator.

Eventually, Robinson set up his business with minimal means and financial resources on the airfield of Lideta built by the former Italian colonial power on the road to Jimma. In addition, he procured three Cessna UC-78 Bobcat aircraft from allied stock. Subsequently, the British donated two de Havilland Tiger Moth and two Avro Anson

aircraft. The Tiger Moth biplanes were very well suited for basic training, and the twin-engine Cessna Bobcats and the Avro Ansons were intended for support flights and training on multi-engine aircraft.

For Robinson, these were tough times. Emperor Haile Selassie was pushing for the early operational readiness of the "Imperial Air Force." However, the Colonel could only advance the pilot training very slowly because of an insufficient pool of suitable candidates. He lacked everything needed for maintenance. Tools and spare parts for the aircraft's maintenance were scarce, and only minimal financial resources were available for the appropriate procurement. Above all, only students who had completed virtually none or only token education were available. The theoretical instruction was also meager due to a lack of training material. Besides, the necessary medical proficiency examination for the candidates was not obtainable. But Robinson tried the impossible anyway. By 1946 he had close to a hundred students, but only a minority were suitable for a career as pilots in the future Imperial Air Force.

In the meantime, an old friend of Ethiopia in Sweden had also been campaigning for an "Imperial Air Force". The aristocratic Carl-Gustav von Rosen felt entitled to assume this role because of his previous assignments as a pilot in Ethiopia. After the war, his relations with the emperor and the Swedish ABA airline prompted him to promote the idea of building a national airline in Ethiopia. The director of ABA, Carl Florman, was enthusiastic about this idea. Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, Von Rosen arranged to meet one of his relatives in Sweden, Bror von Blixen-Finecke. Blixen was also impressed by the idea and provided appropriate planning material. As a result, Von Rosen wrote a letter describing the plan to the emperor Haile Selassie. The Swede was sure that he would be appointed a director of this new airline at

the war's end. Thus, the preparatory work was over, and the launch of "Ethiopia Airways" was scheduled for January 1946. Only the signature of the emperor was missing.

The secret preparations of Von Rosen and ABA had not gone unnoticed. As early as 1944, the Trans World Airways (TWA) station manager in Addis Ababa, Peter Redpath, was informed about ABA's plans in Ethiopia. Reacting immediately, TWA sent a delegation to Addis Ababa in September 1945. Shortly afterward, a contract got signed between TWA and Ethiopia involving aircraft and flight and maintenance personnel for local staff training.

When Von Rosen and Dr. Ing. Fride Hylander, the Ethiopian consul in Stockholm, landed on Addis Ababa's airfield in December 1945, they expected to find their contract signed. Instead, they were informed during an audience with Emperor Haile Selassie that such an agreement now existed with TWA. The disappointment for Count von Rosen was no doubt extreme. In compensation, he was offered the leadership of Colonel Robinson's existing flight school at the airfield of Lideta. Von Rosen accepted and terminated his employment contract with ABA in February 1946 to take over the flight school as a principal instructor of the Ethiopian Air Force. To this end, he discussed the matter with Bengt Nordenskjöld, the head of the Swedish Air Force, hoping to get some additional instructors for the courses.

Between February and June 1946, the first twenty of 160 Swedish Air Force personnel moved into their quarters and the hangar at the Addis Ababa airfield and began training Colonel Robinson's students. Simultaneously, the Saab 91 Safir training aircraft and lightweight Saab B-17 bombers, transported from Sweden, formed the basis of the future Ethiopian Imperial Air Force. Colonel Robinson, however, had not been briefed by Haile Selassie or the cabi-

net on the handover operation. So, it was not surprising that this led to tensions between him and Von Rosen, notably because Robinson held a colonel's rank. In contrast, the emperor had awarded the Swedish "newcomer" only the rank of major.

The situation eased somewhat when the new Ethiopian Airlines made their first regular flights to Cairo under TWA's sponsorship and claimed the Lideta airfield for its Douglas DC-3 and their increased activities. Thus, the flight school needed to move to a new base. So, it took over the buildings on the former Italian emergency airfield at Bishoftu, about 40 kilometers southeast of the capital. Nonetheless, the situation between John Robinson and Carl-Gustav von Rosen intensified steadily over the months until it came to blows between the two in the autumn of 1947. Von Rosen walked away with a broken jaw. He immediately demanded the dismissal of his adversary. After a long back and forth, it ended for Robinson in brief house arrest and allegedly a fine of only one thousand Ethiopian dollars. As a result, Robinson quit his activities at the flight school and founded a private airline along with Prince Makonnen, the Duke of Harrar.

During this time, raids of heavily armed bandits had been attacking the donkey caravans carrying gold from the mines of Shakiso to the Negus, emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia. The aircraft from Robinson's flight school were eventually used to circumvent this problem, transporting the emperor's gold bullion from the mines of Shakiso to Addis Ababa.

This story aims to captivate the reader with the events during those dangerous gold flights in the remote and bandit-stricken area of the Ethiopian highlands. The human greed and weakness that manifests itself in most cases at the sight of the noble metal are well known and revealed in the characters who play a leading role in this book.

CHAPTER 1

End of April 1947, south of Adola, Sidamo Province, Ethiopia

Dave Manning examined the documents he had just signed with a critical eye. He compared the figures with the information in the logbook recording the daily gold delivery from the separate mines for the last time. Finally, he slipped the papers into a large brown envelope and vigorously closed the book. Manning leaned back in the roughly carpeted chair. His severe worries were reflected in his gaunt, sunburned face. He paused for a few minutes, rubbing his clean-shaven, slightly scored chin now and then, his blue-gray eyes fixed on the window's solid iron bars that pointed to a dusty, sun-dried forecourt.

In the bright light of the morning sun, the adjoining sheds' outlines were drawn in long shadows cast on the yellowish dust. A light breeze had sprung up from the plains, bending the long grass along the edges of the square, pointing their tips in the direction of the broad mountain range to the southwest of the mine's headquarters. The flag at the top of the flagpole had begun to move and now swayed lazily in the breeze. But the peaceful appearance was deceptive. Two weeks ago, another gold transport had again been attacked by local bandits. Luckily, the lorry driver had managed to break through a barrier built of thick thorn bushes to reach the gov-

ernor's house in Kibre Mengist on the bumpy road despite a boiling radiator and a flat front tire. The result was two severely injured workers and a bullet-riddled transport vehicle.

This raid was undoubtedly the work of the Shiftas (*organized resistance groups), who had been making the area around Adola unsafe for some time. The target of the raids was the gold bullion destined for the emperor, Haile Selassie, in Addis Ababa. And this time, they had come damn close to achieving their intention. If their roadblock had been more stable, they would have managed to steal the gold from the truck. Manning was intensely annoyed by the incapacity of the incumbent government to put an end to these gangs. The Shiftas were equipped to the teeth with weapons captured from the former Italian colonial rulers or from British deliveries to the *Patriots* (* Haile Selassie's motley liberation army, which came under his command and that of Ras Garussa). They had been endangering for some years every road outside the larger cities. The cruelty of the bandits towards prisoners was proverbial. Survivors of an attack were, therefore, scarce.

As a metallurgist with immense experience in mining gold, Manning had accepted two years previously the generous offer of a job from Hakan Kriegstrom, a Swede who Haile Selassie had entrusted with the management of the Shakiso gold mines. These mines had always been owned and exploited by the respective rulers of Ethiopia. Manning now had overall control of the operation, and his task from the start was to make mining in Shakiso more efficient. For a few months now, the reorganization and modernization had progressed so well that gold bullion could be transported safely to Addis Ababa every few weeks.

Manning suspected that information was being leaked out of the mining camp and that some of the workforce might be forwarding

information about the gold transports to the Shiftas. He had been giving this problem his increasing attention. As such, staff no longer came into direct physical contact with the gold. During smelting, he had progressively replaced the laborers on the hand-operated bellows. Instead, he had used the recently supplied diesel generators to provide fresh air to the two furnaces via electric blowers and had put new water pumps in operation.

Furthermore, access to individual buildings was now subject to strict rules. Thus, nobody from the staff was allowed to enter these without Manning's prior authorization. The assigned storage shed now handed shovels, pimples, buckets, and lamps to the mines' men. Since it was challenging to find trustworthy workers and Manning could never be sure of their absolute loyalty, he kept all the reins firmly in his hands and left nothing to chance.

Today he wanted to send the rescued cargo of gold bullion to Addis Ababa, along with another 16 bars of 400 ounces each, which had been smelted at the camp over the past few weeks. Would it be okay? The fact that the Shiftas had known something about the last gold transport might have been just a coincidence. Nevertheless, Dave Manning had taken particular caution with his preparations, avoiding any signs that might have betrayed today's haulage. Since yesterday afternoon, the overseer, Fikre Miriam, and Bedford truck driver, Petros Robel, had been informed about the matter. Manning unhesitatingly trusted the two Ethiopians, who had been employed in these mines for many years. He could not imagine that they would risk their lives. If it turned out that they had something to do with betrayal, they could face the death penalty.

Today's transport had to be as inconspicuous as possible, and until recently, nobody had been allowed to suspect anything about

the preparations. The night before, Petros Robel had received instructions to drive the Bedford truck to the gold shed under cover of darkness. Dave Manning looked at his watch and realized it was already nearly half-past six. The crew should have loaded the transport vehicle by now. He decided to make sure and abruptly pushed back his chair and stood up.

With his slender and tall stature, Manning was imposing. A light blue, short-sleeved cotton shirt hung loosely from his shoulders, exposing his taut, sinewy arms and hands. A leather belt around the hips fixed khaki-colored, long pants and served as a holder for a worn-out holster, from which the handle of a heavy knife protruded. The slightly graying temples of his otherwise dark brown hair showed his age to be over fifty years. The man did not seem to carry a gram of excess fat on him. Determined, Manning took the big envelope in his hand, crossed the room with long strides, and opened the barred door leading to the forecourt.

The refreshing chill of the early morning still hung in the air. In the distance, some vultures circled above the lower valley and the village of Wakudima, through which the rough-and-ready road led to Kibre Mengist. An animal had probably died over there in the acacia woods, Manning thought. Then he locked the door behind him. A thick carpet of dust muffled his footsteps as he strode across the square, passing between two stone-block buildings. Moments later, he reached the parked vehicle in the shadows. He walked around the Bedford truck and found the iron-reinforced door of the storage shed open. He could hear muted voices.

Their boss's sudden appearance seemed to shake the driver Petros Robel and the overseer Fikre Miriam to their bones because they suddenly stopped talking and stood there rooted to the spot.

"Well, how far are you with the loading?"

"We are ready, Sir," Fikre Miriam stammered. "We were just loading the sacks of charcoal as a disguise on top of the cargo."

Manning nodded wordlessly and then looked around the inside of the shed. To his satisfaction, it was empty. He then climbed onto the truck and let the overseer show him the number of gold bars in the wooden boxes. Finally, he handed the envelope over to the driver, pointing out that he was to guard the documents and deliver them, together with the precious load, to the recipient at Addis Ababa. The driver Robel nodded vigorously. He already knew the procedure and knew that the stately, white manager was relentless when it came to things like this. And so, he took the envelope carefully and stowed it behind the driver's seat of the truck. Manning locked the boxes and applied the imperial seal to the locking plates.

"Petros, once the bags of charcoal are loaded, drive the truck to the front of my office. There will be three armed guards to accompany you to Addis Ababa! One man will sit in the co-drivers seat, and the other two at the back of the loading bridge. Furthermore, I want the tarps on the loading bridge's side completely pulled down and firmly lashed. Roger that?"

Again, Robel gave a firm nod to show that he had understood the instructions. He was glad that the boss had thought about the safety of the transport. The shock of the last attempted attack by the Shiftas still weighed heavily on his mind. Uneasily he remembered the projectiles from the rifles that had hit the windscreen and narrowly missed him. Petros Robel was sure that the bandits would lose the desire to make another attempt with an armed escort on board the truck. Without worrying any further, Manning resolutely headed back to the barracks of the mine's security staff. The shadows narrowed, and the hot air rose in ghostly shimmering waves from the sun-heated, bright facades. The door was wide open.

Manning recognized the lean, middle-sized man against the dark background of the room. Tekle Hagos, the security chief, came to meet him, grinning.

"Good morning, Mr. Manning!"

Dave Manning returned the greeting with a curt smile and gesture. With a serious expression, he beckoned him over, then put his arm over Hagos' shoulder and pulled him outside towards the middle of the large square so that no unauthorized person could overhear their conversation. Towering over the sinewy Tekle Hagos, he leaned forward and said, half whispering:

"Tekle, I need three armed security guards to escort a truck. You should contact me at the office within the next half hour!"

Hagos straightened up. Somewhat astonished, he looked at Manning, but then his eyebrows contracted, and with a faint nod, he said:

"Addis Ababa?"

Manning's face remained rigid as a mask as he pointed with his forefinger at the pale green shirt of the security chief's chest.

"Absolute and highest security level, Tekle! No one is allowed to know where or why. Is that clear?"

"Sure," Hagos replied, his smile long gone. "Three men in full equipment in half an hour in front of your office."

"Correct! In the meantime, I'm preparing the necessary passports for the police roadblocks," Manning said dryly.

"Do you expect the Shiftas to raid the truck?"

"I wouldn't bet at this point. Therefore, we take cautionary measures, but they must remain secret. Who knows, maybe even the walls have big ears here."

"Understood," Hagos answered. "I will arrange everything immediately."

"Thank you, Tekle. See you later."

Manning turned away and strolled with his slow, typical "Jimmy Stewart walk" back to his office. He didn't feel right about the impending transport. But whatever the risks, he had to do it. The dirt track route, which was reasonably navigable during the dry season, was the only suitable link to Addis Ababa, but there were always problems with armed Shiftas. This was not Europe. Ethiopia was unique with its complex rules shaped by tribal structures and the colonial war. Manning knew that he had taken all possible precautions at hand, and his only hope was that no one had any idea about today's valuable transport.

A solution seemed necessary to protect the gold from robbery and his people from being hurt. The Negus, Haile Selassie, would hardly stand by and watch the theft of his gold by local bandits. It would indeed be some time before the current government would disarm the Shiftas, as they had been active against Italy's colonial army. For Manning, total security was almost an impossible and out-of-reach dream. He knew that the few sentries at his disposal to guard the mines in Shakiso could not even protect that area from raids. He unlocked the door of his office and entered the dim room. Fine dust glimmered in the sunbeams that fell through the single window. Manning closed the door and went to work. The old Remington typewriter's keys rattled for the next ten minutes and made the pencils dance on the worn wooden desk. Finally, Manning laid the final form on the counter, pounded it with a few stamps, and signed the documents with his name. The authorizations for the truck and the escorts were ready.

Manning leaned back and waited. The clocks in this country ran at their own pace. Haste was something unusual, even wicked to the locals. Since time immemorial, they seemed to have drifted