

## White Magic\*

Respect was the only protection  
available to Europeans.  
They lived singly,  
or in scattered families,  
among thousands of Africans accustomed  
to constant warfare  
and armed with spears  
and poisoned arrows.  
But the whites had no barricades  
and went around unarmed.

The respect  
the settlers received  
preserved them  
like an invisible coat of mail,  
or a form of magic,  
and seldom failed;  
but had to be carefully guarded.  
The least rent or puncture might, if not  
immediately checked and repaired,  
split the whole garment asunder  
and expose its wearer  
as merely human.

Kept intact,  
it was a thousand times stronger  
than all the guns and locks  
and metal in the world.  
Challenged,  
it could be brushed aside  
like a spider's web.

Steve Bloom  
May 2001

\* Based on found text: from Elspeth Huxley, *The Flame Trees of Thika*.