Driven by Devils
(K. C. Gandar Dower)

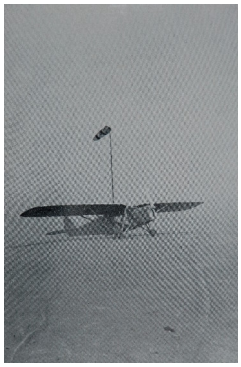
Pacifist, explorer, aviator, sportsman, cryptozoologist, and war correspondent Kenneth Cecil Gandar Dower (1908-1944) was an astonishingly versatile man, who faced triumph and adversity alike with contagious enthusiasm, indomitable spirit, cynicism, and easy, self-effacing humour. Known to his friends simply as 'Gander', few biographical details remain of this intriguing character, yet perhaps few are needed since he voiced his feelings clearly in the handful of books he wrote during his short life. In what was his most controversial work, *The Spotted Lion* (1937), he admitted: "We have all had our day-dreams of adventure...I seem to be one of those unfortunates who is driven by devils to put them into practice".

K. C. Gandar Dower was born at his parent's home in Regent's Park, London, on 31st August 1908. He was the fourth and youngest son of the independently wealthy Joseph Wilson Gandar Dower and his wife Amelia Frances Germaine. Two of his elder brothers, Eric and Alan, served as Conservative Party members in the House of Commons, with Eric responsible for the creation of Aberdeen Airport. As a youth Kenneth read avidly the works of Rider Haggard and showed an interest in writing from the age of eight, although his teachers at Harrow School deemed him awkward and slow-witted. Despite this he wrote for *The Harrovian* with his friend Terence Rattigan, and proved himself a keen sportsman in cricket, association football, Eton Fives, and rackets. After gaining an upper second he received a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge in 1927 to read history. Throughout his Cambridge years he displayed a prodigious and peripatetic energy that would define his colourful adult life. With limitless perseverance, a prodigious memory, and a determination to succeed he narrowly missed a First Class in the History Tripos, much to his disappointment, but then he was simultaneously editing the *Granta* literary magazine *and* chairing the Trinity debating society.

It was also at Cambridge that Gandar Dower proved himself a master of most moving ball games, winning athletic blues in billiards, tennis and real tennis, Rugby Fives, Eton Fives, and rackets (his obituary in Wisden hails him as "one of the most versatile player of games of any period"). He represented his University in no less than six sports, and according to his contemporaries he had no superior in either Eton Fives, of which he was captain, or Rugby Fives, in which he was an invaluable team member for three years. In one match an opponent was heard to say: "I give up: it's no good playing against a kangaroo!" As a doubles player, however, he was less effective, since his partner could never guess where he might be on the field. Gandar Dower won the Kinnaird Cup twice with George McConnell, and the amateur single championship at Rugby Fives once.

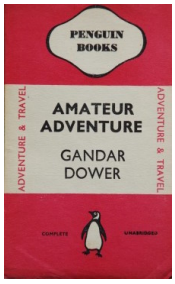
In the 1930s Gandar Dower became a leading tennis player, competing in several international tournaments including Wimbledon and The French Championships. He was nicknamed "The Undying Retriever" for his ability to cover great distances during matches. He scored his greatest sporting success at the 1932 Queen's Club Championships in London, where he defeated Harry Hopman in three sets. The press reported how he "had Hopman perplexed with his unorthodox game and the number

of astonishingly low volleys from apparently impossible positions". Gandar Dower also won the British Amateur Squash Championships in 1938 making him one of only a handful of sportsmen to have represented their country in more than one sport. He also continued to play cricket competitively throughout the 1930s.



Gandar Dower's own words now take up the story: "For years a yearning had been coming over me. Every boy has dreams of adventure, and for most, unfortunately, they must remain only dreams, until at last they die away and are forgotten in the humdrum middle years…But shortly after leaving Cambridge I began to realise that for me it was possible to transmute them into reality." In March 1932, with the help of an ex-R.A.F. friend Angus C. S. Irwin, he made his dreams reality by taking flying lessons. In April 1932, being from an affluent family, Gandar Dower purchased for himself a second-hand Puss-Moth monoplane and in May passed his flying tests. In June Irwin and Gandar Dower cemented their flying relationship by entering the demanding King's Cup Air Race finishing a respectable fourth place. In October, and with little more than a couple of parachutes, a pair of inner tubes, and a "haversack containing a few collars, handkerchiefs, shirts, sun-helmets and the proverbial toothbrush" the pair flew 7,000 miles from London to Madras, with Gandar Dower taking the controls himself for 1,700 miles.

Undertaken just for the fun of it, Gandar Dower recounted his experiences with amusing vividness in his first book *Amateur Adventure* (1934), noting that he didn't dare tell his mother of his plans for fear of worrying her. Along the way they called in at Paris, Ajaccio, Tunis, Tripoli, Benghazi, Mersa Matruh, Cairo, Amman, Baghdad, Basra, Karachi, Bombay, and Poona. *Flight Magazine* called it an "amusing record…that nearly everyone will recommend their friends to read". Although afterwards Gandar Dower admitted with characteristic diffidence that "we only beat the ship by a couple of days", Irwin and Gandar Dower were one of the first to make such a flight. They celebrated their success by hunting tigers for a month in India, a reward offered by Irwin's father as an incentive for them to arrive in Madras in one piece!

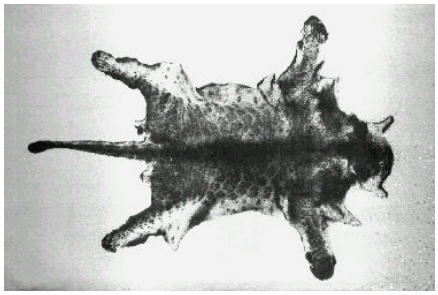


Between October 1934 and March 1935 the twenty-six year old Gandar Dower went on safari to the equatorial mountains of Kenya in East Africa. Initially he craved the simple thrill of being in amongst the big game of Africa but quickly his trip developed into a quest "in queer corners of Africa for animals that hovered between the rare and the fabulous." His very singular goal was to produce irrefutable evidence for the existence of the fabled *Marozi*, or Spotted Lion. Gandar Dower wrote down his feelings upon arrival: "Mine was not a promising situation when I found myself stranded in Nairobi. My only assets were a love of Rider Haggard and a vague half-knowledge of what I wished to do. I wanted to see big game in their natural surroundings, to take their photographs, and, once that was done, to fit myself to go alone into the great forests. I wanted to discover and to explore. Yet I could not speak Swahili. I had no friends in Kenya. I had scarcely taken a still photograph (that had come out) or fired a rifle (except upon a range). My riding was limited to ten lessons, taken seventeen years previously when I was nine, on a horse which would barely canter."

Despite these disadvantages Gandar Dower secured himself a guide, the farmer and hunter Raymond Hook (an acquaintance of Karen Blixen), and within three months an

expedition was put together. He still knew what he was up against, not least of all the scepticism of Hook: “My shy suggestions of the possibilities of new animals brought only rather scornful jokes about the Naivasha Sea Serpent and the Nandi Bear…This opportunity, given so undeservedly to a novice, who three months ago had never been to Africa…was almost too great a reponsibility to bear. I felt small. Even with Raymond’s help, how could I hope to find this rare animal, the very existence of which had for so long been unsuspected, in two thousand square miles of wilderness, through which we could hardly travel, to find it and track it down, and shoot it, or photograph it and capture it alive?”

The main evidence to support Gandar Dower’s belief in the existence of the *Marozi* dates from 1931, when a farmer named Michael Trent shot two small lions, a pubescent male and female, at an elevation of around 10,000 feet in the Aberdare Mountains of Kenya. The skins were retained as trophies because they bore spotted markings usually found only on cubs. So unusual was this that they soon caught the attention of the Game Department in Nairobi and one ended up in London’s Natural History Museum. In the same year Captain R. E. Dent, a game warden, reported seeing four *Marozi* at a similar altitude, and the controversial British soldier and naturalist Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen said he heard the name *Marozi* bandied about by locals as early as 1908, using the word to describe an animal seemingly quite distinct from the leopard and the normal plains lion, or *Simba*.



Several explanations could of course be martialled to help explain away these unusual sightings. Perhaps the *Marozi* was a natural crossbreed of leopard and lion? Whilst genetically possible this is highly unlikely in the wild due to behavioural differences, so-called *leopons* having only been reported in captivity. And since crossbreeds are traditionally sterile this would not explain reports of the *Marozi* over a period of forty years, hence at least three generations of the creature. Or was the *Marozi* simply an abhorrent specimen of normal lion, like the white lions reported at Timbavati Nature Reserve near the Kruger National Park in 1975? Again this scenario seems unlikely because of the favoured habitat of the *Marozi*, namely the thick bamboo and Hagenia forests high above the plains favoured by normal lions (more likely in this case, although again unlikely, the *Marozi* would be a sub-species adapted to a particular environment, similar to the puma-like *Onza* of Mexico). Additionally, an abhorrent specimen would not explain similar reports of small spotted lions in other parts of Africa, for example the Rwandan *Ikimizi*, the Ethiopian *Abasambo*, and the Ugandan *Kitalargo*, all of which go some way to supporting the notion of a distinct species. On the other hand, perhaps the locals fabricated the legend simply to please, and indeed encourage, visiting explorers? Or were the *Marozi* just leopards, or a simple trick of the light?

Gandar Dower’s expedition never spotted a living *Marozi* – tantalisingly they were told they had missed a pair by just a day – but they did find a pair of possible *Marozi* tracks at an altitude of 12,500 feet, where lions rarely tread, the largest of which were bigger than those of a leopard but smaller than those of a lion, suggesting a distinct and dwarf species living like a leopard at high altitudes. (Shades of Hemingway’s *Snows of Kilimanjaro*!) Appearing to follow a trail of buffalo it follows that this was a hunting pair and therefore *not* cubs. Despite finding only this circumstantial evidence Gandar Dower remained convinced that the *Marozi* was a species of lion not yet

known to science. It was only "the difficult nature of the country and the rarity of the beast", he believed, that prevented the *Marozi's* proper zoological classification.

Meanwhile back in England some vindication of Gandar Dower's claims came in a report on the Natural History Museum's *Marozi* skin by R. I. Pocock, prior to the publication of Gandar Dower's book *The Spotted Lion* in 1937. Pocock believed the pelt came from a male of about three years old (a year or so short of full size but definitely not a cub), that it was a little smaller than normal for an adult East African lion, and that it had a noticeably shorter mane. The most distinctive feature was, of course, the dense pattern of "jaguarine" rosettes arranged in obliquely vertical lines over its legs, flanks and shoulders, almost to the spine. Pocock also commented on a skull held by the museum presumed to belong to one of Trent's *Marozis*; thought to be of a similar age to the skin Pocock somewhat cryptically described it as being possibly "slightly dwarfed".

Inevitably some commentators in the British press remained suspicious about Gandar Dower's claims, going so far as to dub him "Gandar Dour" when he failed to acknowledge the funny side of his exploits. The renowned hunting journal *The Field*, however, covered the story seriously by publishing an article on the *Marozi* in 1935. Further reports appeared in its pages as late as 1948, when the splendidly named G. Hamilton-Snowball recalled learning of the *Marozi* prior to Gandar Dower's expedition, and that he himself may have spotted a pair at an elevation of 11,500 feet on the Kinangop Plateau, in the southern part of the Aberdare range. In a bungled attempt to shoot one of the lions he heard the porters whispering the name *Marozi*, dispelling the notion that the local people deliberately and openly circulated a fabricated story. In the same year J. R. T. Pollard, a friend of Raymond Hook, wrote that the latter had now changed his original verdict on *Marozi* sightings from "rubbish" to one of remote possibility, but that evidence was still sorely lacking. From that day to this there have been no further sightings of the Aberdare *Marozi* suggesting that it had either died out or else it never existed in the first place.

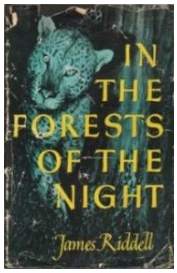
Although the Gandar Dower expedition failed in its primary goal of securing a *Marozi* specimen it did manage to scale several volcanoes and to map numerous mountains along the way. Most significantly for Gandar Dower it made one true discovery of the type he could once have only dreamt of: the sighting of a previously unreported lake on the slopes of Mount Kenya. He announced his discovery in a paper entitled *New Lake on Mount Kenya*, published in the Royal Geographical Society's *Geographical Journal* for November 1935. Although the name Lake Gandar seemed fitting the East African Mountain Society elected for Lake Mittelholzer, in honour of a Swiss aviator and photographer.

True to form when Gandar Dower returned to England from Kenya in 1937 he brought with him eight cheetahs, with the intention of introducing cheetah racing to the greyhound stadiums of Great Britain. A cheetah named Helen managed to break the existing record held by a greyhound for 355 yards disproving the belief that greyhounds were the fastest animals in the world. This somewhat eccentric venture came to an end after one of the cheetahs failed to negotiate a bend and hurtled into the amazed crowd. Even before this the venture seemed doomed since cheetahs do not like chasing inanimate prey, nor do they like running in packs. Gandar Dower also caused considerable controversy by walking a cheetah up to the bar of the Queen's Club on a leash.

It was during this time that Gandar Dower's penchant for cynicism took flight in a pair of pre-war satirical works about the parlous state of his homeland and Europe, namely *Inside Britain – An Internal Scrapbook, a Satirical Account* (1937) and

Outside Britain – A Guide to the Grave New World (1938). Both books, together with a frivolous series of articles in *The Sketch*, were written in collaboration with his closest friend and fellow Harrovian William James Riddell of skiing fame. A review of the books described them as being "occasionally clairvoyant in their political speculation". In 1938, with the Munich Conference over and war looming, Gandar Dower and Riddell, another amateur adventurer and a keen photographer, headed to Africa together, united in wanting to do something interesting and adventurous while they were still able.

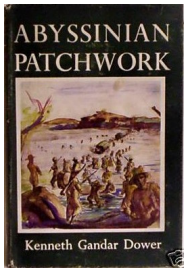
Riddell's recounting of the trip, in his book *In the Forests of the Night* (1946), explained their motives thus, tongue firmly in cheek: "There was a time when it was considered that young men who suddenly left England for a year and headed for the Back of Beyond, for no other purpose than to explore places and shoot things, could only be excused as being either eccentric or badly crossed in love – or both. When we set out from England in 1938 we could only lay modest claims to the former of these". Rather more prosaically the book's dust jacket described the book as "the story of how two Englishmen, amateurs in the art of both big game hunting and photography, set themselves the task of taking close-up photographs of African animals…Armed only with twenty Leica camera, a determination to harm no living thing, and an ability to laugh at themselves, they went into the strange, dark, fantastic world of the Central African forest where more famous explorers had taken their fully equipped expeditions before them." Whatever their motives, the trip offered the two men adventure, and "that was all we wanted".



Using mostly flash bulbs and black cotton trip wires the pair produced a series of remarkable photographs reflecting the tension and beauty of the equatorial forests at night; those of the Bongo and the Giant Forest Hog were probably the first ever taken of these creatures in their natural habitat. They also took plenty of unremarkable pictures of themselves and of each other, by accidentally snagging the trip wires; this prompted Gandar Dower to remark, in his usual wry manner, "If it goes on like this we may have to revise the whole expedition. We might even find it better to hand the whole thing over to the animals and have them take a series of intimate shots of white men at work…" The pair's ultimate goal was to be the Belgian Congo, where they hoped to photograph Gorillas, and it was there that they heard of the outbreak of the Second World War.

Riddell headed back up the Nile, *en route* to England to support the war effort, although he ended up staying in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Gandar Dower travelled to Nairobi to offer his not inconsiderable talents to the Kenyan government as a press liaison officer between the local population and the military authorities (the pair would meet one more time in Jerusalem in 1940). When the job came to an end he returned home, hoping to find work as a war correspondent or to be employed abroad by the Ministry of Information. While waiting he undertook research for Tom Harrison of Mass Observation, another fellow Harrovian and adventurer with whom he planned an aerial survey of an unexplored mountain region in New Guinea. It was not to be and Gandar Dower was soon off again, returning to Kenya once more as press officer. It was in this role, armed with little more than his camera and typewriter, that he witnessed the East African Campaign, notably the Allied liberation of Italian-occupied Ethiopia (then called Abyssinia), Eritrea and Somaliland. Greatly attracted by the native charm and scenery of Ethiopia he compiled an anthology of stories and reports, told or written by friend and enemy alike, soldiers and generals, prisoners-of-war and traders, natives and strangers. The result was *Abyssinian*

Patchwork (published posthumously in 1949), a fascinating portrait of the country which was first to be invaded in the Second World War – and the first to be liberated (it also included a handful of short insightful chapters by Gandar Dower himself, namely *First Glimpse of Abyssinia*, *On the March with the Patriots*, *The Italian Political Collapse*, *The Entry into Addis Ababa*, and *The Return of the Emperor*). He was also author of the official and laudatory account of subsequent British rule in Eritrea and Somalia following the collapse of the brutal Fascist Italian administration, published in the pamphlet *The First to be Freed: the Record of British Military Administration in Eritrea and Somalia, 1941-43* (1944).



Gandar Dower's war effort continued on September 10th 1942 with the Allied assault on Vichy-held Madagascar, arriving at the seaport of Mahajanga (French: Majunga), on the island's north-west coast, in a troop-filled landing craft. Under heavy fire he leapt from the vessel carrying a typwriter, umbrella, and bowler hat! This and numerous other episodes, concluding with the peace signing at Ambalavao on 6th November, are recalled in his book *Into Madagascar* (1943), as well as in *The King's African Rifles in Madagascar*, which he wrote for the East African Command. Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, once again Gandar Dower brought his trademark humour to the proceedings, noting that the 19th century Malagasy Queen Ranavalona I had "a passion for sewing her subjects up in sacks and making use of the first-class facilities offered by her capital in the matter of vertical drops".

Back in Nairobi, with all the fighting in Africa finished, he found life intolerably safe. In one of his last letters he wrote: "I can't stand this. I must do something more adventurous." Thus, on 6th February 1944 he boarded the troopship SS Khedive Ismael at Kilindini harbour in Mombassa, bound for Colombo, Ceylon, en route for further adventures in the Far East. On 12th February, while approaching Addu Atoll in the Maldives, the ship was hit by torpedoes from a Japanese submarine and sank in under two minutes. Only 260 of the 1557 passengers were rescued from the shark-infested waters of the Indian Ocean. Gandar Dower, unfortunately, was not among them.

James Riddell's book, which was published in 1946, was dedicated to his recently deceased friend, the author stating that it should in fact have been written by him. Both men knew that the Second World War would destroy forever the white man's romantic notion of the "back of beyond" – and they wanted to experience it one last time. With the war over, and the frontiers of 'discovery' now more the domain of the scientist, the likes of Gandar Dower slowly disappeared in much the same way as his Spotted Lion. A wealthy man, he left over £75,000 pounds in his will.

Gandar Dower's former Harrow housemaster, the Rev. D. B. Kittermaster, paid a final tribute to this versatile, complicated, and sometimes contradictory character in his introduction to *Abyssinian Patchwork*. He described him as competitive yet generous, loving yet agnostic, ambitious yet altruistic, the most loyal of friends and a pacifist determined to survive the war. Yet he wouldn't have safety on any terms, forever running headlong towards danger.

But it is undoubtedly Gandar Dower's own words, in a prescient poem he wrote aged twenty-one, that sum up best his mercurial personality. He pictures himself flying through unknown skies to discover below him, in an unknown sea, the enchanted mystery island of his dreams. Faced with the prospect of crashing into the sea he offers the following lines:

"That will be life. To feel the engines' power,
Their brave, strong purr, to reach at last the crest
Of my lone island in the sunset hour,
And dipping down the dusk to come to rest.

That will be life. Perchance some day the purr
Will die. Perchance at nightfall I shall find
On the great ocean disc no deeper blur –
That will be death, striking remote and blind.

When, in that hurried moment, out of sight
Of friends, when waves rush up to meet the air,
I find I do not wake, a child at night –
That will be death. I think I shall not care.

I shall not see the glory fade,
The vision pass away,
Or mind and muscle shrink dismayed
Beneath a slow decay.
Ere cracked and tuneless rings the bell,
Ere clouds obscure the sun,
Ere broken be the golden spell
And summer days be done,
At least I shall have died right well
When I was twenty-one."

When he eventually died Kenneth Gandar Dower was just thirty-five.

Books by K. C. Gandar Dower:
Amateur Adventure (1934)
The Spotted Lion (1937)
Inside Britain – An Internal Scrapbook, a Satirical Account (with William James Riddell) (1937)
Outside Britain – A Guide to the Grave New World (with William James Riddell) (1938)
Into Madagascar (1943)
The King's African Rifles in Madagascar (????)
The First to be Freed: the Record of British Administration in Eritrea and Somalia 1941-43 (1944)
Abyssinian Patchwork: An Anthology (1949)

Articles by K. C. Gandar Dower:
New Lake on Mount Kenya, Geographical Journal (Nov 1935), Royal Geographical Society

A book about K. C. Gandar Dower in Africa:
In the Forests of the Night (1946) by James Riddell