Extract 1

One morning, a week or so later, Bertie was woken by a chorus of urgent neighing. He jumped out of his bed and ran to the window. A herd of zebras was scattering away from the waterhole, chased by a couple of hyenas. Then he saw more hyenas, three of them, standing stock still, noses pointing, eyes fixed on the waterhole. It was only now that Bertie saw the lion cub. But this one wasn't white at all. He was covered in mud, with his back to the waterhole, and he was waving a pathetic paw at the hyenas who were beginning to circle. The lion cub had nowhere to run to, and the hyenas were sidling ever closer.

Bertie was downstairs in a flash, leaping off the veranda and racing barefoot across the compound, shouting at the top of his voice. He threw open the gate and charged down the hill towards the waterhole, yelling and screaming and waving his arms like a wild thing. Startled at this sudden intrusion, the hyenas turned tail and ran, but not far. Once within range Bertie hurled a broadside of pebbles at them, and they ran off again, but again not far. Then he was at the waterhole and between the lion cub and the hyenas, shouting at them to go away. They didn't. They stood and watched, uncertain for a while. Then they began to circle again, closer and closer…

That was when the shot ran out. The hyenas bolted into the long grass, and were gone. When Bertie turned round he saw his mother in her nightgown, rifle in hand, running towards him down the hill.
Extract 2

As the last of Table Mountain vanished in a heat haze, he said goodbye to Africa and was not at all unhappy. He had his mother with him, for the time being at least. And after all, England was nearer France than Africa was, much nearer.

Strawbridge

The old lady drank her tea and wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I’m always doing that,” she said. “I’m always letting my tea go cold.” The dog scratched his ear, groaning with the pleasure of it, but eyeing me all the time.

“Is that the end then?” I asked.

She laughed and put down her cup. “I should say not,” she said. And then she went on, picking a tea leaf off the tip of her tongue. “Up till now it’s been just Bertie’s story. He told it to me so often that I feel I was there when it happened. But from now on it’s my story too.”

“What about the white lion?” I had to know, “Did he find the white lion? Did he keep his promise?”

The old lady seemed suddenly clouded with sadness. “You must remember,” she said, putting a bony hand on mine, “that true stories do not always end just as we would wish them to. Would you like to hear the truth of what happened, or shall I make something up for you just to keep you happy?”

“I want to know what really happened,” I replied.

“Then you shall,” she said. She turned from me and looked out of the window again at the butterfly lion, still blue and shimmering on the hillside.

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Whilst Bertie was growing up on his farm in Africa with his fence all around, I was growing up here at Strawbridge in this echoing cold cavern of a house with its deer park and its high wall all around.
Extract 3

That whole afternoon we sat together on Wood Hill and he told me all about Africa, about his farm, about his waterhole, about his white lion and how he was somewhere in France now, in a circus and how he couldn’t bear to think about him. “But I’ll find him,” he said fiercely. “I’ll find him somehow.”

To be honest, I wasn’t sure how much I really believed all this about a white lion. I just didn’t think lions could be white.

“But the trouble is,” he went on, “even when I do find him, I won’t be able to take him home to Africa like I always wanted to.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because my mother died.” He looked down and pulled at the grass beside him. “She had malaria, but I think she really died of a broken heart.” When he looked up his eyes were swimming with tears. “You can, you know. Then my father sold the farm and married someone else. I never want to go back. I never want to see him again, never.”

I wanted to say how sorry I was about his mother, but I couldn’t find the right words to say it.

“You really live here, do you?” he said. “In that big place? It’s as big as my school.”

I told him what little there was to know of me, all about Father being away in London so much, about Nolips and Nanny Mason. He sucked at the purple clover as I talked; and when neither of us had anything more to say we lay back in the sun and watched a pair of mewing buzzards wheeling overhead. I was wondering what would happen to him if he got caught.