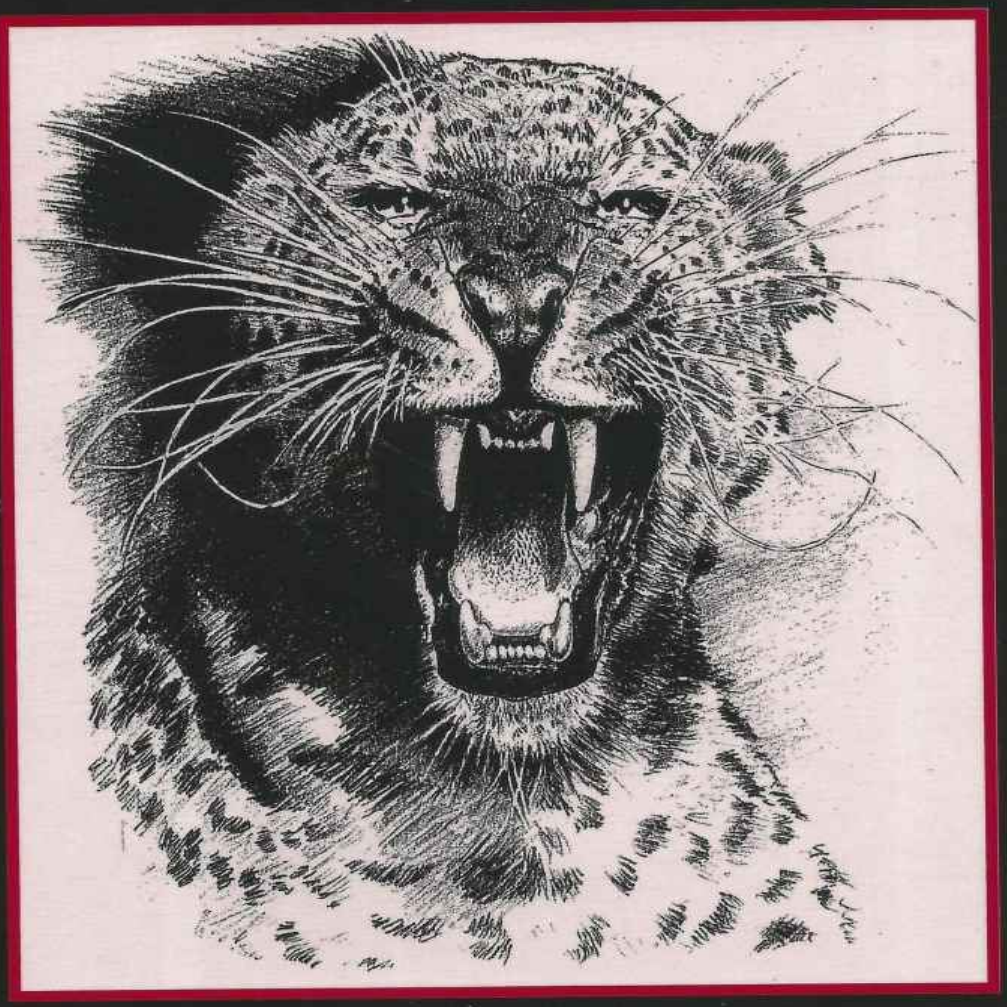


In the beginning

God Created Man the Hunter

by Ron Thomson

In the beginning

GOD CREATED MAN
THE HUNTER

by

RON THOMSON

A Lifetime of Big Game Hunting in Africa

RON THOMSON has published six wildlife books. He is the author of numerous articles that have appeared in leading wildlife and hunting magazines. He is regularly called upon to give talks to wildlife, hunting and tourism groups and he is periodically invited to appear on national television in South Africa to express his views on current wildlife management affairs.

He is vehemently opposed to animal rights-ism, which he considers to be the biggest danger to wildlife not only in Africa but everywhere in the world. He regularly and publicly denounces leading animal rights organisations and their propaganda. He views with disdain their fellow travellers. Yet he is a staunch supporter of true animal welfare.

Ron's views on wildlife management, on hunting, and on wildlife related tourism are considered by many to be both radical and controversial. This is because his *avant garde* philosophies extend far beyond the currently accepted norm. Few have the temerity to openly challenge him because his arguments are sound. They are also clearly based on fact, on his keen understanding of ecology, and on a great deal of personal experience. Consequently Ron Thomson has a good reputation in southern Africa as someone who is knowledgeable about wildlife, who is forthright about his concern that wildlife should be properly and appropriately managed, and who is a highly experienced big game hunter. Few people realise just *how* experienced a big game hunter he really is.

This book is the first of a planned series of six. Each book will stand on its own whilst remaining part of the same series. In continuum these books take a peek into the heart and the soul of a highly experienced white colonial game warden. They record his passion for big game hunting and they touch the very fibre of the African continent. They chronicle major events that have greatly affected both the people and the wildlife of Africa during the last fifty years of the twentieth century.

The stories impart many facets of the creation and the evolution of big

game national parks in Africa. They also predict their ultimate destruction IF world society does not support essential changes in the way these parks are administered. In the last book of the series the author explains that *only* when hunting becomes a primary management tool in Africa's national parks will wildlife be assured of a place under the African sun forever. His arguments are compelling.

These books are a catalogue of true stories about the author's African big game hunting adventures. They expose, particularly and directly, the tangibles of African big game hunting at its best. They are real. You can *feel* the texture of the canvas on which each tale is painted. You can *smell* the pungent tang of buffalo dung. You can *taste* the sweet scent of elephant musth. You will endure the fear that often permeates the hunter's soul. And you will experience that *super high* adrenaline rush that swamps the hunter's wildly beating heart when danger threatens. These are the ingredients that make big game hunting in Africa such a *force majeure*.

The author grew up on a remote farm in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) as a typical white colonial boy. He began his career as a government game ranger, aged twenty, in 1959. Twenty-five years later he emerged as one of the most experienced big game hunters the continent of Africa has ever produced. This is his story.

The hunting stories in all these books took place exactly as they are told. None are fabrications. The truth of this fact shines through in every tale. Start reading them now and begin an exciting journey of adventure into the cauldron of darkest Africa. You will not be disappointed.

Those who read these books are in for a pro-hunting roller coaster adventure that they never thought was possible. They will also be left with a new pro-hunting social perspective that they never expected.

This is a signal year. It marks Ron Thomson's fiftieth year at the coal face of wildlife management and big game hunting affairs in Africa.

Neels Geldenhuys
Managing Director
African OUTFITTER Magazine
August 2009

Introduction

I GREW up in Southern Rhodesia as a typical white colonial boy.

When I was nine years old I shot my first buck with a friend's .22 rifle. It was a common gray duiker ram. Thereafter ever more surely hunting insinuated its way into my soul.

In 1951, aged 12, my parents gave me a .22 single shot rifle for Christmas. This heralded the *real* beginning of my life.

I could not have lived in a better country at a better time to pursue a hunting career. Rhodesia presented me with hunting opportunities at every turn throughout my life and I took advantage of every one.

No work, no sport, no hobby, no pass time, no other social function has provided me with the same kind of satisfaction, inner contentment or feelings of elation. I cannot conceive of life beyond today, in my twilight years, without allowing the memories of my hunting experiences to swamp and to engorge my soul. Hunting has been and remains my life's Alpha and Omega.

In early 1955, aged 15, I experienced my first elephant hunt although it was not I who pulled the trigger.

In 1959, aged 20, I joined the Department of National Parks in what was then the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. That was 50 years ago! I served in that department, based in Southern Rhodesia, for twenty-four years.

In 1981 I became the Provincial Game Warden-in-charge of Rhodesia's Hwange National Park, one of Africa's biggest and most prestigious game reserves. Achieving this post was the fulfilment of my life's greatest ambition. At that stage Rhodesia had become Zimbabwe ruled by the infamous Robert Mugabe.

In April 1983 I was forced out of my Hwange position by Mugabe's notorious security machine. I escaped with my life to South Africa where I have lived for the past 26 years.

In South Africa I served for one year as the Chief Nature Conservation Officer for the Republic of Ciskei. Then I became the founding Director of the Bophuthatswana National Parks and Wildlife Management Board which

position I held for three years. I later worked as a professional hunter for three years.

I have written six books on wildlife related matters largely to create a better informed public. Better informed, that is, about wildlife and its necessary management and about where hunting fits into the bigger conservation picture. I have written magazine articles too numerous to mention in the same vein.

During my 24 years in Rhodesia's national parks, besides commanding some of Africa's most famous game reserves, I enjoyed the greatest of success as a big game hunting game ranger. My score card tells me that I have hunted, in a conventional manner with Bushman trackers, in excess of 5 000 elephants, 800 buffalo, 50/60 lions (including six mankillers), and 30/40 leopards. I have captured on my two flat feet, using conventional hunting techniques, 140 black rhinos and 20 white rhinos. I have also captured and translocated 30 hippos. In the early 1970s I headed the culling team that removed 2 500 elephants and 300 hippos from the Gonarezhou National Park. I do not include these in my hunting score.

For the duration of the Rhodesian Bush War (1964-1980), in a part-time capacity, I operated as a tracker combat unit leader. Using my Bushman trackers we, together with various units of the Rhodesian military, hunted down invading groups of Joshua Nkomo's ZIPRA terrorist forces (1960s), and Robert Mugabe's ZANLA terrorist forces (1970s). Most of my involvement in these operations happened in the Zambesi River valley and its adjacent escarpments. The battles that ensued were sometimes of epic proportions.

As a result of protracted in-service university studies in the late 1960s I qualified as an ecologist passing my final examination with distinction. I was awarded Membership of the British Institute of Biology and was appointed a Chartered Biologist for the European Union. I held these positions for more than twenty years before my retirement.

This is the first of six books that record my big game hunting adventures. Each book is designed to stand on its own whilst still being part of the same series. Altogether they tell the story of my life as a big game hunter and as a game ranger/warden in colonial Rhodesia.

Ron Thomson

August 2009

ONE

Kazungula – 1955

LAND-LOCKED colonial Southern Rhodesia in the 1950s, my teenage years, was a paradise. It was still a pioneer land.

The country is 150 333 square miles in extent, 10 percent bigger than Germany. In 1955 the population was small: 176 000 Europeans; 2 290 000 native peoples; and 13 000 Indians and people of mixed blood. Most people lived in the towns. The tribal areas and white commercial farming areas were only sparsely populated. Vast areas were completely devoid of human habitation.

Only two towns, Salisbury the capital, and Bulawayo qualified for city status.

The roads in only the bigger towns were tarred. Those linking the main towns were two strips of tarmac, one strip for the left-hand wheels and one strip for the right-hand wheels of the motor vehicles that plied them. When oncoming vehicles approached head-on they moved to their respective left-hand sides, each surrendering one tarred strip to the other. All other roads were dirt.

Railway lines linked only the bigger towns. They were the main trade routes to the outside world.

Mining was a major activity producing gold, silver, copper, chrome, tin, mica, iron ore, tungsten and coal for export. Other important minerals included lithium, titanium and beryllium. Large quantities of high grade emeralds were extracted in the south of the country.

The main commercial crop was tobacco. Maize featured hugely in the export economy with world record yields produced by locally developed cultivars. Beef production was a major agricultural industry. Despite its small size Rhodesia was then referred to as "The Bread Basket of Africa".

The national cattle herd comprised three million animals of which 1 800 000 were owned by the country's native peoples. The majority of the country's natives were apolitical. They were a contented and happy part of Southern Rhodesian society living in native reserve lands that had been allocated to them. Every native family had enough arable land on which to grow its subsistence crops and enough grazing for its cattle, sheep and goats.

The bulk of the country's development occurred along the central highveld watershed above the 3000 foot contour. This is where most of the

country's people lived. The malaria area below 3000 feet was still largely in its original wild and pristine condition.

The country was recovering from the devastating effect of the 1896 rinderpest pandemic that had decimated both the country's domestic livestock herds and its wildlife. Although game was widespread and plentiful in the 1950s it had not yet re-occupied all the habitats to capacity.

In 1955 Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was the senior partner in the Central African Federation. Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi) were the other two countries in the coalition.

It was in the wild and remote malarial areas of Southern Rhodesia that I cut my big game hunting teeth.

I WAS fifteen years old when I had my first encounter with big game animals in the wild. My parents at that time owned two farms at Karoi in the northern regions of Southern Rhodesia where they farmed tobacco, maize and cattle. Early in 1955 they took my two younger brothers and me on a two week long camping trip to experience those parts of the country we had never seen. During this adventure we spent one night with an old friend of the family, Bob Wilson, who was managing an experimental rice farm at Kazungula on the upper Zambesi River. Kazungula is located on the nose of the country's map above Victoria Falls where Zimbabwe, Zambia and Botswana all come together. Kazungula was a wild and exciting place for a young lad like me to visit.

The whole region was full of elephants and lions so I asked my parents if I might take along my Martini-Henry .577/450. On a whim I had purchased the rifle from a gun shop in Plumtree where I went to school. When I saw that old weapon on the shop's gun racks I fell in love with it. I just had to have it. My parents not thinking that I might ever use the weapon indulged me my fantasy.

Bob was having problems with a hippo that was raiding his rice paddies at night. Consequently he instructed his farm manager, a huge one-legged man called Tony van Jaarsveld, to go out and kill it. Fortunately for me Tony received that instruction on the very day we arrived. It did not take me long to inveigle my way into Tony's confidence, a matter that was made easier because I had my old Martini-Henry rifle with me.
He invited me along for the experience.

I will never forget that night. After supper we drove out in Tony's old

Chevrolet pickup. He drove with a metal rod contraption he had invented that enabled the stump of his amputated left leg to operate the clutch. His driving was flawless.

We lay in wait for the hippo on the edge of the paddy field. The wind was right. It blew gently and warmly into our faces bringing to us the scents and sounds of the nearby Zambesi River. There was the distant rumble of water running over rapids and, periodically, we heard the contented grunting of hippos wallowing in the great river.

No moon shone but the starlight was bright. There was an incessant cacophony of gentle sounds coming from the rice. It was a hum of bustling movement and squabbling from the masses of ducks and other water birds that were moving about amongst the rice plants.

It was crop raiding by wild ducks rather than by hippos that eventually put paid to the rice growing experiment. I have never in my life seen so many wild ducks in one place. Huge flocks blanketed the sun when they had come pouring into the paddy fields earlier in the evening.

At about nine o'clock we heard the methodical splashes of the hippo's feet as it waded through the shallow water towards us. It took its time. Stopping often to listen. Waiting to listen. Plodding on.

The vehicle was positioned on a small rise just opposite that part of the paddy field where the hippo was wont to stand and eat the young rice plants. Tony had connected the leads of a large spotlight to the battery of his pickup. It was all set to light up the night at the right moment. He had my Martini-Henry loaded up and ready to fire. I sat on the seat next to him holding his Mannlicher-Schoenauer 9.5 mm.

Tony instructed me to shoot at the hippo, too, after he had fired his first shot. His philosophy was that if he did not kill the hippo with the first shot it would not matter if I wounded it a second or third time. And there was a chance that I might just place a bullet into a vital organ and kill it! This possibility roused my blood. It made me thrill with a strange excitement that flooded my whole being. I tangibly felt the increased blood pressure pounding through my veins.

The hippo walked right through the paddy field and emerged on the dry land just below the vehicle. It started walking past us at what I guessed was no more than about one hundred yard's range. We could not see it but we could clearly hear it *crop-crop-cropping* on the wild grasses as it moved

along.

Tony stepped out the far side of the vehicle with my rifle in his hands. He lay over the bonnet and made ready to fire. Then, with both the forepart of the rifle *and* the handle of the spotlight held firmly in his huge left hand, he pressed the torch switch on. The bright beam lit up the whole countryside.

The light focussed on the place where we had heard the hippo grazing. There was no hippo! Tony cast the beam about, searching. The standing trees were few. The grass was relatively short. There were only one or two small bushes about. A small gray duiker flashed its bright white eyes at us before dashing off into some distant cover. That was all we saw. There was no hippo anywhere.

"I'll be damned," Tony exclaimed under his breath. He cast the beam about covering a much wider area, searching.

"Where the hell did it go?" he asked nobody in particular. Still he searched. The light probed everywhere. Nothing!

"Ron," he said to me quietly. *"See if you can find a rock or something to chuck into that bit of thick bush over there."* He wiggled the spot of the light at a small group of bushes some fifty yards away. I walked into the light moving towards the bushes, searching the ground for some object to throw.

"Don't get too close," Tony warned.

I found a small but heavy piece of wood that I hurled high into the air. It fell fair and square into the middle of the target area. Nothing happened.

"What the hell," I heard Tony muttering to himself. Then louder he said to me *"it couldn't have just vanished into thin air!"* But the hippo had done just that.

Our movements were restricted by two factors. Tony, with only one leg, could not walk about the bush at night with a rifle in his hands. Secondly, the spotlight was connected to the vehicle's battery.

For half an hour we drove around amongst the rocks and trees as best we could, looking for the hippo. We flashed the bright light about everywhere. The terrain was rough. There were many trees that had been knocked down by elephants and a scattering of boulders. Despite these problems we made a pretty thorough search of the area where we had last heard our quarry. We found no trace of it. Neither did we hear anything that was even remotely similar to the sound the hippo would have made had it run off. Reluctantly, bewildered, we gave up the quest. We returned to the track that led us back towards the distant farm homestead.

I was disappointed but thrilled at the same time. This had been my very first big game hunting adventure. We had had to turn for home empty handed and under very strange and inexplicable circumstances but the hippo hunt that night had been an experience I would not have missed. It was also one I was not going to forget.

The explanation for the strange disappearance of the hippo that night would only be revealed to me twenty years later when I had a lot more big game hunting experience under my belt.

The night was not yet over.

Driving back we passed through the farm labourers' compound. This was a scattered group of pole and mud thatched huts. Around the huts was a large expanse of the workers' personal gardens. There they grew the food they ate, mainly maize (mealies), sorghum, sweet potatoes, pumpkins and bananas.

"A lone elephant bull has been raiding the gardens here," Tony told me as we entered the first patch of mealies. *"So keep your eyes and ears open. If we see him we'll shoot him."*

This was a bonus! Once again the adrenaline started working. Once again I could feel the hot blood pumping through my veins. I leant out of the window and strained my ears but the noise of the vehicle's old engine drowned out every sound.

Tony's senses were better attuned than mine. He knew what sounds to listen for, the noise an elephant makes when it raids a mealie land. He also knew *where* to look.

Tony switched off the vehicle's lights and we cruised to a stop on a slight rise. He killed the engine.

Silence reigned. We both listened intently. Heavy rustling sounds came to me from our immediate front left. It sounded like something big walking through the mealies.

Tony heard it too. From his driving position inside the vehicle he held the spotlight in his right hand and lifted it above the cab's roof outside. He flicked on the switch.

The powerful beam lit up the whole area. To the left of the road, standing amongst the mealies, caught squarely in the bright light, was a huge elephant bull. He was no more than thirty paces from us. We had caught him red-handed.

He was on my side of the cab almost within touching distance. This was the very first elephant I had ever seen. Its great size amazed me. My heart began hammering in my breast. We were so close to it, so very close. The animal was truly huge but I had little time to marvel at the spectacle. No sooner did we have the elephant in the spotlight than it turned and began to slide quickly through the maize crop towards the thick bush beyond.

Tony pulled the spotlight back into the cab. It was burning bright and nearly blinded me. He pushed the beam through the open window on my side and he handed the torch to me.

"Keep him in the beam" Tony instructed. I held the spotlight out the window and did as Tony had told me.

The elephant was lumbering obliquely away from us and I held the beam squarely on his body. He was moving fast. He kept his head up high. It was cast steadily to one side, to his left. Even in his escape he was watching us intently.

Beside me I heard Tony slipping one of the heavy brass cartridges into the breech of the Martini-Henry. The lever clicked shut. The big man leaned against me squashing me against the cab wall. The rifle barrel slipped past my face and pushed out the window next to me. I leaned back as far as I was able to give him more room.

It seemed he had not had time to aim the weapon before he fired.

'BADOOOF' Despite his large size Tony was kicked back viciously to his own side of the cab. There was a big cloud of blue-white smoke outside the window. It reduced our visibility in the torchlight to zero.

Out in the dark night I heard the heavy lead bullet thump into the elephant's body.

I continued to direct the light towards where I had last seen the elephant. I could see nothing. Visibility stopped mere feet from the vehicle in the dense pall of smoke.

My ears rang from the detonation. It seriously impaired my hearing. I experienced a moment of panic not knowing what the elephant was doing out there behind the smokescreen. My fear was enhanced by the fact I could now not hear him either.

Tony was unperturbed. He took the spotlight out of my hands and climbed out his side of the vehicle. He shone the light over the top of the cab. A soft breeze slowly shifted the smoke to the rear of the vehicle. Soon we were able to see over the cropland again.

The elephant was gone. In the distance, despite the ringing in my ears, I now heard it crashing through the thick bush as it made good its escape.

Early the next morning, with one of Tony's native farm workers doing the tracking, we followed the elephant's spoor out of the maize land. Tony walked with the help of two forearm crutches. I was amazed at how well he managed through some of the thick bush that we traversed. He carried his Mannlicher slung over one shoulder by a leather strap. I carried my Martini-Henry in both hands.

This was my first experience of tracking. I was surprised at how easily the native followed the often very faint footprints left by the wounded elephant. We had not gone very far before the tracker pointed out flecks of dried but still frothy lung blood. It was splattered all over the ground and it clung to the leaves of the bushes we passed. The bullet had found its mark! The bleeding increased. It was not long before we were following a path of frothy blood rather than the shuffling marks left by the elephant's feet.

"He's not gone very far," Tony said to me. *"He can't go very far with this kind of blood on the spoor."* Even so, we followed the tracks for a mile before we came across the elephant's carcass.

The blood trail got heavier and heavier as we travelled along. There were unbelievable amounts of blood splattered in a wide arc around the carcass. The stricken animal had clearly come to a sudden stop smothering in its own blood. Blood had gushed out of its trunk in gallons before the poor beast expired. I was amazed and horrified at the same time. I hadn't realised that one animal could spew out quite so much blood.

The elephant was lying on its side. Its uppermost tusk had been long ago broken halfway along its length but the bottom one was intact. Tony wrote to me in the weeks ahead and told me the big tusk weighed out at forty-five pounds.

There was a problem with regards to where the elephant had fallen. It had been legitimately shot in Southern Rhodesia as a crop-raider but it had died across the unmarked border inside Botswana. Botswana in those days was called the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland.

Our family had to leave on our long homeward journey after breakfast. As we drove off I forlornly waved to Tony who was standing watching our departure from the farm workshop. He waved back. That was the last I saw of him. I dearly wanted to stay and work with him that day because I knew he was in the workshop at that very moment putting diesel into the farm's

bulldozer tanks. In his letter he told me he had successfully chained the elephant carcass to the bulldozer and had pulled it back across the international boundary into Southern Rhodesia. That this was an illegal act did not bother him and it never crossed my mind.

TWO

The Angwa – 1958

I COMPLETED my senior school education at Plumtree School 60 miles south of Bulawayo on the Botswana border. Plumtree, a boarding school, was Rhodesia's equivalent of Britain's Eton College. There I obtained my Overseas Cambridge School Certificate which I passed with a Matric Exemption. This qualified me to enter a South African university to study for a degree. But I was then done with schooling. I had had enough. I had a huge urge to go out into the big wide world that I knew was waiting for me.

I furthered my hunting experience during my last year at school (1956) shooting several kudu and a number of smaller buck both at Plumtree and at home on the farm. I could write a book on my school hunting experiences but that is not what I intend to do now. All I want to say about my school hunting years is that they enhanced my hunting ambitions. Striving to do well in my academic work did not diminish my love for nature and of hunting, as my house-master had hoped and demanded. Poor fellow!

I had set my sights on becoming a game ranger in the Federal Department of National Parks but government rules demanded that civil servants should be twenty-two years of age before attestation. When I left school I had only just turned seventeen. I had already started to badger the then Director of National Parks, Les Stewart, two of whose sons were at Plumtree School with me. Those first demands for a game ranger's position, even though at first not successful, were later to bear fruit.

Upon leaving school white Rhodesian schoolboys were obliged to immediately complete some form of military service. I had a choice. I could join the army and do four months of intensive infantry training followed by ten years of two week long annual military camps. I could join the British South Africa Police (the name of the Rhodesian Police Force) for three years. Or I could join the Royal Rhodesian Air Force.

I attested into the air force on a short service commission and trained to be a fighter pilot. I left the air force inside fifteen months on medical grounds after pulling eight G-forces during an aerobatic manoeuvre. In those days air force pilots did not use G-suits! This episode burst the capillary blood vessels on the left side of my body causing severe subcutaneous haemorrhaging from which I eventually recovered. The damage, however, was bad enough at the time to cause the air force medics to withdraw me from further flying

training. I was offered a navigator's commission but turned it down. Thereafter I became a free agent in civvy street where I was able to work on achieving my burning ambition. I was determined to join the Department of National Parks as a game ranger and to be posted to Wankie National Park. Wankie, now called Hwange, was the biggest and most prestigious game reserve in the country.

There was still the drawback of my age. When I left the air force I was still only 18 years old! Les Stewart advised me to use the intervening four years to gain the kind of experience that I would need to qualify me best when the time came for me to join the department. He gave me a list of practical things that I should do amongst which was hunting. I took him at his word and immediately began seeking work in whatever employment would expose me to these experiences. Periodically I returned to his office in Salisbury with photographic evidence of the work that I had done. I am quite sure he got totally fed up with me during this period of my life.

I had little trouble drumming up enthusiasm for that one item on his list, hunting!

IN the spring of 1958 I accepted a job which paid the lordly sum of ten shillings a day plus my keep. I was employed as a meat hunter and general factotum by a prospector friend of the family. Mike Reynolds had recently pegged and registered a copper deposit in what was then a very remote part of the Lomagundi district, on the Angwa River. Several years later his claims became the Shamrock Copper Mine. There were no roads into that very rugged and mountainous area so we walked in with twenty native porters carrying huge loads on their heads. Each load was contained inside a burlap maize meal sack. When we reached our destination the porters stayed on and became our labour force.

We travelled by Land Rover to the eastern edge of the white commercial farming area near a tiny government outpost called Miami (pronounced Mee-ah-mee). There we linked up with the porters. Our caravan followed the small Deta stream to its confluence with the strong flowing and perennial Angwa River. The copper deposit was then still a whole day's trek downstream.

The claims were located just above the Angwa's junction with a small dry watercourse called the Nyashire, *the place of birds*. The walking distance from where we left the Land Rover was fifty-seven miles. It took us three days of forced marches.

Our first task was to prepare a campsite on the steep mountainside that slid down into the Angwa River. Fifty feet above the river we dug out a twenty-foot wide and fifty-foot long terrace. On one side of this platform we constructed a large hut the walls of which were made of open bush poles. It was roofed with elephant grass thatch each straw as thick as my thumb. Into this hut we placed our valuable goods and perishables.

Two hundred yards away upstream we dug out a duplicate terrace on which we constructed several smaller hut-shelters. This was the labourers' compound.

Our toilet was a long drop pit. It was located inside a grass walled enclosure thirty yards away behind our hut on the far side of a deep gully. A natural fallen tree trunk lay across the ravine alongside which we arranged a matching log. To make this into a safe footbridge we nailed short sections of forearm-sized branches onto and across both the tree trunks. We called the gully the River Styx.

* * *

Colonel Zook Nesbitt, Mike's father-in-law, accompanied us on the expedition. He was sixty-six years old at the time having been born in the pioneer Salisbury military camp in Mashonaland in 1892. Mashonaland soon thereafter became the northern province of Southern Rhodesia.

Mashonaland was, up until the Settler-Matabele War of 1893, the serfdom of the Matabele King, Lobengula. The king had reluctantly and under severe pressure given Cecil John Rhodes' white settlers permission to occupy Mashonaland for the purpose of prospecting and mining for gold.

The white settler pioneer column entered the country from South Africa in 1890. The expedition was sanctioned by Britain's Queen Victoria and commissioned by Cecil John Rhodes under the auspices of the Queen's royal charter. Rhodes engineered his programme of occupation under the name of an organisation that he called The British South Africa Company.

The heavily armed pioneers travelled on horseback protecting a large convoy of ox wagons. They were guided to what later became Salisbury city, now Harare, by the renowned great white hunter Frederik Courtney Selous. Immediately after they had out-spanned they raised the Union Jack and declared Mashonaland to be a colony of the British Empire. The BSA Company was set up as the new colony's governing body. This was in line with Cecil John Rhodes' ambition to annex every part of Africa from Cape to

Cairo in the name of Queen Victoria.

Mashonaland was occupied at that time by a loose conglomerate of scattered native tribes. Their common linkage was the fact they all spoke one dialect or another of the Chi-Shona language. This was the country into which, annually, Lobengula sent his regiments. The impis raided the Ma-Shona villages at their pleasure returning to their king in GuBulawayo, *The Place of Slaughter*, with their spoils of war. They brought back with them Mashona cattle, young women and small boys.

The warriors killed everybody else they encountered thus *blooding their spears*. Ndebele warriors, traditionally, like the Zulus of King Chaka's time from which source the Ndebele's came, could not get married until they had bloodied their spears.

The captured young women became wives and concubines for the warriors thus increasing the size of the Matebele nation. The young boys were trained and incorporated into the Ndebele military regiments thus enhancing the capacity of the impis.

The impi raids into Mashonaland, therefore, had many purposes and many important implications for the Ndebele people.

It was as a direct consequence of these raids into Mashonaland that the Settler-Matabele War of 1893 erupted. It resulted in the Ndebele being defeated and the incorporation of Matabeleland, as a rite of conquest, into the new Rhodesian nation. Lobengula tried to escape the pursuing white soldiers. He ended up on the edge of the Zambesi valley near Kamativi where he took poison. Upon the death of their king the Ndebele people came under the rule of the newly formed BSA Company government of Southern Rhodesia.

Zook Nesbitt was alive when all this was happening. He was one of the very first of the new nation's first generation Rhodesians. He was a Rhodesian pioneer in the real sense of the word and he grew up within the very early milieu of the developing pioneer country.

Zook served in the British Army during the First World War attaining the rank of lieutenant. He followed a military career. In the Second World War he achieved the rank of colonel.

Zook Nesbitt was quite a man. At sixty-six he was stooped and white-haired but still surprisingly fit. It was my good fortune and great privilege to have lived with him for the two months that I worked for his son-in-law on the banks of the Angwa River. The time period was the late hot dry season of 1958.

* * *

Mike departed no sooner than he had located us in the right place. He retraced our route up the Deta drainage to where he had left his Land Rover. He then drove the fifty miles back home to the tiny town of Karoi which was our nearest centre of civilisation.

Mike had other things to attend to. His most important task was getting Tiny Rowlands, chairman of the giant Lonrho mining group, interested in financing the development of his new mine.

The native boys made palliasse mattresses for Zook and me. They used the hemp maize meal bags that had held our katoonda on our march down the Deta. Each palliasse comprised four bags, split and re-sewn together, making one big bag. The boys stuffed the bags with dry grass harvested from the local veld.

Zook chose to sleep in one corner of the hut. I elected to sleep out in the open next to the campfire under the trees.

My job was undefined and all embracing. First of all I had to demarcate the corners of the thirty-odd blocks of copper claims that Mike had pegged. These were centred around prospecting notices that he had previously erected on wooden stakes. They were registered in Mike's name with the Mining Commissioner in Salisbury. Pegging the claims in that rugged terrain was a mammoth task of guesswork and dubious personal judgement. I am quite sure my demarcations were not accurate but my markers sufficed for their purpose at the time.

My second task was to supervise the cutting of a road diagonally up the steep mountain wall of the Nyashire valley onto the high ridge on top. It was a rough track that, when it was finished, enabled a four wheel drive Land Rover to reach the new mine. Mike had another gang of native labourers cutting an access track along the same mountain ridge from the Miami side. It took us two months to join the two tracks together.

We completed our section of the track, which was the most difficult part, with lady-sticks of dynamite, picks and shovels, and a great deal of blood, sweat and tears.

One of my principal tasks was to shoot meat for . the camp.

A few years previously the area had been shot-out by native hunters employed by the government Tsetse Department. The hunters killed every wild animal they laid their eyes on. Wild animals provide tsetse flies with

vital blood meals. It was the Tsetse Department's contention that if there were no wild animals for them to feed upon the tsetse flies could not survive. The purpose of the tsetse fly eradication campaign was to protect cattle in the nearby Lomagundi commercial farming area from the dreaded and fatal nagana sickness that tsetse flies transmit to domestic animals.

We had been given a pot permit by the Game Department to shoot one kudu and one gray duiker a week. The kudu was to provide meat for the native staff and the duiker was to feed Zook and myself. During the two months that I worked on the copper claims I never saw a live kudu and I never ever saw a duiker. The nearest I came to a kudu was finding the skeletons of two bulls that had locked their spiral horns together in a fight. They had died in tandem on the riverbank.

The most plentiful game animals were bushbuck. They lived in the thickets that grew along all the stream banks and in the gorges. Klipspringers, a small mountain goat like antelope, persisted on the steep and high rocky hillsides. If we were going to eat at all we had little option but to ignore the restrictive and specific provisions of our pot permit. We simply *had* to shoot bushbuck and klipspringers to satisfy our survival needs. This proved easier said than done.

Bushbuck are naturally wary animals. The ones I hunted on the Angwa were still wild from the experiences they had had with the Tsetse Department's native hunters. Hunting bushbuck and klipspringers in the rugged terrain of the Angwa, however, was a challenge that I enjoyed.

* * *

The copper outcrop around which the claims had been pegged, had been mined thousands of years before by an unknown people. The whole of Southern Rhodesia was riddled with similar primitive diggings. They were mainly gold, copper and iron mines. The early Rhodesian settlers called these people *the ancients*.

The outcrop was a high rock face standing proud on an open hillside. It was emblazoned with the beautiful blue and green colours of raw copper ore, azurite and malachite. Immediately below the rock was evidence of a large deep pit from which the ancients had extracted copper. Elsewhere along the hillside were similar pits and trenches that had been excavated by these same miners of long ago.

There were wild self-seeded lemon trees growing in the bush all around the copper claims, a legacy left by the ancient miners. Many of the trees were old and gnarled. They are one of the many pointers that tell us who the ancients really were. Lemon trees are not indigenous to Africa!

During our trenching excavations to determine the extent of the ore body, we uncovered several heavy X-shaped ingots of pure copper. Each ingot was about eighteen inches long and a foot wide. The stems of the X were two inches square and each arm, from the centre, was a foot long.

These ingots were well known in Rhodesia and had been found all over the Lomagundi district. They were attributed to the ancients.

The ancients had extracted and exported huge quantities of gold, copper and iron from the country. As early as 1896 75 000 primitive gold mines, excavated by the ancients, had been recorded by the governing BSA Company's Mining Commissioner. The characteristics of these mines were identical to many of the ancient mines the remains of which are still extant in the middle-east and northern India.

The ancients had terraced and irrigated two thousand square miles of country in the Inyanga Mountains on the country's eastern border with Mozambique. They were also responsible for the construction of more than 500 megalithic stone ruins that are scattered about the country, all associated with gold mining activities.

The greatest of these ruins is that of the Great Zimbabwe Temple near Fort Victoria (now called Masvingo). It is an almost exact replica of the ruined and ancient pagan Temple of Awwam that stands today half covered in drifting desert sands outside Marib in South Yemen. Awwam was the centre of the ancient Kingdom of Saba! This fact cements all the other clues that tell us just who these ancient people were.

Since 1958 I have investigated every conceivable piece of writing on these ancient people and I have visited all the most important ruins. I have also walked all over miles and miles of the once irrigated agricultural terraces at Inyanga. The Inyanga terrace walls are identical in construction to those that still exist on the slopes of the Mountains of Hazziz in South Yemen.

There is overwhelming evidence, therefore, to support the view that *the ancients* of Rhodesia were Sabaean Arabs and that they first entered this part of Africa towards the end of the second millennium B.C. It was the Queen of

Saba, called the Queen of *Sheba* by most westerners today, who told King Solomon of ancient Israel about the existence of *The Land of Ophir*. The Yemen and present day Ethiopia, including Somalia and Eritrea, once represented the ancient Kingdom of Saba.

The huge mining civilisation that the ancients slowly developed in what became Rhodesia existed for more than two millennia. It was almost certainly wiped out by the invading hoards of negroid Bantu people who first crossed the Zambesi River on their massive migration southward in the tenth century A.D. These successive waves of migrating black people were the forebears of all southern Africa's present-day native tribes.

Prior to the tenth century there were no negroid people, except perhaps those who might have been slaves to the ancients, resident in southern Africa south of the Zambesi. Before the Bantu migration southern Africa was occupied only by the hunter-gatherer San Bushmen and by the Sabaeans.

This is a long story that I cannot tell here. What I *can* say is that I can now convincingly pinpoint the location of the biblical Land of Ophir which lies inside present-day Mozambique. Ophir comprises the general area of the lower Mazoe River valley in the shadow of a large mountain that is today called *Fura* by the local native people. Five hundred years ago the Arabs called this same mountain *Afoor*. They also claimed that this was the place where Solomon and Sheba obtained their gold in biblical times.

In modern day southern Africa the records of the discussions that the exploring Portuguese sailors had with the Arabs, who were then resident on the Mozambique coast (circa. 1500 A.D.), have been conveniently forgotten. It has become politically correct to attribute the construction of Zimbabwe's important stone ruins to the forebears of the Mashona people. It is also now considered *good politics* to say that the very extensive ancient mining operations that took place in Zimbabwe and Mozambique were the result of a great African civilisation that once ruled this part of south-central Africa. The great Bantu migration of the tenth century is now never mentioned. Historical facts and common sense tell me these now politically correct claims are a huge distortion of an important historical truth.

If I am correct in my conclusions, the ships that were dispatched to the Land of Ophir by King Solomon of Israel and King Hyram of Tyre, visited Mozambique in 964 B.C. They must have travelled 400 miles inland from the Indian Ocean up the Zambesi River to reach their destination. The Christian

bible tells us their voyage from Israel to the Land of Ophir and back took them three years to complete!

Common sense tells me that in 964 B.C. the Sabaeans had not then discovered the vast resources of near-surface gold that existed in the hinterland behind Afoor. Their occupation of what became Rhodesia could only have happened, therefore, *after* the gold deposits of the lower Mazoe river system had been exhausted.

My first exposure to the one-time existence of these ancient people in this part of south central Africa was on what we then called the Nyashire Copper Claims.

* * *

Zook Nesbitt was the nephew of Major Randolph Cosby Nesbitt of the Rhodesian Pioneer Corps. Randolph Nesbitt received the Victoria Cross for his rescue of a white mining community at Mazoe thirty miles north of Salisbury. They had been surrounded and attacked by rebellious Mashona warriors in 1896. The citation reads as follows:

This officer, on 19th June, 1896, led the Mazoe Rescue Patrol, consisting of only thirteen men, fought his way through the rebels to get to Salthouse's party, and succeeded in bringing them back to Salisbury, with heavy fighting, in which three of his small force were killed and five wounded, and fifteen horses killed and wounded."

Zook remembered sitting on his uncle's knee listening to his many fascinating stories about life in Rhodesia in the 1890s. These were the very first years of Rhodesia's pioneering history. Zook remembered quite clearly his own life in Rhodesia from about 1900 onwards.

Zook and I, therefore, had many magical discussions sitting on opposite sides of our Angwa campfire in the evenings. He told me what he knew about the ancient miners and about the lives and the times of the early white settlers. Our evenings perched on our terrace above the Angwa River, in the flickering light of our campfire, were far from dull.

* * *

As a consequence of the recent tsetse department's game elimination operations in the area my hunting duties were not easy. This developed in me a great deal of patience. I learned very quickly how to hunt my quarry using the animals' own behaviour patterns and their own defence mechanisms to my advantage. In a nutshell, I learned how to think like the bushbuck I was hunting. During those wonderful halcyon days on the Angwa I began to

understand the meaning of *a hunter's instinct*.

Anyone who has had anything to do with bushbuck will tell you they are amongst the most difficult of African antelopes to hunt. In the hinterland of Africa they live in the very thick bush that occurs along rivers and in mountainous ravines and they use their acute senses of hearing and of smell to detect their enemies. Like all animals that live in thick bush bushbuck use their hearing more than any other sense to survive. In thick bush good vision for the purpose of self-preservation is only of limited value.

The terrain in the vicinity of the copper claims was rugged, really *rugged*. The hillsides rose five hundred feet on all sides. The sharp crests of the razor back ridges were often only wide enough to accommodate a single game trail. The slopes were steep, in excess of forty-five degrees, and they were clothed in miombo woodland trees and bushes of great diversity.

The streams between the ridges were narrow rivulets of sand, pebbles and boulders that were dry most of the year. Water flowed here only during the rains. Their banks were covered in heavy brush.

Every now and again open glades covered in grass interrupted the rugged nature of the terrain. Occasional pockets of undulating flatter country covered in open miombo woodland were also welcome interruptions. These were islands of benign softness that contrasted starkly with the harsh realities of the otherwise relentless rugged mountains.

And there were buffalo beans!

What, you might ask, are buffalo beans? For those of you who do not know the buffalo bean let me assure you that you have missed nothing in your lives.

Buffalo beans are very thin annual vines, similar to *convolvulus* or morning glory, that crawl all over the bushes and grass stems of the low lying parts of tropical central Africa. They grow to a height of about ten feet and they produce fist-sized bunches of beautiful golden brown bean pods all along their lengths. Each pod is about the size of a man's forefinger. They are covered, when dry, with a mass of short soft hairs that are continually being shed. Every bump of the bush on which a vine is growing sends a soft shower of invisible hairs into the air which eventually reach the ground. Even the most gentle of breezes will lift the tiny hairs from their pods, and from the ground, and send them wafting through the air.

When buffalo bean hairs settle on a man's skin they cause the most painful of irritations imaginable. Not only do the hairs cause discomfort in

the tender regions of the body, such as in the crotch and armpits, they result in raised swellings and inflammations for which there is no immediate cure.

Wearing long trousers helps to keep the buffalo bean hairs off your lower body but for the clothes to be effective you have to relearn everything you knew about wearing long pants. If you wear long trousers when you walk through buffalo bean territory you are very quickly made aware of your trousers' ventilation qualities. Every time you lift and bend a leg the trousers cling to your flesh, expelling the air inside the leg tube. Then, when you put that same foot down onto the ground and straighten your leg, air rushes up the trouser pipe into your crotch area. And every time it does *that* the air takes with it a load of the very fine buffalo bean hairs that are lying on the ground.

The tiny hairs don't take long to make their presence felt. Very soon all the tender regions around your private parts start to itch. Shortly after that heavy welts appear in the soft damp groove between your testicles and the inside tops of your legs making it excruciatingly painful just to walk.

The only way to make sure this does not happen is to secure the ends of your trousers inside the tops of your socks, or to tie the bottoms of your pants around your ankles with some kind of string. In temperatures of between 110 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit at midday this does not add to the comfort of whatever work you are undertaking, but it is *much* better to endure the heat than to experience the pain and discomfort of the buffalo bean.

When you are attacked by buffalo bean hairs the only solution is to let the reaction run its course. All you can do is to let the poison work its way out of your body in a natural manner. This takes many hours. Buffalo beans are no child's play *itchy powder*.

On many an occasion I have sat happily fishing on the banks of the Zambesi River for the whole afternoon. Then, in the evening, I have had to quickly move my position because a gentle breeze had blown up and I found myself on the downwind side of a patch of buffalo bean vines. You don't have to look for buffalo beans. They find you!

The buffalo bean was a major hunting hazard on the Angwa. Many a time when I was swamped with a deluge of the fine hairs I was left near to tears. I tried everything to rid myself of the unbearable irritations and the pain: covering the affected areas with mud; rubbing all sorts of bush juices onto the burning areas; even stripping myself naked and submerging myself in the waters of the river. Nothing helped. Eventually I learned to switch off

mentally. That was the only thing that worked but it took a monumental spiritual effort.

* * *

We had to eat and there was no supermarket round the corner. Maize meal, dried beans, salt and bushbuck meat became the corner stones of our diet. We also ate *marogh*, edible green leaves collected from the veld. The native staff spent a lot of their spare time fishing in the river. It was my job to get the bushbuck meat.

I very quickly learned there was no point in stumbling along the ravines in search of bushbuck. The bush was so thick and the substrate was so rough underfoot, the elusive animals heard me long before I came anywhere near them. Using stealth and my own sense of hearing was the only way I ever got close enough to shoot a bushbuck.

My hunting strategy was to enter a ravine at the downwind end as quietly as was humanly possible. I would sit down in a patch of thick bush for ten to fifteen minutes and listen intently, often with my eyes shut tight. Closing my eyes helped my concentration. If bushbuck were about and they heard me enter the ravine, they would stand still and listen for about five minutes. If the noise they had heard was not repeated they would normally then go about their merry business. If they smelt me or saw me their reaction was to bark an alarm. They have a very loud barking call, like a single hoarse dog-bark. If there was no barking alarm after fifteen minutes I knew I had not been detected.

I would then move on for a hundred yards or so walking quietly and unobtrusively further up the ravine. I would then sit down again and again listen.

The ravine sides were so steep the bushbuck paths were narrow parallel terraces on the slopes. When an animal moved from one pathway to the next it was obliged to bound up the hillside or to bounce down to a lower level. Either way they *had* to make a noise and *that* is what I listened for.

Using that still-hunting technique I was able to confirm the presence of a bushbuck up to a hundred and fifty yards ahead of me. Once I knew there was an animal present and I had ascertained its rough whereabouts, the game was on.

Stalking bushbuck under such conditions is a most exhilarating and satisfying experience. Closing the gap becomes more and more problematical as the range to quarry shortens. Killing the animal then becomes almost an

anti-climax.

Hunting the klipspringers was quite different. They occupied the more open upper slopes of the hillsides and they normally saw me long before I saw them. They would betray their presence by bleating at me or I would hear them bouncing off. I always shot these animals at a distance as they were standing looking down at me.

My hunting rifle was a .22 Hornet. The weapon itself was an old ex-army .303 SMLE into the barrel of which had been inserted a .22 calibre Morris-Tube. The original magazine port was filled with metal and adapted to take the much smaller .22 Hornet magazine. The sights were the standard open iron sights that come with the military weapon.

I had another weapon. It was a single-shot .22 long rifle. I used this occasionally to shoot guineafowl and francolin. Zook had a double-barrelled twelve-gauge shotgun. It was available to me but I rarely used it. A single guineafowl or francolin was a good enough start for the camp stockpot. This was a stew that Zook cooked in a three-legged cast-iron pot that was rarely off the campfire.

Getting meat was our biggest problem and the hunting became more and more difficult as the weeks went by. The fewer the bushbuck became, the more alert did those that remained become to my constant hunting presence. Very soon I had hunted every nook and cranny in the vicinity of the claims and I had disturbed every surviving bushbuck many, many times. Some animals I came to know quite well. I gave them names like *Old Greybeard* who was a huge bushbuck ram.

Old Greybeard lived across the Angwa about a mile upstream from our camp. I always saw him in the same general area and even began to recognise his spoor. When the big maroon-coloured trumpet flowers of the sausage trees matured and fell to the ground, Old Greybeard’s spoor appeared regularly beneath all these trees. He went from one tree to the next to pick up the fallen flowers. They are a favourite food of the bushbuck.

Wherever there are sausage trees in flower in Africa you will find all kinds of wild animals beneath them waiting for the succulent dark trumpets to fall. Everything from baboons and monkeys to porcupines and elephants eat the huge discarded flowers.

Sausage trees are so named because their flowers develop into giant sausage-shaped fruit. These sausages attain lengths exceeding three feet and diameters exceeding nine inches. The trees become festooned with giant

sausages which are not so readily eaten as are their flowers.

My encounters with Old Greybeard were always fleeting and frustrating. Every time we met he outwitted me. Indeed, he became a bit of an obsession and a major challenge. I lay in bed at night thinking about him. As I looked up at the stars through the flickering firelight I dreamed up ways of bringing him to book.

If bushbuck have a weakness it is the regularity of their habits. Once you understand this even the most wary of bushbuck can, sooner or later, be made to pay the piper. One of their habits is their likeness for standing exposed to the warming rays of the early morning sun and individuals have favourite sunning stations.

On two different occasions I flushed Old Greybeard on the Angwa riverbank where he was standing under an enormous sausage tree. He was basking in the early morning sun and taking advantage of the falling flowers at the same time. When I chased him off on the second occasion I knew just how I was going to get him.

I selected what I considered to be a suitable position amongst the rocks on the opposite side of the river. The range to his sunning post was about one hundred yards and there was just a light screen of *Phragmites* reeds obscuring my view. Before it was light one morning I settled into my chosen position with a coarse blanket wrapped around my shoulders. I then waited for the sun to come up.

Come the dawn, just as the darkness was turning to gray, I made out the movement of bushbuck under the sausage tree on the opposite bank. What appeared to be two does were busy eating flowers that had fallen during the night. Then, as night slowly turned into day, I saw the glossy horn tips of the old ram moving along jerkily, *forward-stop, forward-stop, forward-stop*. He was walking along the far riverbank towards the females.

The reeds were much higher than I had thought. I did not have a great view of my quarry and the reed heads were big enough to deflect the tiny .22 Hornet bullet.

I absorbed all the particulars. Time was on my side. Patience was my ally. Sooner or later I believed Old Greybeard would offer me the shot that I would need to kill him. The sun, after all, was then not yet out of bed.

Slowly a bright golden wave of sunlight crept down the far hillside. I watched it sliding indolently closer and closer to the bushbuck family. Soon I

was able to see that the original two animals were a female with a large youngster at foot. The third animal was the old ram Greybeard.

Across the river I waited patiently. Just below me a soft mist rose from the warm surface of the big river pool. The water was like a sheet of glass right down to the rumbling rapids a hundred yards away lower down the river. A column of mist, occasioned by the tumbling warm waters, rose high above the rapids

The doe and her youngster moved down towards the river. They disappeared behind the wall of reeds and shortly reappeared in a gap in the reed bank at the water's edge. Together they lowered their heads and drank their fill. I could hear the sucking noises of each draught of the water they drew into their mouths. And I idly watched the concentric ripples that ran outwards across the pool's slick surface from the focus of the disturbance.

I aimed at the doe. I could have killed either animal very easily but today just any bushbuck would not do. Today my bullet was reserved for Old Greybeard.

When the doe and her youngster had finished drinking, they quietly turned round and moved back up the bank behind the wall of reeds to the sausage tree.

The old ram now wandered down towards the river. It seemed he, too, was going to slake his thirst. *That* was the chance I had been waiting for. If he appeared at the water's edge as had the doe and her young one, he would give me the clear shot that I needed. When he lowered his head to the water I would place my bullet through the back of his neck. The projectile would rake downwards between his shoulders into his lungs. It would be a fatal shot. I would have him down with that one shot, even if he ran, before he reached the sausage tree.

I settled my rifle into my shoulder resting my forearm on the rock in front of me. The sights were trained on the gap in the reeds. If he used the same path the doe and her youngster had taken I knew exactly where he would emerge at the water's edge.

The adrenaline began to pump. There was a quiver in my hands. Even hunting a bushbuck in those days gave me buck fever.

The white leg-socks of the ram's feet appeared as he moved down through the reeds towards the water. The light was now bright enough for me to see the open iron sights on my rifle without any trouble. On he came. His

head appeared. Finally, he was standing at the water's edge in all his glory. I took several long moments to admire his beauty.

Old Greybeard looked around the pool checking for signs of danger. He was not in the least bit alarmed. He looked across the water directly at me. I froze. For a moment I wondered if he had seen me. Clearly he had not because he dropped his head to the water and began to drink. Again I heard the sucking sounds of his drinking.

He was a truly beautiful ram with quite the biggest horns I have ever seen on a bushbuck. For a brief moment I felt remorse at what I was about to do.

We needed the meat I told myself! We needed it desperately. But there was more. I *wanted* that bushbuck ram. I *really* wanted him. My twinge of conscience, therefore, only lasted a brief second for there was a little red devil sitting on one of my shoulders telling me to go ahead and kill him.

Old Greybeard's head was down. He was facing directly on to me. His nose was right on the water. Ripples ran out from where his nose was disturbing the glossy water surface.

I took my time and brought the sights to bear on a point at the base of his neck. It was all happening just as I had planned. Directly behind my point of aim lay the animal's lungs. I was ready to do the dirty deed. I took a deep breath and took up the first pressure on the trigger, reasserting my point of aim.

Just below me, on my side of the river, a quiet disturbance on the water's surface distracted me. I noticed it in my peripheral vision because gentle ripples of water ran out from its epicentre. It was not a fish. The disturbance was too soft, too quiet. I tried to ignore it but even as I was aiming at Old Greybeard there was a niggling question at the back of my mind. What was it that had caused that disturbance?

I was soon to find out.

Just as I was about to squeeze off my shot the water erupted right in front of Old Greybeard. The sudden, loud, shushing, crashing, swirling sounds of the massively disturbed water shattered the ethereal tranquillity of the early morning silence.

The big ram jumped backwards. Too late! A huge crocodile had Old Greybeard by the nose. It flipped him onto his side and surged backwards into deeper water. The bushbuck kicked and bucked and twisted every which way. The crocodile ignored his every convulsive contortion. The giant

saurian simply dragged its prey down under the water as if it were nothing more than a rag doll.

I was subconsciously aware of the bushbuck doe and her young one barking loudly and running off. But I never *really* heard or saw them. My whole being was focussed on the event that was taking place right under my nose.

My finger lifted off the trigger. My mouth fell open. The attack had been so fast, so unexpected, it had taken me completely by surprise.

I watched mesmerised whilst the waters of the pool boiled and churned as the bushbuck tried to escape from its inescapable death. One hoofed foot appeared above the surface for a brief moment. Then it disappeared and the ruffled surface waters drifted down towards the rapids. For perhaps half a minute after the attack there were soft swirling movements under the water. Then tranquillity returned to the river. I could not believe that I had witnessed *what* I had just witnessed. And I had had a focussed grandstand view!

I did not kill Old Greybeard! Fate had another purpose for the old bushbuck ram. Weeks later I saw what remained of his skull lying at the bottom of the pool. I have no idea why the crocodile did not eat the head after it had dismembered and swallowed the rest of the body. Perhaps the horns were too long for its reptilian throat. Perhaps the rest of the bushbuck's body had satisfied his hunger. Whatever the reason the crocodile did not eat the head.

I hoiked Old Greybeard's skull from the river bottom with a long stick at the end of which I had fashioned a wire hook. Thus did I recover the bushbuck's horns.

Zook helped me to measure the horns. I remember them being twenty-one and a half inches in length along the spiral. This was a length that exceeded the world record of the day by nearly two inches. My imagination since those days, however, may have stretched the measurement somewhat. In truth I really cannot be sure of their measured lengths now. Whatever! My memory bank tells me that Old Greybeard's horns were nothing less than huge.

I later took the horns home to our family farm at Karoi. There I stripped the horn-sheaths from the bone, drilled holes through the sheaths, and mounted them upside down on a wooden plaque. They thus became a pair of ornate wall-mounted candlesticks. I gave them to friends of mine, Rob and

Eve Watson, as a present for past services rendered. I had often hunted bushpigs on their Halstead farm when I was a schoolboy and I shot my first sable antelope bull on their property.

What might well have been a world record pair of bushbuck horns became thus lost in obscurity.

* * *

About a week after Old Greybeard's demise I saw the crocodile that had taken him. It was lying in the rapids at the lower end of the same pool where it had taken the bushbuck ram. Its head was propped up and exposed on a protruding rock. I crawled up close on my belly and killed the huge reptile with a single shot into its brain. It died without a twinge. The flowing waters of the river tumbled its body down the rapids over the rocks and into the pool below.

I was not prepared to lose my crocodile.

I abandoned my rifle at the water's edge and ploughed through the water waist-deep to grab the dead animal by it's tail. To this day I remember feeling the tremendous strength of the beast as the rigorous tremors running through its body reverberated up its tail. My hands were alive with the electricity. I truly wondered if perhaps I had a still-live crocodile by the tail.

I was not about to let go.

I dug my heels in and let the current swing the crocodile's body in towards the bank. I then manoeuvred the huge beast into quieter waters at the river's edge. It was far too heavy for me to drag the animal's body onto dry land so I walked back to camp to get help.

Throughout my hunting sojourn on the Angwa I hunted alone. This was probably why I enjoyed it so much. I pitted my wits and my wits alone against the quarry that I hunted. It is also probably why still to this day I enjoy my own times of solitude. There were occasions, however, when I could have done with a little help. Recovering the carcass of that crocodile was one of them.

The croc measured fourteen feet in length and with the help of two of our native labourers I removed its belly skin that same afternoon. In those days the soft skin of the belly was the only part of a crocodile that you could sell.

I saturated the skin with crushed rock salt and rolled it into a ball. This I placed in a wet sack that I stashed away at the back of Zook's hut. I later sold

the skin to a hide merchant in Salisbury and earned myself a handsome bit of pocket money.

* * *

Getting enough meat to satisfy our food demands was a major task. Twice a month Mike sent a group of porters to us. Most carried 100 pound sacks of mealie meal on their heads. One or two carried dried beans. One carried a bag of coarse salt. These food commodities represented our basic rations.

The porters stayed one night. They returned to Miami the next day with a report written by Zook telling Mike of our progress and our needs.
Mike then knew what to send down with the next caravan of porters.

Once a Land Rover was able to reach the camp the Shamrock's ration problems were much relieved. Once a week thereafter Mike shipped in maize-meal, dried beans and dry salted fish in the 4x4 vehicle. Meat came from the butchery in Karoi. Until that time came, however, I was *the butcher.* I was the supplier of all manna from heaven!

Because of the ever-greater difficulty in getting bushbuck we were forced to resort to other devices. I tried hunting further afield but that was a futile exercise. The game animals that had survived the anti-tsetse campaign were just too few and too widely dispersed. We tried the next best thing. At Zook's suggestion I used dynamite to blast one of the river pools. We recovered enough fish in one series of blasts to feed the camp for two weeks.

There was a small supply of dynamite left over from the road blasting work. We put the last of the *lady-sticks* to good use to help fill our empty bellies.

Under Zook's instruction and his watchful eye I tied two sticks of dynamite together. I then tied the dynamite to a fist-sized rock using raw string made from the inner cambium bark of a msasa tree.

The safety fuse was encased in a tarred sheath and it burned, even under water, at the rate of two feet per minute. I cut one-foot lengths of fuse and crimped the aluminium detonators onto the fuse ends with my teeth. I inserted the fuses, detonators first, into holes I made with a sharp stick in the ends of the dynamite. Using the butt end of the same stick I tamped the soft dynamite tight around the fuse cords. Each two-stick homemade grenade was fashioned with just one fuse.

Zook and I selected a large pool in the river just above our camp and we calculated the number of explosions we would need to cover the whole water body. I then walked along the edge of the pool lighting the fuses with a

burning *cheesah stick* (fuse igniter) and lobbed eight of my grenades one by one, in a long line, into the middle of the pool. They sank to the bottom trailing serious dribbles of smoking bubbles from the burning fuses.

The grenades detonated one after the other with heavy dull thuds. Each explosion lifted a fifteen-foot wide column of water about one foot into the air. The explosions appeared like flat white mushrooms on the pool's dark surface. The instant shock waves reached both banks of the river. With every explosion a white flash radiated through the water from its epicentre. A second or two later the water returned to its normal dark hue suffused with clouds of mud from the river bottom.

Immediately following each explosion dead and dying fish of all shapes and sizes floated to the surface. Slowly they drifted on the current down towards the shallow rapids at the bottom end of the pool. There the entire labour force was strung out across the shallow part of river waiting and ready to pick the fish out of the water.

By far the biggest number of fish were small minnows. These we would have lost altogether had not Zook had the foresight to prepare and to use our two mosquito nets like huge filters to catch the small fry as they drifted over the rapids.

This left our mosquito nets stinking of fish even when they were later dry. I never used mine anyway. I never worked on the Angwa during the rains when the mosquitoes must have been a plague. In the dry season there were none.

For a couple of hours everybody in the camp was occupied harvesting the fish we had killed. Large and medium sized fish soon lay in piles on the riverbank. Bucketful after bucketful of minnows were heaped on the tops of empty maize sacks.

The water in the pool cleared when the current swept all the disturbed mud from the river bottom over the rapids. We could then see still more fish lying white belly up on the bottom of the pool.

"O.K. you guys," I said to the native labourers. *"Now we go fishing for the big ones."*

What do you mean? They wanted to know all the details before committing themselves.

What I meant, of course, was that we should all now enter the water and retrieve the biggest fish of them all, those that were still lying stunned and belly up on the river bottom. This would have required us all to enter the

main pool and to dive down to the bottom.

The labourers would have none of it.

Aikona! Was their unanimous response. *No! Not a damn!* They all agreed that a big crocodile lived in this pool and many of them asserted to having seen it just the previous week.

But hadn't I just shot the croc? I cajoled them.

No! Came back the firm and general reply.

"There is another ngwenya," one man assured me earnestly. *"It is much bigger than the one you killed. I have seen it with my own eyes. It lives in* this *pool…." H*e emphasised the pool he was talking about by repeatedly poking his forefinger towards the water we had just blasted. His eyes looked meaningfully into mine. Clearly he *really* wanted me to believe him.

The others agreed. They began talking to me all at the same time, each one trying to convince me. Their voices were just one cacophony of loud noise.

"Nonsense," I assured them all. *"There are no more crocodiles in any of the pools near the camp."* And that I truly believed. *"Anyway,"* I continued, *"the blasts from the dynamite would have killed any crocodile that might have been in this pool."*

That statement convinced nobody.

"O.K.," I said, getting annoyed. *"I can see you are all just a bunch of old women. I'll do it myself."*

I prepared an empty burlap sack by attaching a rope to one corner of the open end, and I placed some heavy rocks inside. The other end of the rope was held by one of the natives who stood on the riverbank. I took the sack in my hands and I waded deeper and deeper into the water. The heavy weight of the rocks quickly drew me to the bottom and as long as I held onto the sack it held me down there. I began collecting the truly big fish that lay dying on the pool floor.

The fish were not yet dead just heavily stunned. They would undoubtedly have expired in time but when I picked them up they were still working their gills and fanning their pectoral fins. It was an easy matter to find them, to pick them off the bottom and to put them into the sack. None of them tried to break free from my grasp. This told me they were really very far-gone.

I came up regularly gasping for air. The men on the bank repeatedly pulled in the sack to unload the fish I had collected. Most of the time I could

stand on the bottom whilst I was waiting for the sack to be thrown back to me. I could keep my head above the surface, therefore, without having to swim or to tread water. So the pool was not all *that* deep.

When the sack was returned to me I went down to collect yet more fish. Again… and again… and again…

Very soon I found myself totally out of breath. I forced myself to rest on the bank. But not for long! Inside fifteen minutes I was at it again. I could still see hundreds of white bellies on the pool floor and I wanted to collect them all.

Blasting fish with dynamite was illegal and it was highly destructive. We were all hungry, however, and I didn't want *any* of those big fish lying on the bottom to go to waste.

I *really* needed some help but nobody volunteered to join me. I continuously cajoled the staff. It made no difference. The whole native labour force stood glumly about on the riverbank watching my every move. They were no doubt waiting expectantly for me to be taken by the crocodile they all firmly believed lived in the pool.

Zook sat back in his home-made deck chair near the water's edge. He said nothing. He just watched. My .22 Hornet loaded and ready to fire lay across his knees. Had the crocodile attacked me I doubt the rifle would have been of much use. At least the old man was showing willing!

I had recovered perhaps half the fish in the pool and I was busy loading up those that were lying on the bottom in the middle, when I encountered the crocodile. Contrary to what my staff had said he was not *quite* as big as the one I had killed. Even so he must have been fully twelve feet long.

The croc was certainly big enough to make a meal out of me. He was lying doggo right on the bottom in the deepest part of the pool and must have known all about my presence in the water from the very beginning. He did not move until I almost touched him.

I was totally absorbed in picking up and bagging as many fish as I could before being forced to rise to the surface for more air. I had been engaged collecting fish all about the croc's head for fully half a minute before he erupted from his position. I hadn't seen him at all until that sudden explosion of movement and energy sent him racing away. He moved like a torpedo in express gear. His tail lashed me across my lower ribcage punching me painfully in the stomach. The smack and the heavy swirl of water rocked me backwards. The captured air in my lungs burst out into the water through my

mouth.

My mind froze.

I was in instant denial. This could *not* be happening to me. Almost lazily I began to understand that it *was* happening to me. It *really was* happening to me!

Slowly, or so it seemed, the truth sank into my torpid mind. For a brief second or two I watched the pale cream of the animal's belly as it raced away into the dark greenness of the water beyond. It was a sobering moment. It told me I was *really* and *truly* in bed with the big crocodile the men had warned me about.

I can't describe clearly enough the cold intensity of the icy panic that then enveloped my soul. For a brief moment in time both my mind and my body had frozen. Then suddenly all my faculties were free. My mind was awhirl. Instinctively I kicked off the bottom and burst to the surface.

I have no recollection of the many people who were standing around the pool watching me. I remember seeing the riverbank far too far away. I remember thinking that my arms and legs were not working fast enough to get me to safety. Gone now were all my pretences. Gone was the youthful bravado that had driven me into that pool in the first place.

The Christian bible tells us that two thousand years ago a man called Jesus Christ *walked across the water*. On that day I did better. I *flew* across the surface of that Angwa River pool. I used my arms, my legs, anything and everything I had that could move, to propel myself over and through the water as fast as I could go.

I scrambled through the shallows at the pool edge. I reached the bank and helping black hands hauled me onto dry land. I flopped down on my hands and knees. My chest was heaving. My stomach retched. The taste of bile flooded my mouth. It was over. I was safe.

My final recollection of that experience was the nervous laughter that then engulfed the labour force and the chatter of the men's excited conversation. Every one of them began clapping his hands. They were happy to be proved right and relieved that I had survived. *T.I.A. That is Africa!*

My meeting with the crocodile at the bottom of that Angwa River pool is one of the moments in my life that I shall remember forever. I now knew, for the first time, the meaning of being truly terrified.

Over the next several days I had a man watching for that crocodile. I wanted to kill it and to turn its hide into pocket money too, but we never saw

it again. I think the several blasts it had received from the dynamite was such a shock to its system that it put as much distance as it possibly could between our camp pool and wherever the river took it. I thank God it had been shocked by the blasts because had it not been severely stunned I am not sure if I would be here today to tell this tale.

* * *

I must have had a guardian angel watching over me during those long ago years of carefree and youthful exuberance. This story of my first *serious* encounter with a *large* crocodile is just one of many close encounters with Africa's dangerous animals that might have seen me dead. It wasn't that I was ignorant of what could happen to me if I went swimming in an African river. I was then just *stupid in the head* and imbued with the fatalistic faith that *it would never happen to me*. How my mentality has changed!

* * *

Just one year prior to this crocodile adventure a bachelor friend of our family, Ronnie Rankin, survived a crocodile attack on the Nyaodza River at a place that is now deep under the waters of Lake Kariba. At that time the great lake had only *just* started to fill for the first time.

Ronnie was several years older than my father but he and I had a mutual interest in wild birds so we became very good friends. I visited him several times in the Salisbury general hospital after the crocodile attack and I later went *birding* with him again too. On the occasion of those hospital visits I was still an Officer-Cadet in the Royal Rhodesian Air Force.

Ronnie was under doctor's orders to go on holiday. He suffered from an irascible temper which, the doctor told him, had given him a niggling heart condition. The purpose of the holiday was to calm him down and to relieve his inner tensions.

Go fishing, the doctor encouraged him. *That should do the trick!*

Ronnie journeyed to Kariba in his Land Rover station wagon from his farm at Macheke. My father had once worked as a farm manager on Mere Estates in the Marandellas area, a farm not too far away from Macheke. That is how I got to know Ronnie Rankin.

Kariba is about 600 miles away from Macheke to the northwest.Ronnie was a loner so he took along with him only his old and faithful native servant, Mishek. They had gone on these kinds of expeditions many times.

When they reached the banks of the Nyaodza River, already swollen by

the slowly rising waters of Lake Kariba, they selected a campsite next to a large pool. Ronnie climbed out of the station wagon and immediately got out his fishing tackle. Settling himself comfortably in a deck chair at the river's edge he cast his baited line into the water.

Mishek, knowing the ropes well, busied himself unpacking the Land Rover and organising their frugal camp gear in an orderly fashion. There was nothing fancy about Ronnie Rankin's camps. He slept under the stars and made do with just the bare necessities.

Ronnie was tired after the long drive to the Nyaodza and it was not long before he dozed off. His bare feet were mere inches from the edge of the river. Behind him Mishek fossicked about organising the camp.

Unbeknown to either man a crocodile in the river had been watching these goings on from a distance. When the initial hustle and bustle of their arrival had died down, the croc cruised closer to the dozing man in the deck chair. Recognising its opportunity the croc dashed in and grabbed Ronnie's lower left leg dragging him unceremoniously into the water. Ronnie shouted alerting Mishek in the camp behind him. But there was nothing Mishek could do.

When Mishek saw his boss being pulled into the water he panicked. He ran to the Land Rover and grabbed Ronnie's rifle pushing a round into the breech. He raced to the water's edge but Ronnie had by then disappeared. The crocodile had pulled him right under the water.

Mishek remembered that on their journey to their own campsite they had passed another group of white fishermen who were camping downstream. They were about one mile away. He took off in a panic running as fast as his legs would carry him to seek their help.

Whilst all this was going on Ronnie Rankin was pulled right down into the murky depths to the bottom of the river. There the crocodile held his leg tightly in its jaws. It lay quite still on the bottom waiting quietly and patiently for its prey to drown. This is standard procedure for crocodiles. It is exactly how they kill *all* their terrestrial prey.

Ronnie always carried a sheath knife on his belt and he had the presence of mind, even under these dire conditions, to take the knife out. He ran his hand down his left leg until he encountered the crocodile's head. Then, tracing his fingers over its head, he located one of its eyes. The croc did nothing. It just lay sublimely still waiting for its prey to expire.

The croc's victim was not about to oblige without a fight. Carefully and

slowly Ronnie brought the point of the knife to within a hair's breadth of the croc's eye. Then, suddenly, he stabbed the blade viciously into the eye socket. He pushed hard, penetrating the crocodile's skull as deeply as he was able. This was something the croc did not expect.

The blade jammed in the croc's eye socket. In a flurry the reptile released its iron grip on Ronnie's leg and it raced away to some other place on the riverbed taking the knife with it.

Ronnie surged his way to the surface and gulped in some fresh air. He then swam as fast as he could towards the riverbank, blood streaming from the multiple puncture tooth wounds in his lower left leg.

Just as he was scrambling onto the bank another croc attacked him, taking him this time by the left arm. He resisted the crocodile's attempts to pull him back into the river by digging his heels into the hard mud beneath his feet. But *this* croc was not about to let go.

With a heavy lunge the croc snapped both the bones of Ronnie's forearm. It then twisted and twisted and twisted in the water, spinning its body round and round and round until the flesh of the lower arm, which was held firmly and securely in the crocodile's teeth, separated from the upper arm. The crocodile then disappeared into the river seemingly satisfied with the hand and the lower part of Ronnie's left arm. This gave my injured friend the opportunity to properly escape to higher dry ground.

He staggered towards his Land Rover with blood pouring from his severed arm, and with blood running out of the multiple tooth wounds on his leg. He shouted for Mishek. At that moment Ronnie Rankin needed his native servant's help most desperately.

There was no response. Mishek was long gone. He was at that moment running for all his worth towards the campers a mile away downstream. This left Ronnie with no one to help him.

With his mind still bemused by shock the truth slowly dawned on him. Mishek was gone. Gone where Ronnie did not know. Nor did he know why. But he knew now that he was alone. He was alone with a torn off arm and a badly lacerated leg. He was losing blood fast. How could he carry out repairs to his damaged body without Mishek's help? A feeling of hopelessness enveloped his soul.

He shouted again, more loudly, getting angrier with every passing second. There was still no answer.

Where the hell is he? Where the hell is Mishek?

Ronnie Rankin was a brave, strong and a resourceful man. He was soon, also, a very angry man. He was angry at the crocodiles. He was angry at himself for being so stupid as to fall asleep at the water's edge. He was angry at Mishek for disappearing at a time when he needed him like never before.

The doctors later told him it was this anger that had probably saved his life!

The first thing Ronnie did was to put a tourniquet round the stump of his lower left arm. The bleeding was profuse. He knew he had to stop the bleeding as quickly as possible. This he did with a piece of fishing line, cutting and tying the line with just one hand.

The bleeding continued. To stop the bleeding he pushed a table fork from his camp kit under the loose fishing line tourniquet and he twisted it round and round tightening the line with every turn. He kept turning the fork until the bleeding stopped. He then tied the fork in position with a handkerchief.

He looked at his leg wounds. The tooth puncture holes were still bleeding but they were not gushing blood. The blood was just oozing out and he guessed the flow would slow down as time passed. He decided to ignore his leg wounds.

Ronnie understood that he had to get to Kariba Hospital. If he didn't get to hospital soon he knew he would die. In his panic, suppressed though it was, he completely forgot about the campers just one mile away downstream! In his state of traumatic shock all that he could think about was getting himself to Kariba hospital.

With nobody to help him, Ronnie Rankin drove his Land Rover along a rough bush track that led directly from the Nyaodza River to the main Kariba road. The bush track was at least five miles long. Once on the main road, which was still a dirt road in those days, he turned towards Kariba village at the dam wall. The hospital was still thirty miles away.

En route to Kariba Ronnie saw one of the dam's big construction lorries coming towards him. These lorries plied the 500 miles between Salisbury and Kariba every day to bring cement for the construction of the dam wall.

When he saw that big lorry approaching Ronnie's mind and body began to relax. For the first time since the attacks he felt light headed and ready to pass out.

He stopped his Land Rover in the middle of the road and got out. His head was spinning. His sight was blurring. As the lorry approached closer he

stood in the middle of the road and waved it to a standstill. The native driver of the truck leaned out of the window and stared down in disbelief at the bloody apparition below him.

Ronnie explained what had happened and politely requested that the driver leave his truck where it was and that he should drive him to Kariba Hospital in the Land Rover. He would die Ronnie explained, if he did not get to hospital *very* soon.

"Haaiee," the man exclaimed, shaking his head. *"I am sorry, baas. I cannot do that. I will be fired. I have been instructed to stop for nobody when I am driving this lorry."*

I wish I had the words to explain just how Ronnie Rankin, in his hospital bed, looked and described to me how his anger flared at that response.

What happened next took the lorry driver completely by surprise.

Ronnie, his eyes now flashing in anger, reached up with his one good hand and he wrenched the door of the cab open. He pulled the driver out of the vehicle and proceeded to try to beat the life out of him.

And he lashed him with his tongue.

Cowed into submission by this attack on his person and on his integrity, the driver was persuaded to abandon his lorry and to drive Ronnie to Kariba hospital in the Land Rover.

A year after this attack, after being convinced by experience that the perpetually septic tooth puncture wounds on his leg would never heal, and after being continually in and out of hospital, Ronnie Rankin finally agreed that the surgeons should amputate his mutilated left leg. This they did just below the knee.

Much later in life a medical doctor friend of mine, Colin Saunders, told me that this is what surgeons refer to as *earning* one's amputation. The surgeons, he said, had *known* that Ronnie's leg would have to be amputated from the very beginning. They also knew that their patient did *not* know this. Colin explained that under such conditions *if* the surgeons had cut off Ronnie's leg immediately he would, for the rest of his life, have wondered and worried that the doctors could have saved it.

The time to carry out a limb amputation, Colin told me, was when the patient *understood* that the surgeon had done everything that he could to save the limb. It is also important that the patient understood that it was better for him to have an artificial limb that worked than his own limb that didn't.

It took a year for Ronnie Rankin to *earn* his amputation.

Ronnie Rankin survived this improbable experience and quickly adapted to life with two artificial limbs. In later life I once accompanied him in his Land Rover when he drove through Salisbury city. He drove like the lunatic he had become, angrily cursing everybody who blew their horns at his fast, erratic and dangerous driving. I survived *this* experience and vowed, *Never Again!*

The doctors never again told Ronnie Rankin that he had a heart condition or that he should go on a fishing holiday to relieve his inner tensions. He has long ago passed on to a better fisherman's paradise, dying, eventually, of old age in his bed.

* * *

I often saw leopard tracks on my hunting excursions so I knew the big cats were about. Zook and I spoke about them often. We sometimes heard them grunting and *sawing* in the night. I never encountered a leopard during my many hunting forays and they never came near the camp… until one night near the end of my stint on the Angwa.

I shot a bushbuck doe high up in the Nyashire ravine. My soft-nosed bullet entered the animal's temple so there was a profusion of blood at the kill site. I gutted her in the field leaving just the liver and the heart and lungs inside the body cavity. Thus lightened, I lifted the carcass across the back of my shoulders and trudged my way back to camp. I inserted my thumb into the bullet's large exit wound to help me hold the carcass in place.

I dumped the bushbuck on the edge of the River Styx and cut out the remaining innards. I kept the liver for Zook and myself and gave the heart and lungs to our native camp cook. The cook and I then strung the carcass up by its back legs over the River Styx on the end of a long piece of 8-gauge wire. It hung there from a branch to one side and high above the footbridge ready to be cut up when the meat was cool in the morning.

I was drenched with blood and gore and stinking from the offal. I collected my soap and a towel and walked down to the river. I did not bother to remove my canvas hunting boots or the anti-buffalo bean long pants that I always hunted in. I splashed right into the rapids clothes and all.

I lay there relaxing and soaking in the warm running water. My feet were wedged against two boulders and, with my head resting on another, I just let the water flow over my body to wash off the muck. After a hard hunt lying there in the warm river water was pure ecstasy.

After a while I removed my clothes and leisurely washed my naked body. Then on a rock in the rapids I washed the blood and guts from my clothes.

Clean and refreshed I walked up the path back to the camp terrace with the towel wrapped around my waist. I left my wet clothes, festooned to dry, across the canopies of the many bushes that grew at the water's edge.

That night I slept like the dead. I was awakened at first light by the raucous clatter of the Natal francolins that roosted every night at the bottom end of the River Styx. I sat up and stretched my mind already occupied with thoughts of an early cup of coffee.

Then I saw the pug marks. They were all around my bed. My heart clicked into top gear. It thumped loudly inside my breast and pulsed heavily in my ears!

I quickly looked round the camp. Was the leopard still with us? Nothing! It had come and gone sometime during the night. Only then did I relax. Still sitting quietly amidst the blankets on my palliasse I examined the spoor in greater detail.

The leopard had crossed the footbridge over the River Styx. It must have seen the bushbuck carcass and realised that it truly was beyond its reach. It had then walked boldly into camp examining everything of interest. My imagination told me it had wandered about the camp like a giant tabby cat. The closest footprint was no more than a hand's breadth from the edge of my bed so the leopard must have had a good sniff at my body and at my face before wandering off back across the footbridge.

I back tracked the big cat as best I could on its incoming spoor. It had followed the trail of blood droplets left behind when I had carried the bushbuck into camp.

This was the one and only time we ever had a visitation from a leopard.

Its close proximity to me that night exhilarated rather than alarmed me. In Africa one rarely hears of a leopard attacking an adult human without provocation. So I knew, or rather felt that I had really been in no danger from our close encounter.

* * *

One afternoon, a week before I left the Angwa, I hunted the valley behind the camp looking as usual for bushbuck. I walked up the Nyashire gorge then moved up the southern hillside to a saddle in the hills that overlooked the adjacent drainage. I had walked this route many times.

The saddle overlooked one of those rare gentle basins amidst the hills

that bushbuck loved to frequent. The veld had been burnt clean so the aspect was wide open. There were patches of green grass sprouting from the black stubble in the hollows and I knew that, in the evenings, bushbuck liked to venture out into the open here to get some of the green bite.

I approached the rim of the saddle cautiously. Without exposing myself I lay down flat on my belly and crawled to the lip of the basin. I lifted my head very slowly to scan the vista below. Only the top of my head protruded above the rim.

On my left side there was a small dry stream. It ran diagonally down the slope to the middle of the basin creating a shallow vee in the topography. It fetched right down to the much bigger, but equally dry watercourse below.

Near the top of the stream there was a waterfall. It was dry at the time. During the rains the water dropped vertically over a solid rock precipice, perhaps twenty feet high, into a puddle of pebbles. This was all encased on the upper side by a curved wall of sheer rock that formed a horseshoe amphitheatre.

There were a number of large trees growing inside this secluded hollow together with tall elephant grass and sundry brush that had not been burnt. The bottom of the waterfall, therefore, provided a pocket of heavy cover that was nowhere else available within the basin. I had flushed many a bushbuck from that hidden jewel of thick cover in the weeks gone by.

I had learnt to be patient when indulging in this kind of still-hunting. I lay there quietly on the pebbly ground, slowly, gently and quietly removing those several uncomfortable rocks and sticks that lay beneath my body. All the while I took my time scanning the scene below.

On the stream bank at the bottom of the basin there were three huge ebony trees. Beyond the ebonies, on the other side of the watercourse, there was a heavy thicket of *Combretum* bushes. A small pocket of the infamous Zambezi *jesse*!

Bushbuck liked those thickets. They often emerged from them at last light to feed on the regenerating green grass in the basin. The maximum range to any possible target was a hundred and fifty yards. I knew that if a bushbuck came out onto the open flats it would be in our camp larder come nightfall. All I had to do to get one, if they were about, was to wait and to watch.

There was no time left to begin another hunt elsewhere. I had nothing to lose, therefore, so I determined to just lie there and to wait out the rest of the

daylight hours. An hour of daylight remained. If no animals emerged before nightfall I would just walk back to camp empty handed. I loved being alone like this in the late evening so whatever happened I knew I would enjoy the experience.

I had been lying there watching, waiting, and listening for perhaps fifteen minutes when I *felt* rather than *heard* subtle sounds coming from the dry waterfall on my left front. I focused my attention in that direction and confirmed the soft noises I had detected.

The sounds were familiar yet strange. They were out of place in that wild environment. What I heard sounded just like a dog gnawing on a bone. I strained my ears. I heard a grunt.

Bushpigs! There are bushpigs in the little thicket at the waterfall!

A bushpig would do! I imagined, in a flash of frivolity, a cooked bushpig lying on the camp's bush pole table with an apple in its mouth.

I held my breath and shut my eyes. I focused all my senses on the sounds I was hearing. Bushpigs? No! It sounded much more like a dog.
But there were no dogs here on the Angwa.

I sensed a soft quiet growl. It was a pleasurable contented insinuation. It was the sound a dog or a cat makes when unhurriedly enjoying a meal. It was deeper and much more resonant, however, than the growl of a dog. The sound instantly raised the hackles on the back of my neck.

It was a leopard! It could be nothing else. *There was a leopard in the waterfall thicket feeding on a kill!*

The moment I was sure what it was I was hearing the adrenaline began to pump. All over my body my nerves were suddenly aquiver. My hands began to sweat and to shake and all the other familiar symptoms of juvenile buck fever became immediately manifest. The excitement, the adrenaline high that ran rife through my body was indescribable.

At that stage in my life I had never seen a leopard. Nevertheless, I had read all about how terribly dangerous these big cats can be when wounded. I had read many tales about the terrible maulings that hunters have suffered after they had incautiously approached a leopard they thought they had killed. All these thoughts and ideas ran round and round in my head as I lay there on the brink of the ridge and listened to the miniscule sounds of the leopard feeding. Most of the sounds were so soft and so faint that, had I drawn my focused attention away from the dry waterfall, I would not have heard them.

A black-headed oriole flew across the valley and perched on a treetop

above where the leopard lay feeding. The bird's golden breast shone brightly in the sunlight. No sooner had it landed than it gave vent to its strident, piping call. Its loud voice totally swamped the gentle sounds the leopard was making.

It didn't matter! I now knew the leopard's whereabouts and because it did not know mine I understood implicitly that I held the hunting advantage.

After a while the bird flew away.

Slowly my excitement waned. As the buck fever subsided my mind began to function more constructively. I was very conscious of the fact that I had only a .22 Hornet in my hands. The calibre was totally unsuitable for leopard hunting but the tiny bullet was capable of killing a leopard if it hit a vital organ. There was really little difference between the size of a leopard's body and that of a bushbuck and I had killed many a bushbuck with this weapon. To kill the leopard all I had to do was to place the bullet correctly. The question was how was I going to get close enough to do *that* without being detected? How was I going to get close enough to place my tiny .22 Hornet bullet into one of the leopard's vital organs?

The leopard was somewhere below the rim of the waterfall. I imagined it to be lying on the edge of the dry pebble pool or even in it. Wherever it was I would have to approach right to the edge of the rocky precipice to see it. One thing was certain, if I could not see the leopard I would not be able to shoot it.

The ground between my position on the rim of the basin and the edge of the waterfall was bare red brown earth. It was covered with a myriad of small rocks and round pebbles and the stubble of burnt elephant grass.

I pondered the possibilities. There was no way I was going to get to the edge of the waterfall without the leopard hearing me. I had read somewhere that a leopard's hearing is eight times more acute than that of a human. One false move, one *snick* of a shifted pebble, one rasp of a foot on a stiff piece of burnt stubble and the leopard would be instantly aware of my presence.

Trying to approach the waterfall was out of the question.

I could wait and hope the leopard would finish its meal and move out into the open but deep inside my heart I understood it would still be feeding there come nightfall. Even if it did finish its meal soon I had also read that big cats with full bellies were inclined to lie about the kill site and rest. I knew instinctively that the leopard would *not* emerge from the thicket before nightfall.

The sun disappeared behind the mountain ridge in the west. Time was running out. If I was to kill this leopard I had to make a plan fast. I racked my brain. The vegetation had been burnt bare all around the waterfall. If I could contrive a way to get the leopard to move out of the thicket I would be able to shoot him as he moved across the open veld! That was the only solution I could think of. I had to *force* him to move out. It was my only chance.

I levered a flat stone out of the soil in front of my face. It was about the size of the palm of my hand. It would do admirably for what I had in mind. Slowly, quietly, I rose to my feet. I was confident the leopard would not be able to see me from where it was hidden below the waterfall and I needed to stand up to get the leverage I required to hurl the rock. Gripping the projectile between thumb and forefinger I sent it flying through the air down the slope. It travelled like a discus floating on the air and landed about a hundred yards away down the hillside.

I dropped back into my supine position and was well hidden again by the time the rock hit the ground. I pulled up my rifle, flipped off the safety catch and made ready to fire my shot.

The rock hit the ground with a soft clattering sound. I was disappointed. I wanted the noise to be louder. But I could not change what I had done. All I could do now was to make myself ready for the time the leopard would leave the waterfall thicket.

Nothing happened. I listened attentively. There were no longer any feeding noises coming from the thicket. All I could hear was silence! All I could sense was stillness!

I did not know what to expect but was ready for anything. I imagined the leopard slinking off up the hillside stopping once to look back. That would be my best chance. When it stopped! In my mind I just *knew* it would stop. Just once! I waited patiently. Nothing happened.

A flock of Natal francolins began their clattering calls in the jesse thicket beyond the bottom stream. They were answered by another covey higher up the gorge. A purple-crested lourie *churred* intermittently from a tangle of creepers growing in the canopy of one of the ebonies. A flock of crowned hornbills flew by voicing their piping calls. There were other more subtle noises coming from the bush all around.

These were all messages that indicated everything was quiet and peaceful in the valley below. None of them were alarm calls. They were social calls. I believed that if I could interpret them as being innocuous so

would the leopard. Still nothing happened. Still silence reigned.

I began to think I would have to throw another rock. Maybe I should lob a stone directly into the waterfall thicket itself?

No! That would not do. Intuitively I knew that would not do.

Patience! I must have patience! I discarded the idea of a second missile.

One minute led into the next. For a full five minutes there was neither sound nor movement from the waterfall thicket. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, the leopard heaved itself silently up the trunk of one of the big trees.

The impression the leopard's movement left me with is still very clear in my mind. There was a primary sense of the animal's immense power. The big cat moved with such lack of effort. It was full of grace. It leapt straight up the tall trunk of the tree as though it was running over a flat piece of ground! What impressed me the most was the absolute silence that accompanied this task. There was not so much as a whisper of sound. Not one single tearing scratch of a claw. Not even the suspicion of dislodged bark pieces hitting the ground. Nothing! The leopard's leap had been executed with no audible noise whatsoever.

My quarry was now up the tree. It stood on a lateral branch looking down into the valley below. Despite all the other homely sounds it was hearing the leopard had understood one thing. Something quite large had dislodged the stone that I had thrown. It could not afford to ignore the possibilities of a new prey animal nearby or a potential source of danger.

The leopard was a big tom. I could clearly see his testicles standing out under his tail. He was perched up there on the lateral branch, broadside on to me, in full view. The white tip of his tail swung gently to and fro. His head turned first to the left then to the right. He was looking down the valley towards where the stone had landed. *And he was only fifty yards away!*

I was shaking imperceptibly, quivering softly inside, as I brought my iron sights to bear on that beautiful body. I set the tip of the front post just behind the leopard's right shoulder and I brought the flat top of the rear U-sight up until it was in line with the tip of the post. The foresight was snug in the rear sight's U. Taking up the first pressure on the trigger I drew a deep breath. This was my first personal and *real* adventure into the realm of big game hunting.

Suddenly my body started shaking like a leaf in the wind. My mind was awhirl. Doubts there were aplenty. Would the tiny .22 Hornet soft- nose

bullet do its job? Was I being irresponsible in attempting to kill a leopard with such a small calibre bullet? None of these doubts really mattered because I *knew* I was going to do it. I was *going* to shoot this leopard come hell or high water. *He was mine!*

Ripples of goose pimples ran up and down my spine. The hairs on my forearms stood up like hedgehog quills. Ever so gently I squeezed off the second pressure on the trigger.

The rifle barked. The leopard's body jerked. The big cat turned. It seemed as if it was going to try to execute a controlled descent of the tree. Then it lifted its head high and tumbled backwards off the branch. There followed a most terrifying period of growls and roars that I had ever heard. The animal was clearly in a rage. I could hear its body thrashing about amongst the canes of the elephant grass in the thicket beneath the trees. Then, just as suddenly as the angry noises began, complete silence returned to the land.

I lay on my belly and did not move. I had already ejected the spent shell and pushed another round into the breech. I was ready should the leopard emerge from the thicket and come in my direction. I was ready to shoot it again if it ran in any other direction.

I lay as if frozen. I did not want to betray my location by either sound or movement.

My eyes were the only part of me that moved. They canvassed every nook and cranny about the waterfall. My ears were attuned to catch the slightest vestige of sound. Even just a whisper! Nothing! There was not a sound.

Down in the valley below me the francolins were now quiet. The crack of the rifle and the reverberations of the report up and down the gorges had long since died away. Its message conveying the hunter's presence had been heard. Every animal and every bird within hearing distance of that shot was at that very moment, like me, standing or sitting or lying perfectly still. They were all listening with great attention.

The minutes dragged on one after the other. Still the silence reigned. I was reluctant to move for several reasons. Firstly, I did not want to betray my whereabouts just in case the leopard was not dead. I had no desire to be attacked by an irate wounded leopard with only a .22 Hornet in my hands. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I did not move because I was

deeply afraid.

I thought of slipping down into the Nyashire gorge behind me and making my way back to camp leaving the leopard to lick his wound or to die from it if he was not already dead. I could borrow Zook's double-barrelled shotgun and come back with that much more appropriate weapon. But the sun was by then long gone. There was not enough light left in the day to get to camp and to get back to the waterfall again before it was dark.

What to do? Five minutes dragged into ten. As each minute passed the darkness ever more insidiously impressed its mark on the land. Already the whole valley below me was in the shadow of the mountains. Soon it would be too dark to see my sights. I did not relish the thought of me still lying there when total darkness came. If I was going to do anything at all I was going to have to do it soon.

It was with great reluctance that I rose from my super flat position on the rim of the basin. I stood there on the high edge of the valley sticking out now like a sore thumb. I looked down towards the waterfall thicket. My mind was racked with indecision. The minutes continued to drag by one after the other. There was still not a sound from the thicket. I began to believe the leopard was dead. I hoped and prayed with great fervour that it *was* dead. There was no reason to believe that it was still alive. I felt confident that my tiny bullet had found its mark. I was sure the projectile had flown true. Still I was afraid to venture any closer to the waterfall.

I could not stand there forever! Steeling my nerves I slowly picked my way over the stony ground moving ever closer to the top edge of the waterfall. Each step I took rang loudly in my ears. If the leopard was still alive I knew it would be listening to my every footfall. I could hear my own footsteps even before I made them! Fear gathered in my throat. It threatened to choke me but now I was on my way I was not going to stop.

I reached the waterfall and timorously looked down over the top edge of the precipice. Nothing moved down below. I could see nothing. I could hear nothing. I inched closer, leaning forward, my rifle ready. Down in the pebble-filled bowl below me I saw the carcass of a young bushbuck. I moved closer to the cliff edge and looked down at its spotted red coat. I examined it carefully. A large part had been eaten.

I looked up at the tree locating the branch on which the leopard had been standing when I shot it. I looked down beneath the branch to the place where the leopard had fallen. Down on the ground the grass and the bushes were

thick. The shadows were now very dark. I could see nothing even from my elevated position. There was no dead leopard. There was no live leopard. I still did not know the fate of my quarry!

There was one consolation. If the leopard *was* still alive it would have trouble getting to me up the small cliff that separated me from the thicket below. That fact gave me some confidence.

I picked up a rock and lobed it into the thicket. It crashed through the brush and hit the ground. Nothing moved. There was not a sound. I picked up another and threw that one into the bushes, too. Still nothing moved. Either the leopard was dead or it was stoically hiding.

The coming darkness worried me but I did not know what to do. I would have been a fool to venture into the thicket at this time of day on my own. Should the leopard attack me and should I be badly mauled there was nobody to help me. Furthermore, nobody knew where I was except that I was *somewhere* in the labyrinth of gorges that lay behind the copper claims. I was also forever conscious of the fact that I was armed only with a .22 Hornet.

Discretion proved the greater part of valour. I decided to wait until morning. I would then come back with a gang of native boys and with Zook's shotgun in my hands. Buckshot would be a safer bet than the tiny Hornet bullet.

I backed off from the waterfall. Edging my way slowly and cautiously I walked backwards all the way to the rim of the Nyashire gorge. I retreated quietly over the saddle and hurried down the ravine back to camp. Once out of the danger zone a huge feeling of relief flooded through my mind, body and soul. I felt as though I had been given a new lease on life.

I did not sleep much that night. I worried about my leopard. I did not know if it was dead or just wounded. And I was anxious about the morrow. I faced the prospect of going into that thicket to look for the leopard I had shot. The thought filled me with terror.

Early the next morning I press-ganged four men from the labour team and armed them with pickaxe handles. I took Zook's double-barrelled shotgun. At his suggestion I loaded it with SSG. Zook offered to come and back me up with the Hornet but I declined his offer.

I looked down into the thicket from the top edge of the waterfall precipice. In the clear morning light I could see everything so much better. But I could *still* not see my leopard, dead or alive. I lobbed rocks into every conceivable position that I thought might conceal my quarry. I got no

reaction.

Was the leopard dead? Was it lying down there wounded? Had it slipped away sometime during the hours of darkness to lick its wound in some hidden retreat far away? These were all questions that I asked myself as I looked down into the waterfall thicket that morning. I had an answer for none of them.

I breathed a deep sigh. It was filled with apprehension. I could do nothing now but go down into the thicket and search the underbrush at close quarters.

We walked as a gang down the slope to the bottom-edge of the amphitheatre.

None of my native companions was prepared to come into the thicket with me. They stood their ground outside the thicket edge their pickaxe handles ready. That was as far as their support stretched. I must say I couldn't blame them.

My heart was in my mouth and racing fast when slowly, and with great trepidation, I stepped into the peripheral edge of the thicket. Once I was through that mental barrier I stood still for several long minutes and stared into the heavy brush. My inexperience was playing games with my imagination. My wide-open eyes were everywhere. My ears were dead. All I could hear was the sound of my pulse thumping away loudly inside my eardrums.

I walked deeper, ever so slowly, ever so quietly into the thicket. Each step was an agony of precision. Ahead of me was the tree up which the leopard had climbed the evening before. My eyes flicked into the upper branches. They returned immediately to the ground. The leopard would be on the ground! I probed every nook and cranny that I thought might hide a leopard.

I reached the base of the tree. The bush here was much thicker than I remembered it. My eyes probed the surrounding undergrowth. They searched everywhere. Nothing!

The remains of the bushbuck were still lying at the base of the waterfall. My whole body was quaking. My nerves were sticking out like porcupine quills.

I stood perfectly still. I remained like that for a long time and quietly looked around. Nothing! Then, just as I was about to turn away to check the base of the cliff, I saw him.

The big cat was lying on its side on the bank of the stream. Its body was so obvious I wondered why I had not seen it before. The second I recognised one small patch of the spotted skin the whole body was exposed to me as clear as daylight. Up to that moment the black rosettes on the golden hide had melded completely with the sun-dappled patterns of the surrounding bush.

The leopard was dead. I could see that at a glance. Looking up to the branch on which I had shot it I realised that it must have been dead inside half a minute from the time it hit the ground. It was not more than ten yards from the base of the tree from which it had fallen.

I examined the body carefully. My bullet had hit the leopard behind the shoulder at the exact spot where I had aimed. I later confirmed that the tiny bullet had shattered the animal's heart. If I'd had the nerve to search the thicket the evening before I would have recovered my trophy then. But it did not matter. The skin was in excellent condition. No fur had *slipped*. The long wait throughout the night had had no bad effect on the skin whatsoever.

The boys recovered the bushbuck carcass for themselves and they carried the leopard's body back to camp. There I skinned my trophy. I pegged the skin out with thin wooden stakes all around the edges on the flat ground of the camp terrace. The flesh side was uppermost. I covered it with a layer of coarse salt. It was dry within a week.

My father paid to have the skin tanned professionally and I gave it to my mother. It was the first of many leopard and lion skins that in later years adorned the sitting room in our Karoi farm family home.

At that stage in my life I had shot several kudu and duiker, some oribi and steenbuck, and one sable antelope. I had also shot lots of bushpigs killed with a shotgun in the maize fields on the farm, without a torch, on moonlit nights. But it was the period I spent on the Shamrock, on the Angwa River, which kick started my *real* big game hunting career. It was a hunting career that was to span the next thirty years. If I'd had a crystal ball my mind would not have believed the extent of the big game hunting experiences it would have shown me were still to come.

* * *

A week later the drone of a motor vehicle's engine broke the peace and quiet of the Angwa River valley. That was the exact moment in time when everything changed for that very special piece of wild Africa. Nothing on the Angwa would ever be the same again.

I heard the Land Rover's labouring engine just before lunchtime, long

before it reached camp, as it negotiated the steep incline and the narrow track that I had constructed down the mountainside to the Nyashire River crossing at the bottom. Ten minutes later it stopped on the hilltop just above the camp.

My job on the Shamrock was done. Two days later I returned home with Mike to our family farm at Karoi. I was sorry to leave. My eyes were wet with tears as I said goodbye to Zook. He was a very special old man and my short sojourn on the Angwa with him had been a very special experience. I never saw Zook or the Angwa again.

THREE

Macaha

WHEN one door shuts another one opens!

Early in January 1959 I saw an advert in the newspaper. The UK Atomic Energy Authority was looking for a Field Assistant. His job was to supervise the fieldwork of it's about to commence beryllium survey of Southern Rhodesia. Beryllium is a metallic element related to the emerald!

The work involved supervising native labour gangs working on major beryllium deposits deep in the bush. The successful applicant would be required to follow the instructions of a qualified geologist who would make periodic visits to the sites. Trenches had to be dug at measured intervals across each ore body. One hundred-pound samples of ore, taken at regular intervals from the sides of the trenches, had to be collected, weighed, labelled, bagged and sent to Salisbury every week. This was not unlike the kind of work I had been doing on the Angwa. One last stipulation was that the successful applicant would be required to live alone in the bush without any European companionship.

I got the job.

At that time the UK was continuously refining its nuclear power plants. New ideas and new technologies were evolving all the time and the problems encountered in each new process had to be resolved. One of those problems was that the material the British were using to make the crucibles in which their enriched uranium fuel was contained, emitted either electrons or protons during the production of nuclear energy. This generated either negative or positive electrical charges that had to be constantly fed off the reactors. Beryllium, they had discovered, emitted neutrons and neutrons gave off no problematical electrical currents. The authority wanted to determine how much beryllium there was available in the producer countries of the world. Southern Rhodesia was one of them. That was the purpose of my work.

As it turned out the UKAEA resolved their problem in another fashion. The work we did to determine the extent of Rhodesia's beryllium reserves, therefore, was abandoned midstream. This did not matter to me because my seven months of employment with the authority took me into some very remote parts of Rhodesia and it allowed me to pursue my hunting ambitions. During this period I hunted another five leopards and my first elephant.

The story of one of those leopard hunts and the story of the elephant hunt

are worth telling.

Macaha, pronounced Ma-kha-gha (the "gha" guttural), is located some eighty miles southeast of Mtoko town and not far from the Mozambique border. Macaha is the native name given to an undefined piece of country north of the Nyagadzi River. In 1959 Macaha was wild.

The countryside is characterised by huge granite mountain ranges and jumbles of many small granite hills. Most of the large animals of the area had also been recently shot out in an effort to control the spread of the ubiquitous tsetse fly. Game animals were relatively few. The survivors, however, were multiplying and slowly repopulating their old haunts.

Within days of my arrival at Macaha I shot a very nice waterbuck bull. It was eaten by a nomadic troop of lions before I could muster a team of my native labourers to collect the meat. This supported my early conclusion that there were more wild animals at Macaha than there had been on the Angwa, including predators.

There were old and abandoned beryllium workings at Macaha called *The Good Days Mine*. This was the focus of my operations.

I lived in a canvas tent in a heavily wooded area high up in the hills above the mine. My fifty strong native work force was housed in half a dozen large dormitory tents constructed of bush pole frames covered in giant tarpaulin sheets. We kept our food supplies and sundry equipment in several smaller tents. Our water was brought to camp in large water bowser trailers that we replenished twice a week from a nearby clear water stream. A five-ton lorry, among other things, pulled the water trailers. It also took the ore samples to Salisbury two hundred and fifty miles away, once a week.

I was supplied with a Land Rover to carry out my daily duties.

My superiors were British executives who had not grown up with, nor understood, and probably did not agree with, the *modus vivendi* in colonial Rhodesia. They surmised that our native labour force, all recruited by them in Salisbury city, and did not like the isolation and the lack of social amenities so deep in the bush. It must be said, however, that the men understood just what their working and living conditions were going to be when they signed on. Nevertheless, in the tradition of British fair play, our general manager insisted that everybody in our employ should not have to work on Saturday afternoons or on Sundays. This head office decree was designed to

accommodate the natives' so-called *social* needs.

This was an unusual luxury that the labourers exploited to the full. They disappeared *en masse* into the local tribal areas every weekend. It was a long fifteen-mile hike to the nearest native villages but that did not daunt them.

Some of the men engineered extra days to prolong their weekend binges.

Every man was required to dig a trench thirty feet long, three feet deep and three feet wide every day. The soil was loose and gravelly so this task was not difficult. It took the average labourer between six and eight hours to complete. They called their tasks their daily *mgwazo.* I insisted that everybody complete five and a half *mgwazos* every week.

Most of the men completed their weekly *mgwazos* in five days. The stronger ones finished five and a half mgwazos in four days. This gave the stronger men *three* free days a week to indulge themselves on *wine, women and song*.

Consequently, the camp was deserted except for two camp guards every Saturday and every Sunday.

The inevitable happened. The local whores geared themselves to satisfying the men's needs and no sooner did we arrive at Macaha than the men fell victim to sexually transmitted diseases. Gonorrhoea and syphilis were the two main infections.

This required that I travel the eighty-odd miles to Mtoko once a week to take my patients to the local government clinic. I left them there for a week, for six daily injections of penicillin, and I collected them the following week. When I recovered the *cured* men I delivered another batch of sick men who required the same treatment. This medical necessity impinged so heavily on our scheduled work programme that I considered recruiting more labourers. It was the only way that I could be assured of having enough men on hand to get the work done.

Driving to and fro between Macaha and Mtoko every week was both wasteful of my time and debilitating of my energies. It also wore down my nerves and it shortened my temper. No matter how much I tried to replace the weekend leave with overtime work and extra financial incentives, which would have kept the men away from their infected ladies of the night, my British head office would hear none of it. The men deserved their weekends off, I was told, especially if they worked very hard during the week, which they all did. I knew very well, however, that the men would have *preferred* the extra money!

The medical officer in charge of the Mtoko government clinic was not a qualified doctor. He was a veteran army medic who had escaped with the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk in France at the beginning of World War II. He had served in the British Army throughout the war. After the war he emigrated and came to Southern Rhodesia as had many other British servicemen. My own father was one of them! The *doctor* at Mtoko was, therefore, a highly talented paramedic with lots of practical experience. He sized up my problem in no time at all.

He gave me a short course of instruction on sexually transmitted diseases. He also explained the wonders and the dangers of penicillin and how to use it. Then he gave me a box full of procaine penicillin bottles and a handful of syringes and needles. Thus armed he sent me back to Macaha.

Curing the labourers of their STDs after that lesson was child's play. Those who thought they were infected reported to me in the mornings. They stood in line and dropped their pants to let me have a good look at their *chongollollos*. I soon became an expert at diagnosing syphilis and gonorrhoea and I recorded my findings on a form that my medic friend had provided.

Then came the penicillin injections. One a day for six days. Every day I had between five and ten patients lined up outside my tent waiting for their *jekshons.* They had great faith in the white man's magic *muti* (medicine) and it became my first task after breakfast to dish it out.

I was nineteen years old! In those days providing such medical benefits to native people was not an unusual task for young white lads in Rhodesia. It was part of the process of growing up, of cutting one's teeth, in colonial Africa.

Thanks to my administrations of penicillin the native staff had their weekend recreations sorted out. They were *very* happy with the new medical arrangement. None objected. They accepted my treatments with quiet composure and they went about their old and merry ways every weekend. Friday nights found most of my men back at the tribal villages prepared for their next re-infections.

There was nowhere for *me* to go over weekends. There was nowhere that I *wanted* to go. The camp was *dead* on Saturdays and Sundays. So I walked the surrounding countryside flat with my rifle over my shoulder.

I explored the Nyagadzi River and followed it down to its confluence with the Ruenya River on the Portuguese Mozambique border. I covered

huge areas but saw very little game. Nevertheless, there were game tracks everywhere.

Bush buck were plentiful in the mountain gorges and there were klipspringers on the mountainsides. I resumed my old Angwa hunting tactics and kept my paraffin refrigerator and the camp deep freeze filled with venison.

And there were leopards!

There were, in fact, quite a lot of leopards and it was not long before I became actively engaged in hunting them. Besides walking the Nyagadzi valley I also traversed the countryside nearer to the mine. My purpose was to determine just how many leopards there were and where they were living. After my first leopard hunting adventure on the Angwa I developed a huge yen for hunting the big cats.

I had nobody to teach me about leopards or about how to hunt them. All I had to support my efforts was my reading of big game hunting books, a dogged determination and simple common sense.

I discovered the easiest way to find where the leopards lived was to walk the dry streambeds below the mountain range. There I searched for and easily found their many footprints in the soft dry sand.

I baited the areas where I saw the most tracks. This was easier said than done. The wild animals most readily available for baits were baboons. There were plenty of baboons. The trouble was they were wary and as wild as all hell. It was extremely difficult to get within rifle range. Consequently my quest for leopards turned into a major hunting effort to kill baboons and other animals all of which I used as bait.

When I shot a bushbuck or klipspringer I cut the carcasses in half behind the ribcage. I kept the back legs and the saddles for myself and, despite the protestations of my native staff who wanted the meat, I laid out the forward part of their bodies as bait.

Every animal that I killed for bait was taken down to one or another of the many dry streambeds that ran off the mountainside. There each carcass was wired to the base of a tree, or it was wired to the fork of a sloping tree trunk, and left for the leopards to find. I prepared each bait in such a place that I could overlook it from a convenient shooting position amongst higher rocks nearby.

Every now and again a blue vervet monkey filled the place of a baboon.

There were also baits comprising domestic dogs!

Although we were fifteen miles from the nearest native settlement, village curs regularly visited our camp in the night to raid the tents for food. So common were their vagabond visitations that it was impossible to keep a three-legged stockpot going at Macaha without wiring the lid down firmly at night.

The dogs were skin and bone, as most village pariahs are in Africa, for they are rarely fed by their masters. The only way they can survive is to hunt and to scavenge. The dogs belonged to nobody out here in the wilds and they were far away from wherever it was they called home. At the Good Days Mine they were in no-man's land and we had every right to protect our property. The fact that I wanted bait for the leopards, of course, was purely coincidental!

One afternoon a rabid dog came into camp. Contrary to what I had expected a rabid dog would do, it did not run around trying to bite people. It staggered about falling down often. Most of the time it just lay panting on the ground. Its eyes were glazed and vacant. When it moved it wandered about in a disorientated fashion. Saliva foamed at its mouth and it left long dribbles of slimy mucus on the ground wherever it went.

The natives vacated the camp immediately the dog arrived. They shouted instructions to me from a distance.

"Shoot it. Shoot it," they cried, *"before it bites somebody."*

They clearly knew all about rabid dogs. They knew more than I did. *This* was the first animal with rabies that I had ever seen.

I wasn't, however, entirely ignorant. I knew the veterinary research people diagnosed rabies by examining the animal's brain. I shot the dog through the heart and took it in a paper cement bag directly to Mtoko where the nearest government veterinary officer lived. Later he confirmed what we had all suspected. The dog *had* been rabid.

After that incident all the dogs I shot were very carefully handled. Nevertheless, at times, dog baits were more numerous than those of baboons. Anything and everything that crept or crawled and that I could catch or shoot was laid out as bait. Even hares and monitor lizards (leguaans)! It was my theory that the more animals I could supply the leopards to eat the more complacent would they become on the baits.

Every morning I sent one of the labour gang down to examine the baits. If he returned to tell me that a leopard had eaten in the night I would be lying

in wait for its return later that same afternoon. Macaha leopards, once they had fed off a bait, would invariably return to feed again the next night and the night thereafter especially if I was *not* in attendance. It seemed it was a matter for the Gods to decide whether or not the leopard would return and give me the opportunity to get a shot at it.

I was always settled into my ambush position by four o'clock in the afternoon. This gave the sun time before nightfall to burn off the scent of my passage. I took along with me one of the native labourers. It was his job to carry the Land Rover's battery to our shooting post. Metal crocodile clips fastened the wires of a bright spotlight to the battery terminals.

I used my canvas camping valise with its one-inch thick felt inner mattress as my ground sheet. We took blankets and cushions along too. I quickly discovered that the more comfortable we made ourselves the quieter and the less restless could we wait out the long hours it often took before the leopard arrived.

Sometimes it was a long wait. Sometimes the leopard only came to the bait in the early hours of the next morning.

More often than not when I was waiting up over a bait the leopard *never* came at all. Yet once or twice it arrived before dusk. The first leopard I shot at the Good Days Mine came down to the bait an hour before sunset. I was able to kill it cleanly using open sights in ordinary daylight. I never used a telescopic sight for *any* kind of hunting. In fact, I had then never *seen* a telescopic sight!

Most leopards arrived at the bait after dark and before nine o'clock. We then had to use the torch to see our quarry.

Today it is considered unethical to hunt leopards at night with a torch. During the period when I hunted leopards at Macaha nobody considered there was any other way. Consequently, most of my leopard hunting was carried out at night with the aid of a powerful spotlight. As you will learn from my stories not all the encounters I had with leopards at night were the cinch that some people believe them to be. Hunting leopards at night can often be just as exciting as hunting lions in thick bush during the day.

Once leopards have been seriously hunted and once they understand the danger represented by the scent of man, they become one of the most difficult of all animals to kill. If they have survived poisoned

or gin-trapped kills, gun-traps, and/or a misplaced shot by a hunter sitting over a bait, they learn not to come back to even their own kills. Thereafter they will kill, eat once and never return. They will then kill something new when they are again hungry. Such leopards will shy away from a spotlight the moment it is switched on. All these survival behaviour patterns are quickly learned. We say such leopards have been conditioned *by man.*

Killing un-conditioned leopards, on the other hand, is one of the easiest things in the world to do. They regularly come back to bait and they often arrive before the sun has set. I once killed such a leopard, long after Macaha, whilst I was putting the finishing touches to a bait at two o'clock in the afternoon. This was a fortuitous encounter that caught us both by surprise.

I now consider it to be less ethical to shoot an unconditioned leopard over a bait before the sun has gone down than to shoot a thoroughly conditioned leopard at night with a torch. It requires infinitely more hunting skill to engineer the killing of a thoroughly conditioned leopard, whether it is killed during the day or after dark, than it does to kill a relatively tame and unconditioned pussy cat over a prepared bait from a hide or blind at dusk.

A thoroughly conditioned leopard will never come to a bait that has been prepared by man. As I stated above, the most experienced conditioned leopards don't even come back to their own kills. This means leopards that are killed in the so-called ethical manner are most certainly all unconditioned animals.

In today's world the hunting and the killing of a leopard during daylight hours seems to be the criterion that declares the hunt to have been ethical. The so-called ethical standards that have been prescribed for the hunting of leopards in modern times, therefore, are in my humble opinion highly pedantic.

The number of dud nights I experienced at Macaha was uncanny. None of the leopards here were conditioned! Yet, even on a fresh bait fed on but once the leopard sometimes *never* returned. I sat up over many a bait for two and three nights in a row and never saw hide nor hair of the leopard that had eaten upon it. Yet the very first night that I stayed back in camp the leopard returned and fed heavily off the by then stinking carcass.

It was not long before I realised that these leopards must have come very near to the baits every night we were in attendance but they had then either seen us, smelt us or heard us. They had then declined to come in closer.

Leopards are naturally cautious creatures. They slink silently into the vicinity of their food and normally don't move directly onto even their own kills. They first sass out the country from a vantage point up a tree or from an elevated position on a high rock or anthill before coming down to the carcass. Stealth is the leopard's constant companion and they are past masters at its use.

They also use nocturnal temperature inversions to their advantage. During the day the hottest areas are located in the valleys. The colder areas are then on the hillsides above. At night the reverse applies.

At night the movement of air is more stable than it is during the day. Without the sun to warm bare areas on the ground, which generates localised wind currents and convoluted breezes, there is a more stolid flow of warm air uphill and of cool air downhill. Wild animals, because they live with this phenomenon, know all about it.

This day/night temperature inversion operates right throughout the year. The contrast between the warmer air on the ridges and the very cold air in the drainage lines at night is much greater during the winter months.

It is no coincidence that on cold winter nights the antelope herds locate themselves on the warm ridges and the jackals, hyenas, leopards and lions patrol the lower lying colder drainages. The predators locate their prey and the carcasses of dead animals by picking up vestiges of their scent as it insinuates its way downhill on the perpetually cooling nocturnal air currents.

When I hunted the leopards of Macaha I was unaware of many things about leopard behaviour. I knew nothing at all about temperature inversion.

I now believe the leopards of Macaha often detected our scent in the cold air that drifted down the drainage lines at night. If they didn't smell us they saw us from the elevated positions they used to silently scan the countryside before coming down to the baits. They may also have heard us moving about or whispering to each other. One way or another they learned of our presence!

There is no other explanation for the many unproductive nights we experienced sitting up over the baits. It also explains why the leopards came down to the baits nearly every night when we were *not* in attendance.

This kind of bush lore does not suddenly happen. It inveigles its way into a hunter's soul only after many repeat exposures. Slowly the realisation becomes ever more apparent until the hunter simply *has* to acknowledge the reality of what he has come to understand is the truth.

Bush craft is *not* instinctive. It is a gradually learned wisdom. It is no wonder that the hunters who have the greatest experience are those who exhibit the strongest so-called *hunting instinct.*

The fact that the leopards nearly always came down to the baits on the very first nights after we stopped sitting over them unnerved the primitive souls of my native labourers.

"Loh ingwe yena pupilleh" the boys would say. *The leopards dream when you will be there.* Others said that either the leopards or I had been *loyila-ed - bewitched*. Their solution was that I should consult a witch doctor of their ken to have the spell removed.

The weeks passed and the leopards grew fat on our baits. Then we would strike it lucky. One of the big cats would come down to a carcass and I was able to shoot it. *The spell has been broken* the pagans then stated emphatically. We would thereafter, however, fall back into the old failure pattern for which nobody had an adequate answer.

* * *

Even though I hunted the leopards of Macaha extensively and over many months only one of those hunts is worthy of permanent record.

A large leopard had fed off a baboon bait that I had prepared right on the edge of the sandy bed of a small dry stream. The carcass was tied with 8-gauge wire to the base of a tree.

Directly opposite the bait, across the stream, there was a small dwala - a bald granite dome - the steep side of which reached right down into the streambed itself.

A large slab of rock had exfoliated from the dwala. It had peeled off in a two feet thick sheet from the ball-like parent rock. This is a common phenomenon in granite country. It is called *the onionskin effect* because the curved slab of detached rock looks exactly like the outer fleshy layer of an onion that has pulled away from the parent bulb.

The huge rock slab had detached thousands of years ago. It had slid down from near the crest of the dome and its base had long ago settled into the sand of the streambed at the bottom. During this process the slab had tilted away from the solid rock dome beneath. Over the millennia the gap

between the loose outer shell and the parent granite rock had filled up with weathered rock chips and dead lichens. This primitive gravelly soil had become vegetated with bunch grasses and small bushes.

The rim of the exfoliated rock slab rose some three feet above the flat soil base behind it. It thus formed a solid wall of granite behind which Jorjo, my native companion for the night, and I waited for the leopard to return.

The gap between the solid granite dwala at our backs and the parapet of sheet-rock in front of us, was four feet wide. This was wide enough to accommodate our meager personal *katoonda* comfortably. The bait below was less than fifty yards from the top of the rock wall. It was a perfect ambush position.

We were settled by four o'clock in the afternoon by which time we had cut out the grass and shrubbery that was in our way. I spread my canvas valise along the ground behind the parapet. The Land Rover battery was in position and the crocodile clips secured. We checked the spotlight. It worked perfectly. Jorjo and I then settled down to wait out however long it would take for the leopard to return.

We sat with our backs to the sun-warmed dwala behind us and with cushions beneath our bottoms. I had prepared sandwiches and a flask of sweet tea which Jorjo and I shared just before dusk.

I had graduated by that stage to a Husqvarna 9.3mm x 62. It was a beautiful little rifle with a full Mauser action. That night the magazine was loaded with soft-nose ammunition. I pushed a round up the spout and checked the safety catch one last time. Then I placed the weapon up against the rock wall on my right hand front side. There it was out of harm's way but still within easy reach.

Jorjo sat on my left-hand side. To his left was the battery and the spotlight all properly connected. It was Jorjo's job that night to hold the beam of the spotlight on the leopard whilst I used the rifle to shoot it. He had done this before so he knew exactly what to do. Just before we settled down we rehearsed the routine one last time.

Then we waited!

Dusk turned into darkness. The developing chill of the night forced us to wrap our blankets round our shoulders. The two of us sat there, silently, each lost in our own thoughts. Periodically I lifted my head slowly above the parapet and stared down at the carcass. I listened rather than looked for I

could hear much better than I could see. Every time I did this I found everything to be still and quiet. Then I returned to my recumbent position and continued my vigil.

I became absorbed by the fascinating sounds of the night. Faraway down the valley a spotted eagle owl hooted. Nearby a scops owlet *burrrupp-ed* at five second intervals. Four different species of nightjars called from various places all around our position. A side-striped jackal *hwaah-ed.* All these sounds meant something and everything to me. I could visualise each and every species as it vocalised in the night.

There was no moon. This is a good factor when hunting with a torch. Anyone who has hunted with a spotlight at night knows that little success is achieved when there is a bright moon shining. Bright moonlight reduces the intensity of the spotlight's reflection in every animal's eyes. It also provides enough natural light for the quarry to see *something* of the hunter moving behind his spotlight. Bright moonlit nights, therefore, are not good times to wait up for leopards. The darker the night the better. I have aborted many a moonlit night's hunt because I discovered it was impossible to close with the predator I was hunting.

Although there was no moon the stars shone brightly. I looked for the constellations and the planets that I knew. Orion's Belt. The Southern Cross. Mars and Venus. I have always wanted to know more about the stars. I guess I would have learnt more had my need to know been greater.

I dozed off.

Just after eight o'clock I woke up. The awakening was abrupt. I sensed the leopard's presence. I cannot explain how or why. I just *knew* the animal was close at hand. It was that much vaunted sixth sense coming into play. It is part and parcel of what I have described as *the hunter's instinct*. Maybe it *is* instinct! Maybe it is not! Maybe the hunter subconsciously hears a footfall or picks up a scent that he does not even know he has detected.

I do not believe in mystical things and magical wands. There *must* be some betrayal of the animal's presence that the hunter absorbs without him realising how he does it. There is no other explanation for the certainty that the hunter feels when he *knows* that his quarry is nearby.

This was my first experience of this remarkable sensation. That night I *knew* the leopard had arrived. I was not conscious of having heard anything. I had smelt nothing. I had seen nothing. I was crunched up half-asleep, half-lying on my back with my knees drawn up in front of me when the notion

suddenly erupted.

I leant over and tapped Jorjo on the arm. He started at my touch. He, too, had been dozing.

"Sssssshhhhhh." I cautioned him.

Slowly I unwound my cramped and stiff body. In the darkness next to me I could feel Jorjo doing the same thing. Quietly I lifted my rifle off the rock wall. I was now ready for the leopard.

In tandem our two heads lifted gently above the parapet. We stared down towards the bait.

The stars were bright but not bright enough for us to see much. Directly below me the curve of yellow sand in the dry streambed was silvery-white in the starlight. The stark outline of the tree was a black silhouette. The tethered carcass of the baboon was just a dark splodge. Everything was a monochrome patchwork of black and gray shadows in the silvery light. There was no movement. Movement in the shadows would have told me the leopard had come down to feed.

I stared down intently towards the bait focusing all my senses on the site where the dead baboon lay waiting.

The leopard growled. This confirmed my intuition. I now *knew* it was close at hand.

The sound was guttural, slow, continuous and very loud in my ears. Each syllable, each cadence, was well separated from the next. The air all around vibrated with the resonance.

My body began to tremble. The tremors in my hands were soft but vibrant. The adrenaline was running high. My heart was beating thunderously. There is nothing quite like the tremendous *high* one feels at the peak of a potentially dangerous hunt. This is the essence of hunting. There is no drug like it!

I looked intently down at the bait. There was no question now that the leopard had arrived. I had never heard a leopard growl like this before. But I was in no doubt that what I was hearing was a leopard's growl. The sound was very, very loud. It seemed to be coming directly from the bait site but I could see nothing. There was no movement. There was no extra shadow down there that had not been there before. I was perplexed.

The growls grew louder. They were now agitated, angry growls.

"Ah!… Ah!…" Jorjo exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. *"Yena fani-kalo motabike."* *It sounds just like a motorbike*.

It did indeed. The leopard's growl sounded exactly like the slow beat of a single cylinder motorcycle engine. The remark was so unexpected and so apt I had to smile. I have never forgotten that moment!

I could still see nothing. The growls continued. They grew in intensity. I could feel that the big cat was getting *really* angry. This both puzzled and frustrated me. I was tempted to tell Jorjo to use the torch but I did not want to expose ourselves until we had pinpointed the leopard's position.

I readied myself with the rifle slipping the safety catch off. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the dull chromium shine of the spotlight in Jorjo's hands. He too had got himself ready. He was now prepared to act the moment I gave the command.

The growls continued. They sounded all the time ever more angry. The resonance was so loud it caused the hair at the nape of my neck to rise and to fall repeatedly. The hair on my arms was standing erect like the bristles on a brush. Goose pimples ran up and down my spine. My whole body began to quake. My excitement was at its peak. Fear and anticipation totally swamped my consciousness. Even so my mind functioned normally. My nerves, although tight and excited, were under control.

I turned my head directing my right ear towards the carcass. I knew that by rocking your head from one side to the other, so that each ear has a chance to focus independently on a particular sound, you are often able to better locate it.

I did not get a chance to present my left ear! When I inclined my right ear towards the bait it was my left ear that picked up the sound.

Instantly I understood. The leopard was not in front of us. It was on the rock directly above and behind us. In a flash real fear gripped my soul.

I whipped round immediately recognising the silhouette of the leopard above and behind me. It was standing on the rock just a few feet away looking directly down at us. For an instant I saw its ears standing out like erect labels against the pale starlit sky.

The moment I turned the leopard dropped to its belly. Its ears flattened. It hissed loudly like a cat hisses when confronted by a yapping dog. I saw all this happening, clearly but in outline only, against the backdrop of the starlit sky.

It all happened in a flash of understanding for I was, at the exact same time, turning and bringing my rifle to bear.

I did not aim. I could not aim in the darkness without the light. I had no

time to aim. As the butt of the rifle hit my shoulder I pointed the muzzle at the leopard's profile and pulled the trigger. The butt kicked heavily. There was a bright muzzle flash of red/white light. I was rendered instantly night blind. The recoil knocked me back against the parapet wall.
I fell heavily onto my bottom.

I jacked a fresh round into the breech.

I sat crouched in my granite slot looking blindly into the now total darkness above me. My rifle was pointing up the hill. I was ready to fire again at any sound.

Jorjo panicked. At first he did not know what was going on. Then, suddenly, he too understood the leopard was directly behind us. Not waiting a single moment to discover the result of my shot he took to his heels. He ran for all he was worth along the slot away from me. For the first few yards he carried the spotlight with him ripping the crocodile clips off the battery. Then he stumbled into a heavy bush and dropped the torch.

The sound of Jorjo's rapid departure lasted only a few seconds. He managed to get about ten yards along the thin line of brush behind the parapet wall before he tripped and fell flat onto his face. There he lay. Still! Listening! In the silence that followed his spontaneous departure his heavy and frightened breathing came to me out of the darkness. That was *all* I could hear.

The leopard's growls had stopped.

I sat on my bottom with my back now solidly against the exfoliated rock wall. I had turned right around. I faced uphill. My rifle was at the ready. I waited. I was hyped up high! I was prepared to react. Nothing happened.

Away in the distance reverberations from the rifle shot echoed through the hills, rolling up and down the valleys. When its energy expired complete silence reigned. The birds and the jackals were all now quiet. Except for Jorjo's heavy breathing not a sound came out of the encompassing black void of the night.

Neither sound nor movement came from the rock above me. I did not move. I sat still and quiet and I listened. I strained my ears. My heart pounded.

After a while I became conscious of a quiet gurgling noise. It sounded like running water. It was coming from close at hand and from just above me. Splashes of liquid fell onto my arms and face. It was warm. It smelt like blood. It *was* blood. The trickle became a deluge as the gore started to fall

onto me in a solid cascade.

I remained silently staring into the night above me ignoring the blood. Slowly my night vision returned. More and more quickly the rock above me took shape again. I could see no leopard.

Still the blood came running down. It was obviously coming from the leopard. Sensing the leopard was dead I stood up, grabbed my valise and dragged it to one side away from the stream of gore.

"Jorjo," I called softly, not taking my eyes off the rock above me.

"Jaah Baas?"

"Bring the torch."

"Hauw!" he replied softly. *"I have lost it… is the leopard dead?"*

"Yes... at least I think so. Bring the torch, dammit. Quickly."

"Hah! I have lost it, Baba."

"What do you mean you've lost it?"

"I dropped it somewhere here in the bushes."

"Well find the damn thing," I replied angrily. *"Quickly."*

I was standing now my rifle trained at the rock above me. The blood continued to run down the granite into our position but I was, at that stage, standing to one side of the deluge. My now much bloodied valise and blanket lay crumpled at my feet.

Jorjo began fossicking about amongst the bushes. He was muttering to himself.

"Hah," he exclaimed at last. *"I got it."*

"Well... switch it on," I demanded impatiently.

"I cannot do that, Baas," he replied. *"It is not fixed to the battery."*

"Well re-connect the bloody thing," I almost shouted in exasperation. Getting what I wanted out of him was like pulling teeth!

There came the sounds of the springs on the crocodile clips being compressed. There were scraping noises of hard metal on dull metal.
Then, suddenly, the night was filled with an astoundingly bright light.

"Shine it up on the rock, "I commanded. Jorjo turned the beam towards the rock above us. It stopped dead on the carcass of the leopard.

The leopard lay no further than four feet from the end of my barrel. I imagined it had been further up the rock when my bullet hit it. Its body must have slid down the steep slope towards us! I really could not conceive that it had been *that* close to us when I fired my shot. But it *might* have been! The

impression I was left with, from my recollection of the size of the animal's silhouette, was that it was some fifteen feet away when I pulled the trigger. Whatever… Wherever…. The leopard was now clearly dead!

My hands were shaking from the sudden release of tension, relief that the confrontation had come to an end. Whether the encounter had been a close call or not is anybody's guess. I don't think the leopard would have attacked us. I think it had simply come to the higher elevation above us to look down over the bait site. It had probably wanted to make sure the coast was clear before going down to feed on the baboon carcass below.

I am sure the leopard was just as much surprised at finding us in the crevice as we were surprised by its sudden appearance directly above and behind us. I sincerely believe that had I *not* shot it when I did the leopard would have hurried away from us over the dwala.

The bullet had penetrated the leopard's right eye without damaging either eyelid. It exited from the back of the skull. The exit hole was a large and ragged gash. It was a lucky shot.

The hunt had been one hell of an experience!

* * *

I do not consider Tony van Jaarsveld's shooting of the elephant at Kazungula as *my* first elephant. It was shot with my rifle, yes! It was my initiation into elephant hunting, yes! But I really had nothing to do with the animal's killing.

The death of the elephant I shot at Macaha, on the other hand, had everything to do with me.

The story of this my first elephant hunt illustrates just how much of a novice I was in those days. Messy, unfulfilling and inconsequential though this hunt may have been it is the foundation upon which I must, perforce, construct the chronicle of my elephant-hunting career.

This story does not do me credit. Neither did it bode well for my future as an elephant hunter. All great things, however, have small and sometime inglorious beginnings!

I had seen the spoor of elephants on the Nyagadzi River. Not a lot but enough to excite my sensibilities! The large size of the footprints and the obvious absence of baby animals suggested to me they were all bull tracks.

I attempted several times to track these elephants remembering how easily the native tracker at Kazungula had followed spoor. I discovered it was

not so easy. When I tried to follow the seemingly fresh tracks that I found on the Nyagadzi I quickly lost them every time. It was just too confusing. I was never sure if I was following todays or yesterday's tracks, or even older sign from the day before. And sometimes the tracks seemed to simply disappear into thin air.

Trying to follow those elephant tracks on the Nyagadzi was like trying to kick-start a dream. I so much wanted to be able to follow them, to find an elephant and to shoot it. The size of the elephant did not matter. The size of its tusks did not matter. All it had to be was *an elephant*. But it was not to be. It was not to be simply because I just did not have the ability to follow spoor.

The Nyagadzi elephants had a fearsome reputation. A well-known big game hunter had been killed by one not far from The Good Days Mine just two years before. This did not deter my spirit or my desire to hunt them. It merely added more hot spice to my already steaming imagination.

Just thinking about the Nyagadzi elephants left a wrangling uncertainty deep down within my soul and I thought about them all the time. It was a fear that would not go away. It was always there. Nevertheless, I *knew* that should the opportunity present itself I was going to shoot myself an elephant. Come hell or high water I was going to do it. It was something that I just *had* to do and on the Nyagadzi the pieces of the jigsaw were falling into place. I was so close to achieving my dream I could smell it. I could taste it. I could feel its realty. Yet it remained tantalisingly out of my grasp.

My native staff knew all about my burning passion for hunting. I often spoke to them, over the campfires we shared at night, about my particular desire to shoot an elephant. Therefore, when one day two of my labourers encountered two elephant bulls feeding in the woodland not too far from camp, they came running back to tell me.

I grabbed my rifle, stuffed a handful of solid ammunition into my trouser pockets and followed my guides to where they had seen the elephants.

I gave no thought to the fact that what I was planning to do was illegal. All that mattered was that, *at last*, I had an opportunity to shoot an elephant.

> *In 1959 a government license to shoot an elephant in a declared tsetse fly eradication area cost just two pounds. Macaha was one such area. Hunters were encouraged to take up these licenses because the government wanted all the game in these areas removed. In those days young men of my age were lucky if they commanded salaries in excess of thirty pounds a month. I was more than lucky. The UKAEA paid me*

seventy pounds a month so the cost of the license was not an issue. I could easily afford one. The fact of the matter was that on the day I ventured out to kill my first elephant I did so without a license. So what I was about to do was illegal. My killing of the leopards at Macaha was also illegal. Neither issue was of concern to me!

All my hunting in those days was, technically, illegal! I was, in reality, a poacher.

In those days I was an arrogant young man who listened to no one. Some say I have never changed! When my wife read these words in the draft text she scribbled a note in the margin saying the only difference between me then and me now is that I am now an *old* man and even *more arrogant*!

Arrogant or not, on that day I had sufficient presence of mind to heed the advice of my two native companions. They told me to be very careful and to approach the elephants from a downwind position. This was something that in the heat of the moment I had completely forgotten. They guided me in a roundabout way, taking cognizance of the wind, to the place where they had seen the elephants.

We walked hurriedly through the msasa trees. My guides seemed to know exactly where we were going. I tagged along behind. All the time I scanned the woodland ahead hoping to be the first to sight the big pachyderms.

All of a sudden the two men stopped. They stopped dead. They both turned and looked at me anxiously and in silence. One of them puckered his lips and placed a vertical forefinger in front of them.

Shuuuuuushhh! His warning was nervous, almost inaudible. He pointed silently with a quivering forefinger into the trees directly ahead.

I came up alongside the men and looked, cock-a-hoop, into the woodland beyond. The now very nervous but still pompous Big White Hunter was come to collect his trophy!

All I could see were tree trunks and the fresh green and yellow msasa leaves of early summer all tinged with red. There were tree trunks everywhere. The leaves came down from the treetops to about eye level. Above eye level the foliage was dense. Under the leaves I could see very clearly for perhaps a hundred yards ahead. There were no elephants!

*"Nanso!" There! T*he more talkative of the two men whispered hoarsely and with great emphasis. He continued to point with a quivering finger into the trees ahead.

I looked. I looked intensely. I could *still* see nothing.

"Nanso," he said again more urgently. *"Yena duzi… duzi". They are very close.*

At that moment one of the elephants took a step to one side. I saw its huge leg move. My heart popped up into my mouth! I had seen the elephant's legs all along but had mistaken them for tree trunks. They looked *just* like all the other tree trunks that surrounded us. Now, instantly, I saw both elephants. Their huge bodies were up amongst the higher branches and the leaves of the trees hidden from my view. I could not see anything of their heads and ears or their tusks, or their bellies. Just their legs!

I could now clearly see what were elephant legs and what were tree trunks. And, as my guide had just told me, they were close. Very close! Thirty paces at the most! What amazed me was the fact that I hadn't seen them until they moved. In retrospect, because they were so well camouflaged, I am surprised we did not literally bump into them.

In an instant my mind froze. It relaxed equally fast, with a twang.

The palms of my hands began sweating. I wiped them dry, one after the other, on the sides of my short trousers. To do this I had to transfer my rifle from one hand to the other. The sweating was a sign of my anxiety.

A very heavy tremour ran through my body. The instant I saw the elephants my heart began to hammer in my chest. It was pounding harder and louder than I had ever felt it work before. The shock of being thrust so unexpectedly and so very close to these two huge animals was so intense it was painful.

I had not understood just how big an elephant really is. Now I knew. They are enormous. These two towered like mountains above me.

I felt suddenly puny. Insignificant! I became instantly and deeply afraid.

I realised at that moment it was one thing to dream about hunting an elephant and quite another to make the dream come true. In a flash I developed serious doubts about my ability to see this hunt through. Did I have enough guts to *put my money where my mouth is?* Did I have enough guts to put my money where my mouth had been for many years! The moment of truth had arrived. I wasn't sure I could measure up to it.

There was the sound of wood breaking. The crack was like an explosion. It was so close and so loud in my ears it was tangible. A branch came down from the treetops to ground level. It was picked up by one of the elephants'

trunks. No sooner had the broken foliage appeared than it disappeared back into the higher branches. There was the *shushing* rustle of leaves. Then came the sharp crunching sound of the elephant chewing. It resonated loudly, strangely and incongruously in the otherwise absolute silence that shrouded the woodland.

I experienced a sudden and ignoble spasm of panic. All sorts of emotions ran riot one after the other through my consciousness. The elephants were far too close for comfort. *That* was the biggest problem. The confrontation had also happened far too abruptly. It had come out of the blue. I was not prepared for such a close and sudden encounter.

The elephants were also too damn big for me to wholly absorb. That was the second factor. Their huge size spun my emotional equilibrium out of kilter.

I looked around frantically. There was nowhere for me to hide. There was no safe refuge. I was standing virtually alongside two huge elephant bulls amongst a forest of puny trees. I felt overly exposed and very vulnerable.

Abruptly I submerged into my very first *real* funk. And it was a huge funk. It was a sudden, gigantic, emotional, physical panic! I never thought it possible to feel so helpless, so vitally afraid. It hit me right between the eyes!

I couldn't handle it. I *knew* I couldn't handle it. This had never happened to me before. I had always been able to do what I had set out to do no matter what.

What the hell was the matter with me?

I felt very confused. Hot and cold flushes raked across my body. I was flustered beyond belief. I was suddenly reduced to being a very inadequate, young, white and very humble colonial boy. I had not yet celebrated my twentieth birthday. I was too young to die! At that moment I understood just how fragile and precious life really is. I realised, instantly and without any doubt, that I was not immortal.

The sudden confrontation at such unexpectedly close quarters brought me down to earth with a very heavy bump. I changed instantly from the arrogant know-it-all and fearless young man that I always portrayed, to being the fearful, normal and tenderfoot teenager that I really was!

I had faced the world for years. I had been afraid of nothing! I had accepted even provoked life's many challenges. Now I could feel myself

retreating figuratively into my erstwhile secure baby crib.

I was ashamed. Here I was faced with the prospect of executing the dream of my life and it was beyond my capacity. I was angry with myself. I was frustrated but I was just *not* capable of bringing my dream to fruition. I could not even *think* about killing one of these huge elephant bulls. I was just too afraid.

"*Bwiya*!" *Come!* I said softly to my guides. I backed off moving quickly and directly away from the elephants. My two companions followed in my wake.

My heart was beating *really* wildly. The thumping pulse in both my ears was alarmingly intense. My breathing was shallow. My chest was constricted. My face blanched and then flushed. Indecision racked my brain. I needed time and I needed space to recover my composure.

My guides hurried after me.

"Eesoh!" This way! The talkative one spoke to me directly. He had recognised my craven funk and immediately took the initiative. I followed his lead like an obedient puppy. He led us in a swinging arc around the elephants' position.

We emerged from the woodland at the base of the mountain range south of our camp. My newfound native friend thus saved face for me. He had moved us all out of immediate danger without in any way implying that we should abandon the hunt.

He must have sensed that I was on the point of backing down from the challenge. I had even conjured up an excuse! I was just about to tell my two companions that my 9.3.mm bullet was far too small to kill an elephant! But I was not given the chance to use that excuse. Instead, my friend gave me other options. He gave me a chance to redeem myself. He gave me a chance to avoid telling a lie. Although the 9.3.mm bullet was small I knew it *was* adequate. I had read many stories of big game hunters who had killed many elephants with the comparatively light bullet.

My courage slowly returned. My timidity was replaced by embarrassment. What my guides had witnessed was absolute cowardice. They *must* have interpreted my unbecoming and hasty retreat from the elephants as nothing less. If that w*as* the case they would have been right. What I had displayed *was* abject fear. My lapse in masculine conduct was a major contradiction of my many big-mouthed campfire discussions about hunting elephants. These were discussions that had taken place on many,

many nights over the last several months.

"The elephants are walking this way," my friend explained. *"They will come on to us now. We must just wait here*."

The bush here was much more open than it had been inside the woodland. I would be happy, I concluded, if the elephants *did* come to us out here in the open. And, right behind us, there were some big boulders between which we could escape to safety if that was required. *This* situation was *much* better than it had been inside the woodland where there had been *no* funk holes to run into if danger threatened.

I was surprised with myself. I had discovered that I was really *very* frightened about confronting these huge animals! My mettle had been tested and I had been found wanting. I had not come up to scratch even in my own estimation!

We squatted down on our haunches and watched what we could see of the elephants as they moved through the trees. My embarrassment slowly dissipated. My composure returned. I now had other things to occupy my mind. I was determined to put right what I had so recently done so wrong. I now resolved that I *was* going to shoot one of these elephants! I steeled myself. I *was* going to do it.

The elephants meandered slowly towards us. After a while they stopped in the shade of a big msasa tree right on the edge of the woodland. They stood there in full view now resting desultorily in the heat of the day. Their giant ears lazily fanned their hot bodies.

One of them shovelled up a pile of soil with the toe of a front foot. He picked some of it up with the end of his trunk and threw it over his body. A cloud of brown dust drifted off in the light breeze. He did this several times until the pile of soil was all gone. Then he stood still and hung his head. His trunk stretched down listlessly a whole long length of it resting on the ground in front of him.

Then all was quiet. All was still. Both the elephants slumbered silently on their feet. They clearly still had no idea we were anywhere about.

The elephants were about sixty yards from where I was now sitting on my bottom. I felt much safer at this distance and under these circumstances. My two companions, when they realised I was preparing myself to shoot, silently retreated to a higher and safer elevation amongst the rocks on the hillside behind me.

Nothing was right. I felt uncomfortable sitting on my bottom. I stood up

quietly and aimed at the nearest elephant. Where was the animal's brain? I did not know. Furthermore, I couldn't hold my sights on target. My body was quaking so badly that my fear reverberated along the rifle barrel right up to the vibrating foresight bead. This would not do!

I made my way to a nearby jumble of boulders. There I sat down again and had another bout of second thoughts. I postponed my planned execution. I was still hesitant. I was still not sure that I could pull it off. For some time I watched the elephants at their siesta wondering just what I was going to do next. My mind was awhirl.

I was like the proverbial dog that barked at and ran after every passing motorcar. Now a car had stopped! Now the elephants for which I had been searching for so long were standing right in front of me. Like the yapping dog I was suddenly racked with indecision and confusion. Like the indecisive dog I was confronted with the big question: *What do I do now?*

Despite what appeared to me to be their enormous size I *now* know they were two young bulls and not very big bulls at that. They each carried two tusks of moderate size. They were completely at ease slumbering silently on their feet in the heat of the day. Every now and again one or the other would raise its trunk and rip a green sprig from the tree above its head and stuff the foliage into its mouth. Neither of them was interested in feeding. They were both much more content just standing still and dozing away the hot warm hours.

I watched fascinated. Other than the Kazungula elephant these were the only other wild elephants I had ever seen. Everything they did, therefore, was of interest to me. But at the back of my mind I knew I was procrastinating. I was putting off the moment of truth. Gawking at these elephants was not the purpose of my presence here today. Today it was my purpose to kill one of them.

I pondered: *How was I going to accomplish that?*

I *now* know these elephants were enjoying the tail end of their midday siesta. Inside an hour they would have ventured out on a serious afternoon's feeding spree. But on that day I knew nothing of such niceties.

Nevertheless I sensed the elephants would soon be wandering off. Realising this my mind quickly firmed on a decision. I was going to shoot my first elephant. I determined to waste no more time.

What I *should* have done was to walk up quietly to within a twenty yard range or closer but I was apprehensive about leaving the comparative safety

of the big rocks behind me. There was no cover for me where the elephants were standing.

Out of the blue I recalled something I had read in a hunting book. It was advice an old Scottish elephant hunter is purported to have given to his hunting protégé. He was a young man confronted, like I was now, with the prospect of shooting his first elephant.

"Go on, laddie," the old hunter had said. "Git in as close as ye can get. THEN GIT TEN YARDS CLOSER!"

I had read all the books. I knew all the rhetoric. I knew what had to be done. But there was no ways I was going to expose myself unnecessarily to these giant and dangerous beasts. My still lingering funk determined that I was going to have to shoot my first elephant from my present position.

My two native companions had read my mind. Indeed, they had interpreted my temperament that whole day to absolute perfection!

One of the elephants was standing broadside on to me. It thus presented me with a classic side-head brain shot. I knew this from my extensive reading of big game hunting books.

I examined the features of the elephant's head carefully. But where, I anguished, was the animal's brain?

I had a vision, in my schoolboy ignorance, that the brain lay somewhere between the elephant's eyes. This came from the old and false hunting adage: *Shoot him between the eyes!* The implication was daft. I could only see one of the eyes of the elephant I had selected.

It really did not help me to know that the side head-shot gave the hunter's bullet the easiest and the shortest route to the brain. It did not help me because I did not know where, exactly, inside the elephant's giant head its comparatively small brain was located. Not knowing where the brain was positioned was the most fundamental of all my problems.

In my mind the brain was my one and only target. I gave no thought to any other vital organ. The lungs, I knew from my other hunting experiences, were a very large and a very good target. The lungs were a very sure target. Tony van Jaarsveld had shot our Kazungula elephant in the lungs! On the other hand I had read that most of the olden day elephant hunters preferred the heart shot.

Clearly I was a brain shot man! It was the elephant's brain that stuck in my mind. It was the brain I was going to have to go for. All other considerations

were of secondary importance.

Time was ticking by. Soon the elephants would be moving off. I did not now want to let this opportunity slip me by. I made my decision. I was going to do it. I was going to shoot the elephant in the brain. And I was going to shoot it now.

I anguished over how best to rest my rifle. None of the rocks around me was positioned to my liking. Finally, agitatedly, I again sat down with my bum on the ground. I placed my elbows on my knees. I took careful aim at the place where I imagined the elephant's brain to be and I squeezed the trigger.

The elephant staggered as my 9.3 mm solid bullet smashed into his skull but he did not go down. He wasn't stopping for anyone either. Both he and his companion spun round and belted off into the dense msasa woodland behind them. As my elephant turned I pumped a second bullet into his body behind the shoulder. It was an oblique angled shot at another target, the lungs, which I did not know much about on an elephant either. He absorbed the second bullet without any kind of acknowledgement!

Then both elephants were gone. The msasa woodland simply open up and swallowed them whole.

My decision to shoot the elephant, my pulling of the trigger, my follow up shot into the region of the elephant's lungs had all happened in a flash. It was all over in a matter of seconds.

I jumped to my feet and stood listening dejectedly to the noise of the elephants' flight. For several long moments there was the sound of trees and of branches breaking. There was a scurry of cascading pebbles as the elephants ran down a stony slope. There was the hollow bang of a dead tree trunk hammering against something else as it was knocked aside by racing legs.

Then there was nothing. Just an immense silence! There was no sound at all! There was no intimation of the events that had just taken place! There was just me standing forlornly at the base of the hill looking hopelessly into the far away distance, listening.

There was an empty feeling in my stomach.

Where the elephants had been standing a misty pall of light brown dust hung in the air. It was all that was left of my dream. My dream was just a puff of dust!

I was desolate. I had just shot and wounded my first elephant!

It took some persuasion to get my two guides to accompany me on the spoor. I had no idea how to track but I tried my best to follow the marks the elephant's feet had left behind on the hard baked earth. If my black companions were any better at tracking they did not show it. After my fear-filled exhibition over the last half an hour they were far from enthusiastic.

The three of us followed the tracks, the blind leading the blind, for about half a mile. Finally we lost the spoor but not before we had found several blobs of frothy pink blood on the ground. I knew then my second bullet had at least touched the elephant's lungs.

We were back in camp before nightfall.

That night I dreamed of my elephant. I slept little. I tossed and I turned all night long.

At first light, with several press-ganged volunteers from the labour force, I was up and back on the spoor. I was frantic. I had to find my wounded elephant. My native friends were clearly equally determined not to find it. By midday we had made such little progress I reluctantly called off the search.

I felt miserable. I hated the idea that I had wounded an animal and had been unable to find it. I now had the will and the determination to follow the spoor but I could not see the insignificant signs the elephants had left behind. I obviously did not have the support of my native companions either, many of who probably did have some tracking skills. They were clearly not about to put their lives on the line to satisfy the burning passion of a frightened little boy!

Two days later an itinerant native traveller passed through our camp carrying an elephant's tail and a quantity of smelly meat. I pounced on him. It transpired he was travelling through the bush from Inyanga to Mtoko. It was a prodigious undertaking covering over 200 miles of wild uninhabited bush. He had seen vultures flying in a concentrated swirling kettle over the Nyagadzi River. Upon investigation he had found a dead elephant on the riverbank. The tusks, he said, were still in the carcass.

The next day, with six of my native labourers in tow, following the old man's directions and guided by the vultures we found the dead elephant quite easily. I recognised the animal the instant I laid eyes on it. My second bullet, so it seemed, had found the animal's lungs but the beast had travelled seven miles before dying.

I was ecstatic. I was in seventh heaven!

The tusks each weighed about thirty pounds. The carcass, which was lying on its side, was swollen with expanded stomach gases. The uppermost legs stuck up high in the air with the stomach bloating. The whole body was covered in the white slices of vulture droppings. The only place the vultures had been able to penetrate the carcass, however, was through a hole in the hide of the topmost back leg. This was the place from where the old traveller had cut the meat he had brought to our camp.

I wanted a photograph. This was, after all, my first elephant!

The elephant had died on the riverbank. The carcass, fortuitously, lay next to a big pool in the riverbed. There was just a small patch of old, dried, dark blood lying on the ground in front of its trunk. This puzzled me. There was not the profusion of lung blood sprayed around the carcass that I had seen with the Kazungula elephant.

The specks of fresh frothy pink blood I had seen on the spoor immediately after the shooting was definitely lung blood. I knew that from all the many antelopes that I had killed in the past. I remembered it especially from the Kazungula elephant. I knew what lung blood looked like.

I had to be content with the idea that my bullet had nicked a lung and that that nick had been enough to cause the animal's death. But I was left troubled with this explanation. The evidence and my gut feeling did not fit this picture.

My native helpers cut open the animal's belly to deflate the stomach. They cut a slit along the ventral line of the elephant's tummy using sharp knives and a small native knobkerrie axe. When the first of the gases escaped they caused great hilarity. They squirted out, whistling under pressure, and all the men ran for cover to avoid being covered by the stinking stomach fluids that sprayed out with the air. After the first emissions abated the men cut deeper, opening the stomach wall completely to let the gas swollen intestines burst out onto the ground.

A profusion of black watery blood poured out with the intestines. It spread over the ground onto and all around the bulbous white balloons of the swollen innards. There were gallons and gallons of it. It was viscous like old engine oil and it oozed over the ground everywhere about.

Its putrid stench was suffocating. My breakfast rose up into my craw. I choked on the taste of my own bile. Somehow I resisted the temptation to vomit but I came very close to throwing up. Swallowing hard I moved away from the carcass into fresher air upwind.

Deflating the carcass did the job I wanted in an exemplary fashion. As the gasses ushered out the bloated aspect of the elephant's already rotting body assumed some semblance of normality. The upper legs subsided as the stomach grew smaller. They settled eventually against their counterparts that lay beneath.

"I want a photograph," I told the men seriously, *"so we're going to have to open up those matumbus (intestines)."* It was a royal "we" because I had no intention of getting personally involved with the process.

The men had no such scruples. They set about the task with great hilarity and enthusiasm. They punctured the big balloons with the blades of their penknives trying their best to cut the holes in such a way that the emissions squirted onto their fellow workers. The men behaved like school children carrying out a prank, dodging the escaping gases and stomach fluids with every stabbing thrust of their blades. And all the while the fetid stench increased in volume and intensity. I kept my distance. The men seemed totally oblivious to the stinking grime in which they became totally immersed.

When the intestines were all lying flat and deflated on the ground "we" washed off the vulture excrement with buckets and buckets of water from the river pool. One of the men had fortunately brought along a bucket that he intended to fill with meat!

I set my old camera on top of a pile of rocks we erected for the purpose, making sure the image would not expose the carnage that lay around the animal's open belly. I arranged my men in appropriate positions next to the carcass and I told them where I myself wanted to be squatting on the ground amongst them. I then set the delay switch on the camera and ran back to join my crew.

None of the three photographs I took that day was very good but they were better than nothing at all. They were proof for Les Stewart that I *had* shot an elephant. Regrettably, during my various perambulations through life I lost them all.

My staff insisted they needed a felling axe to chop out the tusks. They had only brought along with them two knobkerrie axes which, they said, were not good enough. They were excellent for chopping through the elephant's thick hide to get at the meat, they said, but they were not heavy enough to chop through the bones of the elephant's skull to remove the tusks. This was not true but, in my ignorance, I took them at their word.

The boys cut out as much of the smelly meat as they could carry. It was meat the rich sweet smell of which, alone, turned my stomach. But they would eat it all. That I knew. Africa is full of people who eat such meat. The diets of most native peoples in Africa are greatly protein deficient. Africa's rural people, particularly, are *all* meat hungry for *any* kind of meat.

We returned to camp loaded with smelly meat but we left the tusks in the carcass. I made plans to return the next day with men armed with felling axes to cut out the ivory.

The next day we returned to the carcass to find that someone had got there before us. Both tusks had been chopped out during the night. I suspected my own people but I could not prove it. Who else could it have been? Our camp was the only centre of human life in that whole vast area!

I was angry. I was angry because I had lost my ivory. I was angry because I could not report the theft to the police. I had, after all, shot the elephant illegally!

I was angry because I *knew,* I just *knew,* it was one or several of my own people who had stolen the tusks. I had been naïve. I knew *that* after the event. I seethed over the matter for days. Over time I learned to live with my loss and to accept it as one of those lessons in life that I vowed never to repeat.

> *Many years later, when I had garnered enough experience to re-evaluate my Macaha elephant hunt properly, I was still in no doubt that my second bullet of that fateful day had indeed nicked the elephant's lungs. What I did* not *know then was that the bullet had carried on beyond the lungs and had passed through the animal's liver. This was manifest by the huge volumes of almost black blood that had invaded the whole stomach area and that had gushed out with the intestines when we cut the belly open. It was not the lung wound but the chance hitting of the liver that had killed the elephant. A liver shot is slow but fatal because it causes profuse internal bleeding that totally fills up the body cavity. Had my second bullet not found the animal's liver that day I would never have found my Macaha elephant.*

Shortly after my shooting of the Macaha elephant I presented my friend Les Stewart with a bulging photograph album. It contained photographs of the rough Land Rover track I had dug and blasted out of the Nyashire mountainside on the Angwa. It included photos of several tree trunk corduroys that I had constructed over sandy river crossings to enable our lorry to get to The Good Days Mine at Macaha. There were pictures of old

tobacco barns that the native builders under my command had demolished on the farms where I had been employed at Karoi; and of the new barns they had built on the old foundations. It contained photographs of every bushbuck and klipspringer that I had killed on the Angwa. My first crocodile on the Angwa! My first leopard on the Angwa, and the five Macaha leopards I had killed on the Good Days Mine.

Lastly, and most importantly, the album contained a photograph of my first elephant.

There was enough hard photographic evidence of my poaching exploits in that album to put me in gaol for many a long year. In those days, however, hunting without a license in Southern Rhodesia was not a big deal. Many Rhodesians shot wild animals. Few ever purchased a license even though hunting licenses were relatively inexpensive. The Director of National Parks, perhaps sensing an answer that he did not wish to hear, never asked me about the legalities of my hunting successes!

In my compilation of that photographic evidence I never gave legal niceties one iota of thought. I was determined to become a game ranger in the country's Department of National Parks and the only way I knew how to achieve that goal was to prove that I had what it took. If I was to mould my future the way I wanted it to be, presenting Les Stewart with that photograph album was an imperative.

FOUR

The Matopos

I TURNED twenty in August 1959 and took up employment with the Federal Department of National Parks on 11th November that same year. I was still two years under age but Les Stewart had contrived a new post for his department. It was the post of Cadet Warden and it was created especially for me. I was deeply honoured. I could not be officially employed as a fully-fledged warden until I turned twenty-two.

My salary was thirty-five pounds per month. It was a barely liveable wage but I was satisfied. They could have paid me nothing. I would have been happy with just free board and lodging. I was more than happy. I was ecstatic.

I was posted to Maleme Camp, Matopos National Park, forty miles south of Bulawayo in Matabeleland and placed under the command of Warden John Hatton. I was disappointed insofar as my posting was to the Matopos but, as Les Stewart told me, it was a stepping stone.

I was impatient. I wanted everything to happen yesterday. Everybody knew of my burning ambition to work in Wankie National Park. If they did not know I was quick to tell them. Wankie (now called Hwange) was the country's biggest and most prestigious game reserve but there was no post available at Hwange. I was promised the first vacancy.

In those days national park officers wore no uniforms. We carried no identity papers. There were also no game rangers or game wardens. We were all called wardens, except that in my case I was a cadet warden. For simplicity's sake and to maintain continuity, however, I shall use from now on the designations that eventuated over time: cadet ranger; ranger; senior ranger; and warden. Wardens were the most senior of the field officers. They were the station and unit commanders. This will make my stories more simple to tell.

When I arrived in the Matopos I felt as big as a mountain. In reality I was the smallest of the small fry. I was to learn this lesson during my first year of service!

I drove into Maleme in my two-year old recently purchased left-hand drive Chevrolet sedan. It had leather upholstery and tinted windows. It was my pride and joy. I lorded it. I felt like the Prince of Wales. The car was a fortuitous purchase that I had made from an expatriate refugee who had fled

from the conflict and massacres in the Belgian Congo. I was able to afford this vehicle because of my good wages in the UKAEA but I still had half the purchase price to pay on the hire purchase agreement. I was soon to learn that I could not keep up the monthly instalments. My measly wages from the day I joined the department were to change my financial circumstances considerably but all that was still to come. The real world was waiting for me. I was soon to hit the dirty bottom of the barrel with a big bump.

IN 1959 the Matopos National Park comprised 400 square miles of jumbled granite hills, some large some small. They were all covered between the rocks and boulders, in every nook and cranny, with trees and shrubs of an unimaginable variety.

The highest of the hills is a solid mass of rounded granite called Silozwe. It measures 985 feet from base to summit. Right next door to Silozwe there is a second hill of slightly smaller dimensions. This one is called Silozwana, Little Silozwe. There are thousands and thousands of bald granite domes like these two hills in the Matopos range. Here they are also called dwalas.

The huge dwala called Silozwe dominated the hills all around. From a distance it looked like the giant head of a bald man. It is surrounded by a broad ring of rain forest type vegetation. All the other big hills in the national park are similarly ringed with fringes of dense forest. These forest rings are occasioned by the fact that rain water runs down off the granite rocks and soaks the soils around their bases. This provides the rings of soil around the dwalas with a hugely enhanced supply of rainwater. Between the hills and away from the forest fringes are ribbons of open sandveld covered in tall grasses used by the local natives to thatch their huts.

There are caves and waterproof rock overhangs throughout the park. Hundreds and thousands of them! On their walls are hundreds and thousands of ancient Bushmen paintings.

* * *

There is no written record of San Bushmen ever having lived in Rhodesia. Nor do Bushmen feature in the folklore of any of the local native peoples. The paintings, however, tell us they once lived in great numbers amongst all the country’s granite hills. Nobody knows where they came from or when and why they disappeared.

There is a presumption that the Bushmen had been rendered locally extinct in Rhodesia by no later than the 9th Century A.D.

This was not the case in the land to the South. South Africa is full of stories about serious, violent and barbaric interactions between resident and invading people of many different ethnic origins right up until about one hundred years ago. Written history records many great wars between the black bantu tribes of the country and the white immigrant settlers, from the time the white man arrived at the Cape of Good Hope some 500 years ago. At that stage the bantu native tribes of the country had been permanently resident in South Africa, north of the Great Fish River, for about 500 years. There were then no bantu natives living south of the Fish River.

There are many stories relating to interaction and conflict between the immigrant native tribes of South Africa and the indigenous San Bushmen and indigenous Hottentots – a scion of the San Bushmen. There are tales about interactions and conflict between the immigrant white settlers and the indigenous Bushmen and Hottentots who hunted and killed both the white man's and the black man's domesticated animals.

The wild Bushmen were eventually exterminated by the natives and by the white settlers in South Africa sometime during the latter part of 19th Century.

The click sounds in the languages of South Africa's Zulu and Xhosa people are said to have originated with the Bushmen. In the absence of written records it has been presumed that the resident Bushmen that once lived along the eastern seaboard of the country were integrated into the negroid (bantu) tribes who invaded and settled in that part of the country about one thousand years ago.

Few people know that it was only in the 9th Century A.D. that the forebears of all southern Africa's diverse native (bantu) peoples first crossed the great Zambesi River on their massive migration southward. Prior to that time there were no bantu or negroid-type people, or people of European origin, living in southern Africa! There are written records of the progress made by this great bantu migration in the Arab chronicles of that time!

There is a small clan of mSili Bushmen still living in the Nata River area of Zimbabwe. The Nata is far away to the north west of the Matopos. These Bushmen are a recent intrusion from an mSili community that lives just across the border at Zibanninni Pan in Botswana. Botswana is the Land of the Kalahari Desert and the Kalahari Desert is the ancestral home of the mSilis.

It was from the small mSili Bushman community on the Nata that

Hwange National Park recruited its specialised trackers.

To say that the Matopos is a beautiful national park does not do justice to this remarkable piece of country. Cecil John Rhodes, the one-time gold and diamond magnate and Prime Minister of the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, was so captivated by its remarkable beauty that he chose to be buried there. His grave is located on a dwala in the Matopos National Park called Malindidzimo, *The Place of the Spirits*. The grave is hewn out of the solid granite and topped by a brass plaque that bears the simple inscription: *"Here lie the remains of Cecil John Rhodes"*. It was Rhodes who financed the pioneer column of 1890 that brought white settlers to the country for the first time. It was a country that, ultimately, was to carry his name: Rhodesia.

When I was posted to the Matopos the national park had only recently been proclaimed. There were then still 450 Ndebele subsistence farmers living under permit within the park. They each had their own village comprising many huts made of pole and mud walls with thatched roofs. The villages, or kraals, were surrounded by rough bush pole palisades cut from the local forests. Most of the village headmen had several wives and many children. One man of chieftain rank had twenty-seven wives and more children and grandchildren than he could count.

Each family had extensive herds of cattle, sheep and goats; and donkeys and chickens and dogs and cats. They had been allocated a piece of arable land on which to grow their crops. They grazed their domesticated animals wherever they could find forage. The land under cultivation comprised the local granular granite sands and it was inherently infertile.

The excessive numbers of domestic stock kept the grasslands permanently cropped short. Soil erosion was rife and huge dongas, massive erosion gullies, meandered through the open grasslands like winding snakes. Some of these gullies were fifty yards wide, fifteen feet deep and over a mile long.

Located so close to the city of Bulawayo the native villages of the national park functioned as a weekend dormitory for many native workers employed in the city. In many respects the Matopos National Park in 1959 was little better than all the other native reservations that surrounded this exquisitely beautiful granite hill country.

Several years after I left the Matopos the park was reduced in size by 50 percent. Those villages that had been located in the core area of the hill country were forcibly moved out to other locations. The smaller park then

settled down into the kind of natural national park that most urban, white, nature loving people understood and wanted to see prevail.

There were few game animals in the park. A herd of sable antelope had been introduced to the government agricultural research station many years before. The research station lay to the north of the park and a fair number of sable from these original animals still roamed the countryside there. None ever ventured into the national park. Indeed, the park itself was kept devoid of major wild animal species as a result of continuous poaching carried out by the unemployed young people of the resident native communities.

A fair number of klipspringers still lived in the high rocky fastnesses. They were difficult to catch and impossible to hunt with dogs so they persisted.

Dassies (hyraxes) were everywhere abundant despite the fact they were heavily snared. The Ndebele's ate their flesh and they tanned and stitched together their tough skins to make wonderfully soft and durable blankets. When I was a boy dassie skin blankets (dassie karosses) were famous in Rhodesia.

Black eagles ranged over the skies everywhere. They are Africa's equivalent of the northern hemisphere's golden eagle. Their diet comprised almost exclusively dassies and they built their huge nests on the high cliff faces of the granite hills.

During my eleven months in the Matopos I logged 35 black eagle nest sites and I climbed to most of them. A few years later my records of these nests formed the basis of the world's greatest ever big eagle study.

When the park was reduced in size and the Ndebele families were moved out, the dassie population exploded and the number of black eagle nesting sites doubled in number.

* * *

I have a passion for birds of prey. It started when I was at boarding school at Plumtree which, as the crow flies, was not too far south of the Matopos. My interest began with me collecting birds' eggs. As I grew older I took the chicks of small hawks from their nests and attempted to train them for the sport of falconry. I obtained my rudimentary knowledge about training hawks from the Encyclopaedia Britannica in the school library. My ambitions, however, were sometimes greater than my capacity to bring them to reality. Nowhere was this more true than in the case of my first adventures with black eagles.

Four years before being posted to the Matopos I collected my first black eagle egg from a nest in the Syringa area of the Plumtree district. I was then at school and living in the Lloyd House boarding-hostel.

The nest was on a cliff on the side of a jumble of high granite boulders three hundred feet above the ground. The nest was immense, fifteen feet wide and four feet thick. Some of the sticks the nest was made of were six feet long and as thick as my forearm. The basin at the top of this pile of sticks, about one foot in diameter, was lined with fresh green leaves.

It was a single egg clutch. I confirmed this by leaving the egg in the nest when I found it. I came back a week later and there was still only one egg in the nest. It was a plain chalky white egg with only a sprinkling of red markings. In later years I collected several two-egg black eagle clutches that were profusely marked with red, brown and deep purple.

But I was content with my single plain white egg. It was the first black eagle egg in my collection. Before I removed the egg I set a cord noose around the periphery of the nest cup and I captured the brooding female. The egg became a treasured part of my egg collection. The eagle I took back to school and over ambitiously started to train it for falconry.

Black eagles are huge. This one had a wingspan exceeding eight feet. Its feet were bigger than my hands. Each toe was longer and thicker than my fingers. The giant talon of the heavy back toe exceeded three inches in length.

I furnished my eagle with leather jesses, traditional leather thongs tied around her ankles. I carried her about the school grounds sitting on my gauntlet-covered left hand. This was necessary, the book said, to man her, to tame her down. She weighed 5.5 kilograms. I experienced serious cramps in my back from the effort of constantly carrying such a heavy burden on my one hand. I had to resort to using a wooden staff to support my hand and arm whenever I stopped to rest. It did not take me long to realise I had bitten off more than I could chew. But I persevered. I really tried very hard to train my huge and beautiful black eagle.

I tethered the eagle when I was not carrying her about on a simple log perch. It was located inside a secluded corner of the hostel grounds surrounded by a high and thick rubber hedge. There she was left relatively undisturbed. Surprisingly she did not seriously resist her confinement.

She refused to eat. No matter how much I enticed her she rejected

everything that I offered. I was later to discover that fat eagles are able to go for long periods without feeding and with no detriment to their physical being. I did not know that at the time. So as one starving day followed the next I became terribly worried. My first priority was to get my eagle to eat.
On the fifth day after her capture the school cook matron in the dining room kitchen, a lady who was familiar with my many similar tales of woe, gave me a huge chunk of steak for the eagle. I presented the eagle with the steak immediately after lunch. She eyed it with disdain. So I left the meat on her log perch hoping that, when she was alone and quiet, she would eat it. I then retired to my bed in the senior boy's second story dormitory for the obligatory half-hour rest period after lunch.

Our house master, Eric Turner, was called "Bungy" or "Tumpty Turner" by the boys.

Tumpty had three passions in life. He was a captain in the school cadet corps, the officer commanding no less, and he pranced about on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons in his army uniform. Tuesdays and Thursdays were the two days of the week when all the schoolboys had to undergo military training.

Tumpty and his wife were also besotted with Gilbert and Sullivan operas. Every year they produced a different play with schoolboy actors. The operas were performed in front of the parent gatherings on the occasion of the annual school athletic championship weekend.

Tumpty's third passion was for his two golden cocker spaniels.

The dogs, both bitches, were called Sarah and Gina. I have to admit they were beautiful dogs and the Turners groomed the dogs' coats every day. When the dogs came on heat they were taken to kennels in Bulawayo sixty miles away. There they were mated with the highest pedigreed sires in the country. So it was that Lloyd House was periodically inundated with batches of lovely golden cocker spaniel puppies that were spoilt rotten by the schoolboys. Nevertheless, amongst themselves the boys ridiculed the house master because of the ludicrous manner that he and his wife fawned over their various puppy dog families.

It happened on the occasion of my leaving the chunk of meat with the eagle during the after lunch rest period, that Sarah walked along the road next to the rubber hedge behind which sat my eagle. The dog picked up the scent of the meat and investigated its source. Inevitably she found her way into the eagle's secluded enclosure and, ignoring the eagle, she went straight for the

meat. The meat was still lying on the log next to the eagle's big feet.

Whatever the course of events that led up to what happened next is of little consequence suffice it to say that the hungry eagle grabbed the dog with both its seriously huge feet. Ninety-five percent of the black eagle's diet comprises dassies and the dog called Sarah was just about the same size.

I was lying on my bed, dosing, when I heard the loudest and most terrible caterwauling screams coming from the eagle's enclosure. I rushed to the nearest window and looked out. From the upper floor I looked down over the rubber hedge into the enclosure. What I saw nearly stopped my heart.

"*Oh my God*," I thought. "*Not this*!"

My good friend Tim Hughes was at my side. Together we tore through the dormitory, passed the rows of beds on either side and we flew down the stairs. By the time we got to the eagle the dog had stopped its screaming. It was then lying supine in the eagle's clutches. The eagle was spasmodically cramping its toes sinking its talons ever deeper into the dog's flesh. That cramping action is the way big birds of prey kill their quarry.

I prepared myself for the worst. I believed the dog was about to die. But it was not dead yet. I could see it was still breathing.

Without thinking, in a flash, I grabbed both the eagle's legs just above the feet. Had the eagle at that moment decided to release the dog and transfer its attentions to me, which it could have done with lightning speed, it would have been my hands, my arms and/or my face that would have born the cramping brunt of those terrible feet. I was lucky. The eagle was too intent on killing the dog. So my hands closed around the eagle's ankles with impunity.

I lifted the eagle into the air desperately trying to get it to release the dog. It hung upside down from my hands, its huge wings beating the ground on either side of my feet. It refused to let the dog go.

"*Take one foot*," I urged Tim. He grabbed a leg.

Now, with one leg and one foot in each of our hands, we both contrived to prize the eagle's toes open. They were like bands of rigid steel. The power of each toe was incredible. The heavy talon of the large inside front toe and the enormous talon of the huge back toe were the two killers, and they worked in tandem. The powerful and continuing cramping action of the eagle's feet was warning enough that we had to be very careful lest our hands

became the eagle's next target.

I heard a murmur of noise coming from the direction of the hostel. Looking up I saw that every window in the senior boy's dormitory was filled with inquisitive faces, excited faces, faces that were undoubtedly talking about what they were witnessing. I knew what the boys were saying. They were extravagantly talking about what they believed Tumpty was going to do to me when he discovered what had happened to his beloved Sarah.

My heart sank into my boots.

I had visions of being gated for the rest of the year, of being confined to the school grounds, of not being allowed to venture into the bush every Sunday on our traditional exeats. *That* would have meant no more hunting. No more egg collecting. No more fishing for bream in the local dams. If *that* was to be my punishment it would kill me. Much better that I bend over and take *six of the best* from Tumpty's cane. But I knew Tumpty. I knew him well. I knew that when he learnt about what had happened to Sarah he would be beside himself with fury. He was also a vindictive son of a bitch and he did not like me. I knew he would *both* beat me *and* gate me. He would love doing *that,* doing *both* those things.

I was the prime athlete of Lloyd House at that time having won all the school's age class athletics championships over the years. Earlier that same year I had won the school's senior victor ludorum athletics cup. That year, too, I played for the school's first XV rugby team. I had played first team hockey for the school for the previous three years. I had all the makings for promotion to head prefect of Lloyd House the following year. But that was not to be. I resisted all Tumpty's attempts to groom me because it would have placed too many restrictions on my weekend bush adventures.

Tumpty had always resented the fact that I preferred to go into the bush with my friends on Sundays rather than stay behind to perform house duties that he prescribed. I had a choice. I chose the bush. He also hated me for repudiating his overtures for me to take part in his Gilbert and Sullivan plays. Tumpty and I were constantly waving red rags at each other. We were like two matadors in the same bull kraal. I had good reason, therefore, to feel doleful at that moment.

And if Sarah died….

Suddenly the eagle let the dog go. Its body fell the four feet from my hands onto the ground. It hit the hard earth with a loud thump. I looked down. The dog was squirming helplessly in the dust. It was still alive I

thought somewhat happily. But in my bones I believed it was *going* to die. Surely no dog of Sarah's size could survive such a powerful attack? What to do now?

My first concern was for the eagle. I again took both the bird's legs into my hands. This freed Tim's hands completely.

"Have you got your penknife with you?" I asked Tim. He was one of those schoolboys who always carried a penknife.

"Jah," he said laconically. He took the penknife out of his pocket.

"Cut the jesses off," I urged him peremptorily.

Tim looked at me inquiringly. *"I'm going to let her go,"* I answered his silent question. "*When Tumpty hears about* this *he'll put her down. I'd rather let her go!"*

Tim sawed away at the leather, cutting off the one jesse and then the other. When he was done he picked the dog up, cradled it in his arms and moved back and away from me. Tim had been with me when we caught the eagle. He knew just how much time and effort I had put into her. He knew how much I loved that big bird. But he also knew the best thing I could do with her now was to let her go free.

I rearranged myself over the top of the eagle, first of all setting her feet onto the log perch. Then I got hold of her body firmly with both hands over her shoulders from behind. She trilled quietly to register her disapproval. I then lifted her bodily off the perch and I threw her up and over the confining rubber hedge barrier. She flapped her giant wings heavily and disappeared over the other side.

Thinking that she had simply landed on the ground I raced round the side of the hedge and looked along the road that lay on the other side. She was flying strongly along the road just a foot or so above the ground her wing tips raising whirls of dust off the gravel road surface. With every wing beat she gathered speed. I felt happy to see her flying off to freedom.

Then I saw the school's headmaster, Mr. Pat Pattison, emerge onto the road from the gated entrance to the Prefects' Common Room cottage. He started to walk towards me along the road. When he saw the big black eagle flying towards him he stopped in his tracks. The eagle and the headmaster were on a collision course.

Just as the crash was about to take place the headmaster's rotund and gentlemanly figure made a surprisingly agile duck. The eagle laboriously raised itself just enough to brush over the human obstacle. Then it started to

gain height. The headmaster turned to watch the eagle flying away. Then he spun round to see who it was that he had seen emerge from the Lloyd House grounds. He saw nobody because by then I was gone.

In retrospect the headmaster *must* have known it was me he had seen. Who else in the school had a black eagle? But I never heard a squeak from him. He was that kind of man.

Just at that moment the bell rang to announce the end of the midday siesta. Sleepy schoolboys began to come out of the woodwork everywhere. Now was the time the boys were required to complete the first phase of their homework. There was now a half-hour period of 'prep time'. By the time the hustle and bustle began Tim and I had rushed Sarah into the seclusion of the outside lean-to ground floor study that he and I shared.

Sarah was not dead. She was, however, very badly hurt. She seemed to be completely paralysed from the neck down. I wrapped her in a heavy bath towel and laid her on the study's single bed. Tim went off to the washrooms to fetch a bucket of boiling hot water.

The dog lifted its head and looked up at me silently with doleful eyes. I gently stroked her face and I prayed that she would come out of this experience with no serious damage. No matter what I thought of the dog's master I had compassion for the damaged and lovely little dog.

Throughout the prep period Tim and I took turns at massaging the dog's badly bruised muscles. We applied hot wet compresses all over her body. The holes left by the eagle's talons were black in colour and both broad and deep in appearance. There was no flowing blood.

The prep period came to an end. Now we had to get all dressed up in our army uniforms for the cadet parade. Tim went. I stayed. Tim gave Tumpty an excuse for my absence. He told him that I had a stomach bug and he begged Captain Tumpty to understand that I was thus indisposed. The ruse worked. At four-thirty Tim returned from the cadet parade.
Sarah was by then looking a lot better.

Tim took over the massaging and the application of the hot compresses. I went for a shower. When I got back Tim went for a shower and I continued with the massaging. Fortunately when Tim returned he locked the study door.

Shortly after that we heard Tumpty's voice outside. He was talking to a group of boys who were lounging about in the sunshine outside the study block.

"Has anybody seen Sarah?" Tumpty inquired. *"She has been absent all*

afternoon." Apparently nobody had seen Sarah. I sighed with relief.

Just then the other dog, Gina, began sniffing at the bottom of our study door. Her shadow obliterated the small amount of sunlight that was creeping in under the door panel. She began whimpering. Then she scraped the door with her front foot claws.

My hand clamped over Sarah's muzzle. She struggled but I restrained her. She was unable to respond.

The doorknob turned. Tumpty was trying to open the locked door!

"Anybody in there?" he inquired through the door panel.

Tim and I stood stock-still. We looked at each other apprehensively but didn't say a word. My hand remained tight over Sarah's muzzle.
Tumpty moved off.

That had been a close call!

Come dusk Tim and I were bathed and dressed for supper. Sarah was by then very much better. She was standing up on her own but the tentative steps she took were very wobbly.

The bell rang for supper. The shadows of darkness were streaming over the land. In front of the hostel all the boys were lining up in their crocodile column preparatory to walking down to the school dining room.

It was now or never. There was nobody about. We opened the study door and I raced with Sarah in my arms round to the kitchen door of Tumpty's flatlet. The house master's accommodations comprised a ground floor wing of the hostel block. The door was ajar. The kitchen was empty. I pushed the dog through the open doorway and fled to where Tim was waiting for me. We joined the crocodile column just after it had started its forward march.

After supper all the boys of Lloyd House were required to attend an assembly in the ground floor junior boys prep room. There Tumpty officiated at the evening prayer session. After the prayer it was customary that he address the boys with regards to any matters of importance.

I just *knew* that Tumpty was going to say something about the injuries that Sarah had sustained at the feet of the eagle. I was *very* anxious. My moment of truth was at hand. I was sure he was going ask the boys if they knew anything about how Sarah had sustained her injuries. *Somebody* was bound to give me away.

Tumpty looked very stern. *Here it comes*, I thought.

"Whilst you boys were having supper in the dining room," Tumpty

intoned very seriously, *"a most unusual thing happened here just behind my flat."*

"On my way to the forum…" some idiot blurted out loudly from within the phalanx of schoolboys.

The prep room fell silent. Tumpty looked annoyed but he ignored the remark. You could have heard a pin drop. Every boy in the hostel, by then, knew what had happened to Sarah. Everybody waited with bated breath.

"A large leopard paid us a visit," Tumpty continued in all sincerity. The house master eyed the boys in front of him speculatively. The stern look on his face challenged anybody to laugh at the thought. Silence reigned. I could not believe my ears. I began to breathe again for I knew now what was coming.

"Sarah went out and challenged the leopard and they had a big fight. Sarah was injured fairly badly," he said seriously and with concern. *"But she chased the leopard off. I'm going to have to take her to the vet tomorrow, in Bulawayo… but I think she is a very brave little dog to have done such a thing."*

The assembly burst into spontaneous cheering. Every boy in the room was laughing with apparent happiness for Tumpty's little dog. Everybody started clapping.

"I knew you would be pleased with the news," Tumpty asserted happily. A laconic smile touched his face. He turned then and left the room.

I looked at Tim. Tim looked at me. Our right hands came up and slapped each other in the high five salutation. We were off the hook. After *that* tall tale there was no way that Tumpty would ever admit that he had made up the story about the leopard. That meant he could not now face the truth and heap retribution on me. And because *everybody* knew what had *really* happened, Tumpty Turner became the butt of the whole school's ridicule for the rest of the year.

It was because of incidents of this nature that I never got along with the house master of my boarding school hostel! Our haloes just did not merge!

* * *

Tim and I revisited the black eagle's nest three months later. It contained a single small eaglet. So my eagle had returned home after her release and she had laid another clutch of eggs. This time she had managed to hatch them. This was one of the many experiences that proved to me just how resilient nature really is.

* * *

There were many conflicts of interest between the natives who lived in the park and the national park authority. It was because of this state of conflict that the park was eventually reduced in size and why the resident native people were evicted from the core sanctuary area.

One of those problems concerned the fact that the terrain was ideally suited to leopards. There were many leopards in the Matopos hills. Most of them subsisted on the ubiquitous dassies and they normally left the peoples' animals alone. The relationship between leopards and dassies in the Matopos was a much bigger version of the relationship that exists between cats and mice everywhere!

Every now and again, however, a leopard took a calf, a goat or a sheep. It was one of my duties then to shoot *that* particular stock-killing leopard.

When I was posted to the Matopos I had six leopards to my credit and some knowledge about leopard behaviour. In fact, I had infinitely more knowledge about leopards and about hunting leopards than had my new boss. Warden John Hatton was simply not a hunter!

Prior to his appointment in National Parks John Hatton had been a policeman. From all reports he had been a very good policeman. His police service and training had made him a very good administrator. He was also a very good Ndebele linguist and an acknowledged expert on the history of the Ndebele people. John Hatton, therefore, was admirably suited for the post of Warden in charge of the Matopos National Park.

Besides John Hatton and me there was one other white officer employed in the Matopos at that time. He was fifty-six year old Ranger Jurie Grobler. Jurie lived with his wife, Anna, in an old farmhouse at White Waters twenty miles west of Maleme.

Jurie had, previous to the national park's promulgation, been an irrigation officer with the Department of Water Affairs. He was an expert at building earth-walled water reservoirs. Jurie, in fact, had constructed *all* the many earthen dams in the greater Matopos region using oxen and primitive olden-day style earth moving equipment. He had lived at White Waters for more than twenty five years and he had transferred his allegiance to National Parks *only* when he understood that, not to have done so, would have meant he would have had to leave his old and established home. Jurie was a treasure trove of information about the Matopos and he had shot a great many leopards in the Matopos hills.

* * *

At the time of my arrival John Hatton was champing at the bit to take his family on holiday. This had been impossible because he was the only white officer on station. Although not many tourists availed themselves of the rest camp facilities at Maleme there were enough visitors to make it impossible for the warden to leave his post. My arrival at Maleme changed all that. It took John Hatton just a few short weeks to train me in the simple mysteries of rest camp administration. He and his family then went off for a ten-day well-deserved break.

I was housed in a thatched two bedroomed tourist rest camp hut. My outside kitchen was an open fireplace located under a small lean-to shelter with an asbestos roof. It was set up against a huge granite boulder. My hut was the last in a line of ten similar units that were constructed in a horseshoe configuration amongst an attractive jumble of twenty-foot high granite boulders and big trees. Meagre though my living circumstances were I was very comfortable and content. I had no complaints. Just to be living in that beautiful environment was a pleasure beyond belief.

I employed a house servant, a young Ndebele man in his midtwenties called Jack. He served me much as a batman works for an officer in a military single quarters. He looked after my every simple domestic need. He washed and ironed my clothes. He cooked my meals on a metal grill that was set over the red-hot coals of a wood fire in the outside kitchen. Jack commanded the normal salary for a house servant in those days, two pounds and ten shillings a month plus rations

One evening, during John Hatton's absence, Jack was cooking my meal outside. I was sitting in my hut reading a book in the bright light of a Tilley paraffin lamp. There was then no electricity at Maleme.

There was a commotion outside. Jack burst through the door.

"*Haaaiieee… Baas,*" he exclaimed. "*There is a big snake in the kitchen.*"

I picked up the Tilley lamp by its wire handle and rushed outside.

The kitchen was so small I took in the whole scene at one glance. There, next to a pile of dry wood in one corner, I saw a snake three to four feet in length. As I approached it the snake lifted its head and spread its hood. Its throat was creamy-pink with a broken band of black. I recognised it immediately. It was a Mozambique spitting cobra.

Jack hovered in the background continuously telling me to be careful.

"Yena loh impimpi," he declared. *It is a cobra.* Then came the expected warning: "*Watch out, baas, it is very dangerous."*

I have always been amazed that native people consider *all* snakes to be dangerous. They do not differentiate between venomous and nonvenomous snakes.

I knew the Mozambique spitting cobra well. They are not aggressive and they are normally not a threat. Like most venomous snakes they are only dangerous when surprised at close quarters or when you interfere with them physically. The danger of the spitting cobra lies in the fact that if you approach too close they spit venom into your eyes.

I had never seen cobras spitting their venom and I was curious to see how they did this. In those days there were no TV documentaries to tell us about such things. Indeed, television itself was then still just a pipe dream. Living in a pioneer country Rhodesians learnt everything they knew by way of personal experience and experimentation. I decided the situation that now confronted me was a good opportunity for me to find out something about how a cobra spits its venom.

I believed that I was safe behind the bright and shining mantle of the lamp. The snake's eyes seemed to be focused on the light. It appeared to ignore my presence altogether. I concluded that if the snake *was* going to spit it would target the glowing mantle and it would leave its venom in a pattern on the surface of the lamp's hot glass.

I moved imperceptibly closer. The snake leant backwards all the while waving its head and hood from side to side. I was surprised at how close I was able to push the lamp in front of the snake without it spitting.

Was it ever going to spit? I wondered.

The cobra began moving its bottom jaw as if it was chewing something. It seemed to be preparing to spit but nothing happened. I grew impatient. How was I going to force the damn thing to spit? Impetuously I took a bold step forward and I swung the lamp from the handle towards the snake.

This is what the snake had been waiting for. Hindsight, they say, is the only exact science!

The snake threw its head forwards almost striking the roasting hot lamp glass. I saw the venom eject from its fangs in two contorting columns. The poison was opaque and dull yellow/gray in colour. In the few short moments of time that it floated through the air I saw that it was viscous.

These conscious thoughts flashed into and through my mind in an instant.

I had no time to counter what was happening. The snake had not been targeting the bright mantle of the lamp at all. It had all along been waiting for my two bright eyes, above and behind the light, to get within spitting range.

To this day I retain a slow motion vision of those two columns of venom lifting over the top of the lamp. They flew over my hand and on towards my face. Between the time I understood what was happening and the time it took for the poison to strike, it was too late. The venom hit both my wide-open eyes. It splashed against both my eyeballs. Instantly, automatically, my eyes shut tight. Too late! The snake's deadly toxin had found its mark.

I stumbled hurriedly backward blinking my eyes. There was no pain just the uncomfortable feeling of the strange and viscous fluid on my eyeballs. I wiped it off my face with my bare hands.

The snake was now of no consequence. I forgot about its existence. I knew I was in trouble and I cursed my stupidity.

I rushed back to my hut. The water stand with its canvas camp basin stood just outside the front door. I washed my face and my eyes in the puddle of water that was still lurking in its bottom. Jack poured more water from a canvas water bag, my old josak, into the basin. I washed some more.

All sorts of things were coursing through my mind. Somewhere I had read that the Bushmen of the Kalahari urinate directly into the eyes of those who had received a dose of cobra venom. I had visions of Jack undoing his pants and pissing into my eyes. That idea did not appeal to me.

Milk! I had also read that milk was a good substitute for urine. I had no fresh milk. All I had was a tin of powdered Klim milk in my food box. I fetched it, poured some water into a mug and added a heaped spoonful of the powder. I mixed it quickly and used it to again wash my eyes clean of the venom.

My eyes began to smart.

There was a Fitsimmon's snakebite outfit in John Hatton's office. It contained anti-venom serum, a syringe and needles, none of which would be of much good to me in my present circumstances. I was also concerned that, if I injected myself, I might die of allergic reaction to the horse serum that was the carrier-medium for the anti-venom. Many people I knew are allergic to horse serum.

I remembered there was also a small bottle of permanganate of potash in

the snakebite outfit, otherwise known as Condy's Crystals. This was sometimes used to help ward off the effects of snakebite poisoning but I had forgotten just *how* it was used. I felt that *that* would be the best bet for my eyes.

I was now experiencing an uncomfortable throbbing sensation right through both my eyeballs. The pulsation was more worrying than it was painful. My eyesight began to blur.

I raced over the rocks to the thatched office block. I found the snakebite outfit where it always was, on one of the shelves on the far side of John Hatton's desk. I grabbed the tin box and rushed back to my rest camp hut.

Jack was now in a state of panic. I found him moving about inside and outside the rest hut in agitated disharmony. He offered all sorts of advice from the bizarre to the ridiculous.

"Bring me the aluminium basin from the spare bedroom," I instructed him urgently. *"And bring the josak."*

Jack poured water into the basin. "Enough" I almost shouted when the puddle was big enough.

I added a liberal amount of Condy's crystals. The water turned deep purple with the dye. I added more. I immersed my whole face into the dark purple liquid and blinked and rolled my eyes about furiously under the surface. I used one hand to open my eyelids. I came up for air took a deep breath and plunged my face back into the water.

A pounding began in my head. It came from a region far behind my eyes. This brought me severe pain for the first time. It began with a soft thumping sensation which quickly grew ever more intense. The venom was beginning to work its magic. I hoped that *this* pain was all it was going to be. It was a pious hope.

The insides of my eyelids felt raw. I had been washing them out with water, then with Klim milk and now with a solution of Condy's crystals continuously. It has been too much. It was the washing action rather than the venom that had brought on the discomfort. The delicate tissues of the inner eye socket could only take so much washing. I pulled my face out of the basin and told Jack to throw the contents away outside.

I dried my face with a towel. Now, with nothing more I could do, I contemplated my situation. I believed that my life was not in danger. I believed that I had washed out most of the venom and that, in due course, my eyes would get better. I did not believe there was anything more that anybody

else could do for me now. I had done the best that I could for myself.

I thought of telephoning Jurie Grobler. He was the only other white man that I knew in the whole Matopos region. I had met him but once.
He was a complete stranger and I was reluctant to disturb him.

I could have phoned the police. There was a police station on the research station twenty miles away. I could have asked Maleme's lorry driver to take me to hospital in Bulawayo. There were no tourists in the camp that night so I could not even send Jack to a visitor to ask for help.

I did none of the things I could have done. I did nothing. Why? Because I was a kid and I was a fool. I believed I could get through what was to follow all by myself. I was full of pride. I was arrogant. I was stupid. I *should* have done *something*. At the least I *should* have phoned Jurie Grobler. But I didn't. So I deserved the purgatory that I was to suffer over the next three days and more.

The pain grew ever more intense with every passing second. It became so bad I wanted to scream. All I could do was to settle down quietly and grimly bear it.

Once the pain *really* set in my whole sensorium shut down. My brain, my nerves, my whole conscious being dulled into a state of torpidity. It was nature's way of ameliorating the pain. Endocrines from the brain, nature's tranquillisers, swamped my body and took over my soul.

I told Jack to stay with me and to "*see me right"* whatever that might have meant. I sat at the metal camp table in my hut. The Tilley lamp flooded the room with its bright light. I put my arms on the table and cradled my head in the fold of my forearms. My eyes, my whole face, felt thicker and thicker as the swelling began. My body shook uncontrollably. Jack put a blanket over my shoulders and tucked the corners into my lap. The pain became intense. It was a deep and throbbing pain. It hit me again and again. It pulsed with every beat of my heart deep in the middle of my head.

Then oblivion came. I subsided into a state of unconsciousness.

My next conscious thoughts came out of the continuing pulsing spasms in my head. My whole head felt thick. But it was not numb enough to remove the pain. The pain was intense.

I remembered the cobra and shuddered. What a fool I had been!

I was lying in a bed. I was tucked in. I was comfortable between linen sheets. I was no longer shaking. I felt tired. My body was cumbersomely heavy.

There was a bird singing loudly not far away. I recognised the call. It was a male mocking chat, a species that loved the granite boulders in the park. The bird's call told me it was daytime. The night was long gone. I could see nothing. My eyes were shut tight. I ran a hand over my face and with gentle fingers felt the bulbous flesh that now covered both my eye sockets. My whole face was swollen to hell.

I had no recollection of getting into that bed. I did not know where the bed was. Was I in hospital? Where was I? The question was taxing. I fell back into a deep and troubled sleep dominated by the intense throbbing pain in the middle of my skull.

Something woke me. I heard someone walking over a cement floor to my bed. I must have moved letting the person know that I was awake.

"Haaaiee baas," I heard Jack's voice. *"Kanjahn?" How are you feeling?* I then knew I was still in my rest camp hut.

"Moobie," I answered succinctly. *Not so good! "How did I get into bed?"*

"You fell off the chair last night," Jack intoned*." I carried you to bed."*

"You carried me…?" I couldn't imagine Jack carrying me anywhere.

"Well," Jack answered, a little embarrassed. *"I dragged you over the floor into the bedroom. Then I lifted you onto the bed."*

That sounded more likely. He had also stripped me naked and covered me in extra blankets.

"What time is it?"

"Just after three o'clock." It was afternoon. So I had slept right through the night and through most of the day!

"You had better call Sergeant Jonathon," I told him through the pain. Jonathon was the senior game scout at Maleme. *"He needs to be told what to do."*

"He's been here several times today," Jack informed me. *"He'll be coming again at five o'clock when he shuts the office for the day."*

Jonathon was very sympathetic. I persuaded him not to cause a palaver over my injury. I would get better, I told him, by just letting nature take its course. Even then I was still behaving like an arrogant fool. Nevertheless, I *was* feeling better. Just a bit. But I *was* feeling better. The throbbing pain was just as intense as it ever had been but I felt that I was over the worst.

Jack had never left my side. After putting me to bed sometime in the middle of the first night he had dragged the mattress off the spare bed and

prepared a sleeping place for himself on the floor next to me. There he had slept throughout the night periodically checking to make sure that I was still breathing. He slept there for the next four nights, too. I wanted for nothing. He did everything for me, from bringing a bottle for me to urinate in to preparing for me sloppy mealie-meal porridge that he fed to me by the spoonful. I think that was all I ate for at least three days.

I remained in bed the rest of that day and the next. By the morning of the third day the pain had subsided. My whole head and face felt thick and sore but I was able to see through the slowly opening slits of my eyes. Full recovery was after that fairly rapid. But for weeks my face was a complete and horrible mess.

I still looked a sight when John Hatton returned from his holiday. The first thing he did was to remonstrate with me for being such a fool. Why the hell had I not had the common sense to phone Jurie Grobler, he asked me the obvious question. I had no answer.

The next day John Hatton took me to his personal doctor in Bulawayo who gave me a thorough medical examination. There was seemingly, surprisingly he said, nothing wrong with me that time would not heal. Then he asked me to confirm that I had washed my eyes out with a strong solution of permanganate of potash. I confirmed that that was the case. He raised his eyebrows towards the ceiling.

"Well, young man," he intoned soberly, *"consider yourself lucky… lucky you didn't stain the whites of your eyes permanently purple."*

The episode with the spitting cobra was my baptism of fire into the Department of National Parks. For the rest of my life I never had another experience with snakes that was as bad despite the fact I have lived and worked in some of the wildest parts of the continent.

There is a host of poisonous snakes in the Matopos. There are several species of cobras, boomslangs, puff adders, night adders, and there is an abundance of huge black mambas. During the winter months it was a rare morning when walking through the hills I did not encounter at least one black mamba sunning itself in an open space amongst the tall grass.

One of Jurie's black labourers, Thom, was bitten by a black mamba whilst working just behind the White Waters homestead. He survived the ordeal. That was several years before my arrival on the scene. Thereafter Thom walked in a totally uncoordinated fashion. He looked as though he suffered from St. Vitas Dance. But he *was* able to walk. He was lucky. Few

people survive a mamba bite. Over the many years I worked in the department I know of several game scouts who were bitten by black mambas in the Matopos. They all died.

I was on horseback patrolling the White Waters game park one day, later in the year, when I disturbed a basking black mamba. It lifted its head above the grass and it came for me. The horse spun round immediately, nearly unsaddling me in its haste, and it raced away from the danger. I kept my seat only by clutching onto the saddle pommel. I never looked back so I don't know how far the mamba chased us. It had been a close call.

* * *

Whilst I was learning the administrative secrets of running the Maleme tourist rest camp, Jurie was busy constructing a seven foot high game fenced enclosure in the White Waters section of the park. It was the department's intention to re-introduce those species of game animals that were known to have existed here in years gone by. Much of the dubious proof that they had once roamed these hills came from the animals' images amongst the many bushmen paintings in the park.

Two months after my arrival I was dispatched to White Waters to help Jurie finish the fencing. The first enclosure eventually encompassed about ten square miles of grassland and woodland and many small hills between the giant kopjes. I stayed with Jurie and Anna in their lovely old farmhouse where I was made to feel completely at home.

The animals were caught for the Matopos at Ngamo in Hwange National Park.

Ngamo was two hundred miles away to our northwest. I had the privilege of travelling there to pick up the animals that, so I was told, had already been captured.

Ngamo is a remote location in the eastern corner of Hwange. It is a huge open plain which was then covered in *kweek* (Cynodon) grass that the wildebeest and the zebra kept permanently cropped very short. So short was the grass the pale yellow Kalahari sand on which the grass grew was more prominently visible.

The Ngamo plains were two miles wide and two miles long. In the middle were two boreholes which kept a large natural pan full of water. One borehole was equipped with a windmill the other with a diesel engine. The plain was forever filled with wildebeest and zebra that continuously came to

the water to drink.

Senior Warden Bruce Austen, the game reserves second in command, was in-charge of the capture operations. He was ably assisted by rangers Harry Cantle and Tim Braybrooke. Tim had been a senior at my old school Plumtree when I was a junior. So I knew something about him. I was made to feel very welcome and was immediately incorporated into the team.

At the time of my arrival no animals had been captured. Somebody had got his wires crossed! That meant I was able to participate in the capture operations. I was elated. I was immersed in my element.

Our first task was to construct holding pens. This we did, using *msusu* (Terminalia) bush poles cut from the edges of the nearby teak forests. The standard uprights were set in holes bored into the sand substrate with steel hand augers. The thinner lateral poles were bound to the uprights with 8-gauge wire that was tightened by twisting with metal bars into what are called *Spanish-windless* fastenings.

We also had to prepare crates on the backs of the two 5-ton lorries that I had driven up in from the Matopos. We first constructed panels of bush pole walls on the flat ground. Then we erected the crate walls on the lorries, one side panel at a time. We fixed them to the lorry superstructure again with 8-gauge wire. We then tied roof poles over the top, connecting the two side panels of the crates together. This may sound all very Heath Robinson-ish. And it was. But it worked! There were no other alternatives.

The capture and translocation was done in the early months of 1960. This was before the advent of drugs and dart guns. It was before the invention of woven plastic sheeting that, much later, was used to guide whole herds of stampeding animals into large bomas, the animals being herded by a weaving helicopter. In those days helicopters had never ever plied the Rhodesian skies!

We captured the animals, one by one, after racing behind them at breakneck speeds in stripped down Land Rovers. We lassoed them around their heads and necks, or around one of their back legs, with loops made at the ends of soft cotton ropes. The nooses were strung from the tips of long, thin, stiff poles called *vangstoks* (catch-sticks). Sometimes we just grabbed the animals' tails as they raced along next to the vehicle. Whether we lassoed them or caught them by the tail, we had then to physically wrestle every animal to the ground by hand. It was exciting and rewarding work.

The animals were kept in the holding pens in groups of five and six for

several days. A transistor radio played next to the pens all day long, more softly at night. The constant strange noises from the radio had a calming effect on the captured animals.

I escorted the first two loads to the White Waters game camp. We travelled throughout the night to reach the Matopos just after first light. The first two loads comprised eight yearling zebra only one of which was a stallion, and ten yearling blue wildebeest, three males and seven females.

Immediately after their release I turned the trucks around and returned to Ngamo. The next two loads comprised six twelve-foot tall giraffe, three on each lorry. By comparison, adult bull giraffe are eighteen feet six inches tall at the head! The young giraffe required bush pole crates that were fourteen feet tall.

The tall crates caused problems on route because there were many low hanging telephone lines crossing the sandy country roads we journeyed along. To get around the problem I climbed to the top of each crate and, holding the telephone lines between my teeth above the top poles, I edged my way to the back as the lorry slowly moved forward beneath me. We travelled in the dead of night.

The next loads were buffalo and eland. Then came sable and kudu. In every case those first introductions were small in number. They were just a handful of sub-adult animals with a high preponderance of females.

Over the next several years more animals of these same species were brought to the Matopos from Ngamo to increase the numbers. Other species were brought in, too. In every case enough animals of each species were eventually introduced to ensure their successful inoculation. Five years later twenty white rhinos were introduced to the Matopos from Natal in South Africa.

In a few short months after my arrival the Matopos National Park had taken the first steps of its transformation. When I first came to the Matopos it was just a scenic tribal dormitory for the native folk who worked in the Bulawayo metropolis. When I left eleven months later it had begun its metamorphosis. Like a butterfly coming out of its drab chrysalis the Matopos was emerging as one of the most beautiful national parks in the country with a wide variety of resident wild animals.

All this had been planned long before my posting to Maleme. Nevertheless, because I was the only single member of staff on the national park team in 1960, I was the *only* Matopos field officer to participate in the

capture and translocation exercise.

* * *

Almost immediately after we had released the last batch of animals we began to lose them. I spent many long days walking the fence lines looking for signs of breakouts. There were none. I scoured the open grass lands and the edges of the broken hillsides looking for dead animals.

The first carcass I found told us immediately that we had a problem. The half-grown animals we had introduced were providing ideal and regular meals for the park's ubiquitous leopards.

A head office policy was quickly adopted. John Hatton was instructed to remove *all* the leopards from the fenced game park *and* from the surrounding area a mile out from the fence lines. Consequently my temporary transfer to White Waters became permanent in early March 1960.

I became a resident houseguest in Anna and Jurie Grobler's home. There I thrived in the comfortable Afrikaans family atmosphere and I put on a huge amount of weight with Anna's wonderful South African cuisine.

My permanent transfer to White Waters was the best thing that happened to me in the Matopos. Jurie had been living in the Matopos hills for more than two decades. He was a highly experienced leopard hunter but he could not carry out his regular job *and* hunt the game park leopards at the same time. He needed help.

Jurie knew I had shot a number of leopards before I came to the Matopos but he felt I needed something more. So over the next several months he taught me all his hard learned leopard hunting methods and techniques.

He was then fifty-six years old and not in very good health. So much of the hard work involved in the leopard control exercise quickly shifted onto my much younger shoulders.

The last seven months of my service in the Matopos was taken up almost exclusively with leopard control work. This involved procuring and laying out baits nearly every day and hunting leopards in and around the fenced game park nearly every night. It also involved leopard stock killer control in protection of the local native people's domesticated animals throughout the Matopos range.

To begin with Jurie and I hunted the game park together. Every night of the week found us driving round and round the new grader-scraped game viewing dirt tracks. Jurie always drove. I stood on the back of the Land Rover

with a powerful spotlight in my hands. We thus scoured the hillsides and the open vleis with the torch's powerful beam searching for the glowing eyes of the leopards that were, at first, relatively plentiful everywhere.

When we found one we tried to hunt it down on foot with small battery powered torches strapped to our heads. Thus equipped we followed each leopard's flashing eyes, climbing the hills the leopards climbed and slipping and sliding down the other side. Then we climbed the hill that lay beyond. All the time we relentlessly pursued those brilliant flashes of eyes. They were the only sign that betrayed the leopard's whereabouts. We went wherever those tell-tale eyes took us. Most hunts were fruitless the leopard eventually giving us the slip.

Sometimes we were lucky. We got our leopard. Then we had to carry its heavy body up and down yet more hills until we reached the nearest dirt road.

The job was exciting but it was a killer. We worked into the early hours of the morning every night. We drove round the game park enclosure for hours on end staring into the bright beam of the probing spotlight, and we climbed the hills in pursuit of those elusive bright eyes.

The next day we had to execute our normal daytime duties.

My daytime work entailed shooting baboons and laying their carcasses out as bait. Every morning I religiously revisited all the baits to see if leopards had fed on them during the night. Every now and again I shot a feral donkey for bait.

Whenever a leopard had visited a bait Jurie and I spent the afternoon setting steel leghold (gin) traps around it. They were medium-sized Canadian bear traps! Sometimes we were successful with the traps. More often not! But we continued trying. Nobody could have accused us of not trying!

This work regime was not sustainable. It was not sustainable by Jurie. It was not sustainable by me. It left us both exhausted. Each day we walked about in a total *dwaal* looking like zombies. We tried our best to do a good job but we were always dissatisfied with what we were able to achieve. Our faces were forever haggard. Our energy reserves were constantly tapping zero. So out of necessity we split the nocturnal hunts. One night Jurie went on duty and I slept the night through. The next night I went on duty. *That* programme worked best for both of us.

In the beginning success was relatively frequent but as we reduced the numbers of leopards in and around the game park the more difficult did it become to kill those that remained. It was more difficult because there were

fewer leopards to find and those we did find were infinitely more difficult to stalk. They became ever more elusive and ever more cunning. There is no animal quite so difficult to kill as a leopard that has been persistently pursued.

During the seven months that I lived at White Waters, Jurie and I between us killed over 20 leopards.

By the end of those seven months the killing of the young game animals had stopped. The following year more animals were introduced from Ngamo. Over time the animal herds grew in size, in age and in local experience. When the herds were mature they were able to absorb occasional losses due to leopard predation. The Matopos staff then stopped the leopard control work in the game park. The leopards rebuilt their numbers and a natural herbivore/predator regime was established.

In the beginning the killing of the resident leopards in the game park was vital. If it had not taken place it is doubtful that the Matopos would ever have had the numbers and variety of animals that today roam those wild and beautiful hills.

I recall very little about most of those leopard hunts. I cannot remember even one small part of many of them. That they happened I can only assure you because I recorded the numbers. Some of those hunts, however, I will never forget.

* * *

One night at the very beginning of our leopard control programme, I picked up intermittent flashes of eyes on an isolated hill in the middle of an open grassland. Jurie drove over the veld to the base of the hill to investigate. We were both sure that what we had seen was a leopard. We recognised the colour of the eyes and the way the animal moved. We confirmed it *was* a leopard only when we saw its spotted body walking round the high top edge of the hill.

There were boulders and small dongas surrounding the hill all hidden by long grass. This made further driving impossible. If we wanted to get this leopard we concluded, we would have to get out the vehicle and walk. So we extracted the Land Rover battery, attached the bright spotlight to it with crocodile clips, and set off after the leopard on foot.

We had two native game scouts with us that night. One of them, Justice, was tasked with carrying the Land Rover’s battery. The other stayed with the vehicle.

"Leave your rifle," Jurie instructed me. *"You are going to have to carry the battery just now."*

This remark puzzled me but I did not question it. I left my 9,3 mm. Mauser in the Land Rover. Jurie carried a single shot Greener 12 gauge shotgun. It had a lever action under the pistol grip that opened a top slide to the cartridge chamber. Jurie had great faith in shotguns. I never took to them maybe because of what we were about to experience!

Jurie was the man with the greater experience. I did as I was told. I trusted him implicitly.

To begin with I carried Jurie's shotgun. He carried and used the spotlight. Justice carried the battery on one shoulder.

"I am going to ask you to carry the battery when we get close to the leopard," Jurie explained to me quietly as we walked along. *"I don't trust these native game scouts when push comes to shove."*

"I was once hunting a leopard just like this," he went on. *"I wounded it with my first shot and it charged at us out of the darkness. The guy I had carrying the battery dropped the damn thing and took off into the night leaving me alone in the dark to face the leopard. I have never trusted* them *since."*

"What happened?" I prompted, *"…with the leopard?"*

"Oh," replied Jurie matter of factly. *"The leopard! It was wounded. It fell over dead in its charge. It never reached me… but that damn game scout never hunted with me again."*

Jurie was still clearly more concerned at having been let down by his native assistant than he was concerned about the fact that he could have been killed.

I remained silent thinking deeply about the kind of man Jurie Grobler was. That little story pushed him a notch higher up the ladder in my estimation.

"Anyway…" Jurie continued *"When we get closer I want you to take the battery off Justice. It's damned heavy but you are young and strong. You can manage it. When we get up very close we'll put the battery on the ground and I'll give you the torch. You will then be responsible for holding the beam on target. You got that?"*

"Yes."

"And if the leopard comes at us I want you to keep the spotlight on it no

matter what. Just remember it won't be able to see behind the light. So we will be safe just as long you keep that damn beam focussed on its eyes."

What Jurie said made sense. The story he had just told me started to take on a new three-dimensional shape. It occupied a great deal of my thoughts as we continued with the hunt.

We walked round the hill. The hill was relatively small, just a jumble of granite boulders. I continued to carry Jurie's shotgun. Justice continued to carry the battery. Jurie held the back of the spotlight's reflector case on his mouth. He looked directly over the top rim. We stopped regularly as we progressed through the rough bush, scanning the hillside above with the bright light. For a long time we saw nothing.

At first I believed the leopard was walking ahead of us constantly positioning itself round the next edge of the hilltop. It never exposed itself. It never showed its eyes. After about half an hour I began to have doubts. I grew despondent.

"It's gone," I said disconsolately to Jurie. *"It must have come down off the hill and made off through the grass."*

"No," Jurie said confidently. *"It's still up there. He is just keeping ahead of us and out of sight. He'll get tired of the game just now."*

So Jurie had believed what I had believed before, and more. It seemed he knew from experience what the leopard was doing *and* what it was going to do. That made me feel better.

I wasn't as sure as he seemed to be but I tagged along faithfully carrying the shotgun for Jurie should he ever need it.

Suddenly everything happened just as Jurie had said it would. On the hillside up above, slightly to the front of us, we saw the leopard sitting at the base of a large boulder.

"Hah-haaaah," I heard Jurie say under his breath. *"Just keep going,"* he told me quietly. He kept the spot on the leopard whilst picking his way forward through the bushes and boulders in the lamp's penumbral light.

When we reached a point not quite below where the leopard was positioned, Jurie stopped. Keeping the spot focussed on the leopard's face he quietly instructed the game guard to put the battery down on the ground.

"Now give me the shotgun," he said to me in a whisper. *"You take the torch Ron. And remember, no matter what happens keep the light on him."*

The leopard was no more than fifty yards away and at a forty-five degree angle above us. It was having trouble looking down into the bright beam. It

half closed its eyes to ward off the heavy glare. As Jurie had said it would, it had become tired of the hide and seek game it had been playing.

Jurie had loaded the weapon with an AAA cartridge. AAA was not as heavy a load as SSG buckshot but it was heavy enough. It carried 42 pellets against the SSG's much heavier 17 but, Jurie asserted, the smaller and much more numerous lead pellets were far more effective on leopard.

Jurie stood back from the light not letting any movement in its peripheral glow betray our presence. From behind the light and over my head he discharged the weapon.

I flinched at the bang but kept the light on target. The shot ploughed into the leopard's head and chest. A pattern of irregular puffs splattered across the granite boulder behind it. These strikes were from those outer pattern pellets that had not hit the target.

All hell broke loose.

The leopard reared up and started fighting the rock behind it. It roared loudly, growled and hissed and thrashed around like something demented. Then it came tumbling down the hillside rolling head over heels, bouncing over the rocks. It made no attempt to stop its downhill progress. All the while the terrible roaring and the coarse growling continued.

"HOLD THE LIGHT ON IT" Jurie shouted. The command was urgent. *"Don't take the light off it whatever you do!"*

As he spoke Jurie worked the lever on the shotgun. *Yunk… Yunk… Yunk….*

I heard the action going again and again as he repeatedly yanked on the lever beneath the pistol grip. The Greener was a single shot weapon. That meant Jurie had to physically eject the spent shell and replace it by hand with a fresh one.

"Damn…" he cursed. *"Damn it…."*

The leopard slithered off the bottom of the hill and came to a stop. There it lay writhing in pain and bewilderment. It looked up into the light and hissed in anger. It was no more than ten yards in front of me. There was nothing between us. Just a few blades of tall dry grass.

"Hold the light on it," Jurie told me again. He spoke quietly almost into my ear. There was a vital cadence in his voice.

I heard the sound of metal scraping on metal. I flicked my eyes away from the leopard. I just *had* to see what Jurie was doing. In the glow of the

light behind the beam I saw Jurie fiddling with his penknife. He had inserted the blade into the chamber. I knew, then, he was trying to get the sharp point under the rim of a jammed cartridge case.

Oooh… Hell…. My mind ran riot!

At the exact moment I returned my attention to the leopard it rushed at me, looking straight into the bright beam of the spotlight. The charge was silent, deadly, dripping with malice. My nerves, already on edge and stretched to breaking point, began to hum. My body quivered with fear. The desire to turn and to run was overwhelming but I stood my ground. I held the spot firmly on the face of the charging leopard.

The leopard ground to a surprising halt right under the hot reflector. It stood there cowering and hissing, not three feet from my outstretched hand. My body was quaking with an all-powerful fear and all-embracing tension. I held the beam, quivering now, in the leopard's face.

For what seemed an eternity the leopard moved about in front of the light squinting up into the core of its beam. Hissing. Growling. Baring its teeth. In reality the episode lasted probably no more than a few seconds. Whatever! My wide eyes never left the animal's face. What was happening was unbelievable.

I watched the leopard's angry eyes. One was bloodshot, damaged by a shotgun pellet. The other was bright yellow. They were malevolent eyes. They were eyes that reflected many things. Fear, confusion, bewilderment and pain! Deep down in my psyche I felt a twinge of conscience. Despite the dire circumstances of the moment I felt sorry for the leopard.

Blood was oozing out of several punctures in the leopard's face and across its chest where the shotgun pellets had entered its body. Some of the holes were bleeding profusely.

Jurie had the weapon to his shoulder. He stepped forward to get a better shot at the target. The end of the barrel stuck out into the beam. The leopard saw it and made ready to jump. It was too slow. There was another loud bang. The leopard's head disintegrated. This time, at point blank range, every pellet entered the leopard's head. They blew it apart.

My first conscious feeling was one of huge relief. A suffocating pain hit my chest as a huge gush of air left my lungs. While time had been standing still I had been holding my breath!

Suddenly my whole body began to shake. It shook uncontrollably, the consequence of the enormous adrenaline rush that came with the release of

tension. It had been a frightening but exhilarating few moments.

The hunt was over. I had survived my first *really* dangerous hunting encounter with one of Africa's Big Six.

I felt rather than saw Jurie looking at me. He was looking at me closely. I was then a young man of twenty years old. I was still an unknown quantity to the old man of great experience. I kept my eyes focussed on the dead body of the leopard but in the reflected light of the torch beam I could see a broad smile running rife across Jurie's face. I was relieved to see that his hands on the shotgun were shaking just as wildly as mine were on the torch. This pleased me no end. I realised in that moment that I was no different from someone whom I considered to be one of the best! It made me feel much better about myself.

"*Jy het goed gedoen, Ron,*" Jurie finally said in Afrikaans, his home language. *You did well, Ron*. He clapped a still quivering hand on my shoulder. "*You did well.*"

I smiled tentatively. I said nothing. There was nothing to say. In fact I couldn't talk. My throat was choking with emotion. Coming from whence they had come those few words were great praise. Very great praise indeed!

"*But we were in no real danger,*" Jurie continued, "*Just so long as you held that beam on his face. He couldn't see behind it.*"

I realised then that all along Jurie had been in full control of his emotions. He had *known* the leopard would be reluctant to launch itself into the dark void that lay behind the bright spotlight. I also understood at that moment that he had taken a huge risk. He had put his faith in me, an unknown factor that I would not turn and run. He didn't know how close I had been to doing just that!

"*Leopards like to see what it is they are attacking!*" It was a lesson I was never to forget.

"*Where's Justice?*" Jurie suddenly asked. There was an angry tone in his voice. Our stalwart native game scout was gone, gone into the night. He was one who had *not* been prepared to take any chances.

* * *

I responded one day to a leopard stock killing complaint that had occurred in the northern region of the park. The countryside was dominated by jumbles of high rocky hills but the complainant's village, an untidy conglomeration of badly thatched pole and mud huts, was set in the middle of a wide barren plain. The ground all around was bare. It had been grazed flat for many years

by too many cattle, sheep and goats.

In those days I often wondered why national parks responded to such reports. I believed the leopards were doing a fine job de-stocking the excessive numbers of domesticated animals in the Matopos. In my mind the health of the veld was all-important. Coming from farming stock I was all the time concerned that the soil and the grass in the national park were being constantly degraded by too many cattle, sheep and goats. Every one of the village headmen owned infinitely more livestock than their residence permits allowed.

Much later in life I learnt that the issues at stake in this widespread and general African conundrum are much more complicated than meets the eye. Africa is a complex continent and to resolve its ecological problems, like overstocking with domesticated animals and the commercial poaching of wildlife, needs the hand of a master craftsman. In those days I was far from being amongst that elite. My youthful drive was then just to *do or die* and my volatile and impetuous nature caused me to think about and to react to these problems in an impetuous manner that I now know was wrong.

There was a barren ploughed field alongside the village surrounded by a skimpy brush fence. The barrier was just big enough to keep cattle out of the cropland when crops were growing in it.

A roughly constructed bush pole cattle kraal stood next to the village huts. This was where the family's cattle were housed at night. A smaller roofed enclosure was reserved for the family's sheep and goats. The whole ménage was set against a small hillock of piled up granite boulders. The kopje protruded out of the open plain like a disfiguring pimple on a teenager's smooth young face.

The leopard had come down to the kraal out of the kopje and it had taken a small calf just as the dawn was breaking. The calf had wriggled through a gap in the pole fence during the night and it had been wandering around outside bleating for its mother. It had thus advertised its presence and its predicament. It was easy prey for the opportunistic stock killer.

The village headman had heard the big cat catch the calf. He had rushed out of his sleeping hut to defend the animal. Using the village dogs he chased the leopard off. But he was too late. By the time he had rallied to the calf's assistance it was already dead. He found the leopard dragging its prey up the small hillock into the rocks behind his hut.

The carcass was intact and the old man left it where he had found it. This

is what the national park warden at Maleme had told the people to do if they wanted his assistance. Early the next morning the old headman had sent his eldest son on a bicycle to Maleme Rest Camp. There the young man had reported the killing to John Hatton.

Prior to my posting to the Matopos Jurie Grobler attended to all such complaints. Now it became my job!

I arrived at the village in the government Land Rover sometime around midday. I didn't know what to expect and just hoped the people had not removed the carcass.

It often turned out that, after travelling many miles to get to a leopard kill early, I discovered there was nothing left. The villagers, starved of red meat protein in their diet as they normally were, often cut up the carcass whilst it was still fresh. They would prepare the meat, some for immediate consumption, some to be dried out in the sun under a smoky fire, for future use. The leopard then had nothing to come back to in the early hours of the following night.

Whenever I came across such a situation I normally aborted the hunt and immediately returned home. When a leopard had nothing to come back to the following night it moved on. Sometimes it killed again at the same village or at one nearby within a few days.

If there was no carcass for the leopard to come back to there was no point in me wasting my time. If the leopard was a veteran stock killer and it killed again, maybe next time the villagers would leave the carcass alone.

This time was different. This time the old man of the village told me upon my arrival that the carcass was still in one piece. He had left the dead calf where he had found it, halfway up the hill, and he had instructed his family members not to go near it. He wanted this leopard dead. He did not want to have it kill another of his animals the very next night.

I had come prepared to camp out for the night but I did not immediately set up camp. I wanted to first see the kill in order to arrange in my mind's eye just how I was going to go about killing the leopard. I had brought gin traps with me just in case setting traps was the best option.

"Show me the dead calf, mdala" I instructed the headman after he told me what had transpired.

Mdala, *"old man"*, is a respectful title in the Ndebele culture. It is a courtesy afforded to elderly men by younger people.

He led me to the back of his sleeping hut and together we laboured up

the steep slope of the hill behind. We reached the first of the huge boulders that, higher up, were jumbled one on top of the other. I carried my Husqvarna 9.3 mm loosely in my hands. The rifle was cocked, there was a bullet up the spout and I had the safety catch fully on.

The Mauser safety catch is a leaf at the back end of the rifle bolt. When the leaf is turned over to the right the safety mechanism is fully on. The rifle is ready to fire when the leaf is turned fully to the left. When the leaf is left standing erect the rifle is safe but it takes just a flick of the thumb to make it live. The half-safe position is used when a state of danger is imminent but not immediately vital. This is why I prefer the full Mauser action to any other.

We followed the drag marks through the grass and leaves. The old man pointed out all the signs to me as we progressed up the hill. When we reached the place where he had left the dead calf it was gone. The leopard had returned in daylight to retrieve its kill and it had dragged the carcass into the rocks higher up.

I was pleased. *This* leopard was bold and full of temerity. *That* was a good omen. I felt sure now I would soon have it in the bag.

"*Gghaau,*" the old man gasped gutturally, his eyes wide in disbelief. There was nothing else he needed to say. What had transpired was obvious.

I looked up the hill following the new drag marks with my eyes as best I could. The calf had been a small one so the leopard could have taken it anywhere inside that jigsaw puzzle of giant rocks piled, as they were, one on top of the other.

I gauged the size of the hillock. It was really very small compared to the giant mountains of similar structures that loomed on every side all around us. It was surrounded by a huge expanse of close-cropped open ground. Even a rash leopard, I surmised, would not voluntarily risk crossing the open ground during daylight. Subconsciously I knew the leopard was still inside the kopje. I also knew it was accessible to me even in daylight.

"*How many dogs do you have, Mdala?*" I asked the headman quietly.

"*Four,*" he announced with brevity. He held one hand towards me displaying four erect fingers.

I considered my options. I could locate the leopard with his dogs, of that I was certain, but would I also chase it away? I again looked across the open expanse of bare flat ground that stretched out all around beneath us. What I saw convinced me the dogs would never flush our quarry from the kopje's

many boulder retreats in the middle of the day.

There was no kill around which to set my traps. So trapping the leopard was, for the time being at least, not an option. Having no kill on which to focus my attentions also eliminated the possibility that I could lie in wait for the leopard at dusk.

There was a good chance we could relocate the calf with or without the dogs. The drag marks were conspicuous. If we found the carcass trapping might be again possible. There was an equally good chance we might *not* find the carcass. There may be nothing left of it. The leopard could have eaten it all.

If we could *not* relocate the carcass in daylight my only option then would be to hunt the leopard after dark, with a spotlight, in and around the conglomeration of rocks high on the summit. Higher up there was more granite than ground so following the drag marks up there would be more difficult than was the case down where we were standing in the lower elevations of the hillock. The more I thought about the problem the more I leant towards using the dogs in the bright light of day.

I made up my mind. *"Go get your dogs,"* I instructed the old headman.

I had never before hunted a leopard with dogs but the procedure seemed pretty obvious. The dogs, I believed, would do all the work. They would follow the scent of the leopard wherever it went until they eventually treed it, or chased it up a high rock. Then, if I could keep up with the running dogs, all I would have to do was to shoot the leopard from a safe distance. The leopard's attentions would then, I believed, be focussed on the dogs and not on me.

It didn't quite work out like that! Indeed, whenever and wherever I worked with dogs in later years the end result was never as I had hoped it would be. My early unsatisfactory experiences with dogs put me off using dogs for life.

The dogs arrived and we set off in pursuit of the leopard, just the old headman and me.

At that stage in my hunting career I had not yet learnt the advantage of having good and loyal trackers. In retrospect, I now know that none of the native game scouts that I worked with in the Matopos had any worthwhile tracking or hunting capabilities. Neither would any of them have developed into reliable and trustworthy hunting companions. In those days my only true *hunting* companion was myself. The native game scouts I had were mere *tag*

alongs.

On this occasion I had the fearless old headman at my side. I was beginning to like him more and more as each minute passed.

I was then and I am now, a loner. I was a hunter at heart. I relied totally upon myself. I was a young man with little fear but a great deal of well-tempered caution. Despite my tender years I had a surprising understanding of the natural world. I had a great deal of patience when hunting and I was developing a huge confidence in my hunting capabilities. My ability to handle leopards under any circumstances was growing by the day. I also had an unwavering determination to succeed and I had already developed surprising instincts that did not allow me to take unnecessary risks.

Gone now was the trepidation I had experienced with my first leopard kill on the Angwa. The terrible funk I had endured with my first elephant at Macaha was behind me. My performance that day still irked me but I had laid its memory to rest in the shadows of my past. My Matopos days saw me starting to emerge from my chrysalis but I still had no idea just what kind of butterfly I was going to become. The transformation was not then yet complete. There was still some incubating to do! My leopard hunting experiences in the Matopos kneaded the dough of my now quickly developing hunting character.

So it was that the old black headman and I, with a rifle in my hands and a spear in his, set off after the stock killing leopard in the heat of the day. The old man's pack of four village curs initially ran about all around our heels but once they had picked up the spoor they coursed ahead. Three of them showed great fear. One had more courage. The old man walked behind them urging them on with many and varied homely verbal communications with which the dogs were familiar.

The hairs on every dog's back were standing erect. As they progressed along the drag marks they growled continuously and softly to and at each other. They knew, all of them, the danger involved in what they were doing. The scent of the leopard was everywhere and, except for the one brave hound, they were clearly reluctant to engage the animal they were following.

I walked along next to the old man directly behind the dogs my rifle in my hands. I was starting to enjoy myself. I had a soft nosed cartridge in the chamber and I lifted the safety catch lever into the half-safe position.

We had not gone far when a commotion erupted ahead. The leopard had gone to ground in a rock shelter amidst the boulders. The lead dog found it.

The dog moved straight into the shelter and started barking and growling at the big cat.

I rushed to the rocky overhang all ready to shoot the leopard. The other three dogs were all around my feet barking and yowling hysterically. Not one of them was prepared go into the cave. They were quite happy to leave their leader to sort out whatever the mess he had got himself into.

The deep and resonant growls of the leopard and its loud hissing threats were easy to distinguish from the lesser barking and growling of the dog. The hair on the back of my neck was standing erect. The hairs on my forearms were stiff like bristles. Adrenaline rushed through my veins. My whole body was quaking.

With great trepidation I looked into the cave. The dog was standing stiff legged. All its attentions were focused to its right hand side. It was barking furiously at the leopard which I could not see.

There was a loud and angry roar. In a flash of movement the leopard rushed at the dog. There was a skirmish. The dog came flying through the air out of the cave. It landed at my feet.

After that one attacking movement the leopard turned and in a blurring moment it disappeared into the rocks behind. I hadn't had a chance to raise my rifle and to aim let alone to pull off even a snapshot. Everything happened in one amazing split second of time.

The leopard was gone.

The brave little dog lay whimpering at my feet. Its entrails were writhing and squirming on the leaves next to its ripped open belly. It raised its head and looked up at me with limpid pleading eyes. It was asking for help. I didn't know what to do.

The old headman knew what to do. He stepped forward and, muttering to himself angrily, he did the only sensible thing he could have done. He whacked the dog on the head with his knobkerrie, snuffing the dog's life out in one fell blow. The dog's body stretched in an almost leisurely manner. It quivered all over. Finally it lay still. It had the paid the price for its bravery. The remaining three dogs were reluctant to continue with the hunt. The old man picked up his dead dog by the back legs and he hurled its body into the cave. Its carcass was something else the leopard could feed on come nightfall.

I went inside the cave and found what remained of the calf. It was lying on top of an open sheet of granite and was now more than half consumed.

There was no place where I could set gin traps. There was no place where I could lie in wait for the leopard at dusk.

I lifted the dead dog by the scruff of its neck and laid it next to the calf on the rock. It may just keep the leopard occupied for a little while longer.

The old man came into the cave. He watched my every move his spear at the ready. When I left the cave he followed. We retired back down the hill together.

I now had but one option. I would have to await the coming of the night. I would then have to seek out the leopard in the darkness with the bright beam of my big spotlight.

* * *

I set up camp on the far side of the valley under the canopies of the forest trees that ringed the base of a high rock dwala. There I lay down on my camp stretcher to wait out the rest of the day. I slept like a baby throughout what remained of the afternoon.

This is a common scenario when hunting stock killing predators. It is often necessary to wait for many hours until the appropriate moment came to dispatch your quarry. You are, therefore, either waiting for night to fall or you are waiting for the leopard, or lion, or hyena, to trap itself in one of your gins. There is nothing you can do to hurry the process. These repeated experiences instilled in me a huge capacity for patience.

I had supper out of tins just before nightfall and prepared the tools of my trade for the night: my rifle; my headlamp with its elastic headband; and the big handheld spotlight. I removed the vehicle battery from the government Land Rover. I had one uniformed native game scout with me that night whose job it was to carry the battery on his shoulder. Everything set I waited for total darkness. Happily there was no moon.

It was my intention to walk round the lower rim of the kopje and try to locate the leopard on the higher levels with the beam of the big spotlight. Once we had him pinpointed I intended to walk up the hill alone with just the small spotlight on my head. It provided enough light for me to shoot. I had already determined that it would be physically impossible to have the game scout carry the heavy battery all about and through the jumble of rocks higher up.

My game plan was all worked out.

The scout and I walked across the bare open ground to the village in the bright starlight. The headman was waiting for us. His whole family was

present. Some family members sat around flickering log fires in the compound. Some stood immobile leaning against a tree trunk or a pole fence. They watched intently. None spoke a word. Clearly the old man had told them to keep quiet.

"Ready?" I asked the old headman.

"Yebo Nkosana," he replied. *"I am ready."*

Calling a young white man *Nkosana* was a sign of respect. Translated *Nkosana* means *Little Chief*. That meant I had already scored several credits with him. Calling me Nkosana meant that he understood one day I would be a great *Big Chief*, an *Nkosi*.

The old man held a spear in his left hand and a knobkerrie in the right. The latter was a primitive weapon that he had already demonstrated he knew how to use.

Spears, knobkerries and knobkerrie-axes were the standard *battle* equipment of most native men in Rhodesia in the twentieth century. These were the poachers' tools of the trade together with dogs and bundles of wire and cable snares.

The only other weapon the old man carried that night was a rough bladed knife with a wooden handle. It was sheathed in a wooden scabbard that was secured to his belt with raw goatskin leathers.

I looked the old man over and smiled. He was a typical rural Ndebele of his time right down to the ragged old European clothes that he wore. The sandals on his feet, *maskatcholos*, were made from motorcar tyres. He must have spent many days cutting those tyres into strips, sewing the strips together and then sewing on the tyre soles.

There was a satisfying warmth in my heart just being in this old man's company. I liked these old generation natives. I particularly liked the Ndebele. I liked them immensely.

"O.K." I said. *"Let's get on with it."*

I attached the crocodile clips to the battery terminals and flicked on the spotlight's powerful beam. Its sharp light cut through the darkness like a knife. I swung the beam about the village picking out, one by one, the old man's stoic family members. When the bright spot hit them in the face they all, one by one, cast their eyes to the ground. The light was just too bright!

I cast the beam up the hillock working the spot over the rocks, higher and higher, behind the headman's hut.

Towards the crest there was the flash of a leopard's eyes. The big cat, clear as daylight, was standing completely relaxed on one of the summit rocks. It looked down on us, calmly, as we prepared for the night's hunt in the village below.

"NANSO!" exclaimed the old man immediately, excitedly. *There it is.* The bright white eyes winked out and the pale form of the big cat disappeared into the rocks.

I had the proof I needed of the leopard's whereabouts so the big spotlight was already redundant. It was now up to me to get the job done with my head torch and my rifle.

"O.K…You guys stay here. I am going up alone." I spoke haltingly in the vernacular. I was picking up the Sindebele language very quickly with John Hatton's help.

"Aaiee…" the old Ndebele exclaimed. *"I cannot let you go up there alone, Nkosana. I will come with you."*

"No, Mdala. I am going alone."

"Aaaieeee…."

"You all *stay here,"* I said again. *"I cannot hunt with a whole herd of people all around me."*

With that command firmly established I left the protesting old headman and my game scout in the middle of the village. I switched on my headlamp, focussed its beam directly to the fore and set off up the hill alone.

There was a lot of trash on the ground, mainly twigs and leaves from the tree canopies above my head. There was also discarded human detritus. Beyond the last of the tall trees there were no more dead leaves. I waded through some tall grass then I was walking on the bare rough surfaces of solid granite boulders. My main concern was that I should not sprain my ankle in a rocky crack or slip down an open crevasse.

Throughout my journey the beam of the torch was more often than not searching for a safe passage through and over the rocks than it was looking ahead for sign of the leopard. The higher up I went the more dangerous my footing became.

The leopard was no doubt well aware of my progress. It *must* have seen the flashes of bright light that periodically illuminated its rocky fastness.

The dead calf and the dog's carcass were not where I had left them. The

leopard had returned and carried them off to some other place. I ventured further up the hill.

The closer I got to the summit the more excited I became. I moved ever more carefully. I moved ever more slowly. And I spent more time scanning the rocks in front of me with the torch beam. I probed every cave and every rock shelter that I passed. A vision of the gutted village cur was constantly in the forefront of my mind.

My breathing became seriously laboured. This was inevitable. It had been a fast, hard and steep climb. My heavy breathing was not good. If I was going to shoot straight I *had* to get my breath back.

I started to rest more often. I used this time to calm my senses, to let my breathing get back to a more normal rhythm and to more thoroughly scan the rocks ahead with the torch beam.

On one of these stops I smelt the stench. There was the familiar heady smell of blood and raw flesh. The pungent odour of freshly exposed gut content was rich in my nostrils. The kill was nearby!

There was also the fetid pong of fresh leopard scat. It told me the leopard was probably close!

I flashed the torch beam around searching for the leopard's kill. I found nothing. From the heavy smells I knew I *must* be standing right on top of it. How literal did that thought turn out to be! I looked down and saw that I was standing in a liquid puddle of black excrement. I had found the leopard's fresh dropping!

I was absorbed with a feeling of disgust at finding my one foot in the leopard's stinking dung when a subtle sixth sense pervaded my being. Something had changed! I had seen nothing. There had been no sound.
Not a whisper! I just became conscious of the leopard's presence.

I never ignore paranormal intelligence.

Standing still I slowly lifted my head. The beam of the torch seemed to know exactly where it was supposed to go. It sketched a pattern of light up the surface of the boulder directly in front of me. As it rose higher the leopard's form slowly took shape in the reflected light. Finally the bright core of the beam locked onto the leopard's face.

The leopard was standing broadside on looking directly down at me. Its eyes squinted as the bright light burned into its pupils. It turned its head away but it kept looking back trying to probe the darkness behind the light. There was no menace in its stance, no malevolence in its stare, no fear, just

curiosity and some bewilderment.

He was perilously close. No more than fifteen feet separated our staring eyes. I had to crick my neck to keep the beam pointing upwards into the leopard's face. I felt extremely vulnerable. I was vulnerable! Just one small leap and the leopard could pounce onto my shoulders.

Then the mauling would begin.…my hands were quivering as I gently turned the Mauser safety catch into the fully 'off' position. I was careful not to let the metal key *click*. The beam, all the while, remained locked on the leopard's face!

Slowly I raised my left hand to my forehead keeping all sign of it out of the bright light. I gripped the reflector case firmly behind the beam. Holding the beam on the leopard's face I moved my head to the right. The elastic headband slipped around my head until the reflector was located over my left eyebrow.

It is impossible to shoot using a headlamp unless the beam is directed along the length of the rifle barrel. To make that happen the torch had to be located on my brow above my left eye. I had it right. I was ready to shoot.

The leopard never moved except that it turned its head away once or twice to relieve the discomfort of the bright beam in its eyes. As the rifle barrel moved up into the light, however, the leopard's body tensed. Its stare became less casual, more concerned. But it did not move away.

Slowly, methodically, I placed the bead of the foresight onto the leopard's face just below its right eye. Impacting at that point the bullet would traverse the skull upwards and pass through the brain. The 'vee' of the rear sight snuggled around the bead. I settled my cheek onto the rifle's wooden stock. I took a deep breath holding my body still.

I was no longer conscious of my beating heart. My hands were now steady as a rock. My nerves were under complete control. Gently I squeezed the trigger.

The rifle's butt kicked sharply against my shoulder and up against my cheek. A red and white flash spewed out from the muzzle racing away towards the target. The bullet hit the leopard exactly where I had aimed. It punched the big cat's head away from the light. Its body fell down onto the sloping rock. It slid down the intervening space between us, backwards, and tumbled onto the flat rock at my feet.

I stood my ground a new round already up the spout. The leopard's magnificent golden body, covered all over in shining black rosettes,

shimmered in nervous reaction as its spirit departed to a happier hunting ground.

All around, up and down the valley and through all the many caves and rock shelters in the high Matopos mountains that surrounded us, the reverberations of the rifle's echoing report rolled and rolled and rolled. The deep and resonant sounds went on and on in a seemingly endless cacophony until finally they exhausted their energies in the vastness of the night.

Only then did I lift my foot out of the stinking excrement.

As I moved my foot I became aware of another malevolent presence. The hackles on the back of my neck erected even though, once again, I had neither heard nor seen anything. Again I just *knew* something had happened.

I lifted the beam of the torch slowly, as before, to canvas the rock above me. Just a few feet behind where the first leopard had stood there now stood another. This one was facing me its head held high. It was casting its head around with palpable agitation. It looked to the left, then to the right and back again into the bright beam of the torch. The loud report of the shot that had killed its brother, and the heavy reverberations that followed, had clearly unnerved this fellow. He was searching for his companion.

The torch on my head was still in the correct position. There was already another cartridge in the chamber. It was a simple procedure for me just to raise the rifle to my shoulder, to repeat the aiming process, and to gently squeeze the trigger a second time.

The second leopard dropped dead where it had been standing. This one, too, slid down the sloping surface of the rock, head first, leaving a smear of blood on the granite rock behind it. Its body tumbled directly on top of the first leopard. And there it too writhed gently in its death throes.

Even as the echoes of the second shot rolled round and round the mountains I was casting my torch beam all over the high rocky summit probing the rounded tops, searching all the gaps between the giant granite boulders. I was looking for a third leopard but that was just too much to ask. There had only been two.

Both these leopards were males in their prime. There were no fighting scars on their faces. They were young nomadic adults. They were wandering males without a territory to defend. There was no sign of the long fluffy coats that separated the juveniles from those that were fully mature. Both their skins were perfect.

* * *

Relating *all* the stories of the leopards that Jurie Grobler and I hunted together, and those that I hunted on my own, that year would make repetitious and boring reading. Few had any hunting qualities that need reporting. One or two, however, stick indelibly in my mind.

There is one more Matopos leopard-hunting story that I would still like to tell.

John Hatton at Maleme, the recipient of all stock killing reports, had been badgered by an Ndebele headman who lived just outside the south-eastern boundary of the park. The old man had asked for help with a leopard that had been killing his cattle on a regular basis. He had reported five cows lost in as many weeks. The fact that this headman lived outside the park boundary gave him a lower priority rating than those who resided inside the park and who had similar complaints. As the weeks passed the man's pleas for help became strident.

Jurie and I were up to our eyebrows hunting leopards in the White Waters game park during this period so John Hatton was reluctant to call on either of us to attend to this complaint. Finally, when the headman's calls for help could no longer be ignored, I was dispatched to attend to the problem.

I arrived at the complainant's kraal late in the afternoon and was confronted by a mass of meat ropes drying and being smoked on bush pole racks in the middle of the headman's village. This, I was advised, was what remained of the leopard's last kill two days before.

The whole village had heard the leopard make its kill in the middle of the night. Aroused by the ruckus just outside the village palisade the old man, his two adult sons and his pack of scrawny dogs, had driven off the leopard before it had even settled down to feed.

"Hah! " I exclaimed angrily to the embarrassed and bumbling headman. *"Why did you call me to help you when you have already* benghisaed *the leopard's kill?"*

"Haaaaieee…." The headman replied in remorse, shaking his head. *"I have asked for help so many times,"* the old man explained, *"and nobody came to help me. How did I know that you would be coming this time?"*

He had a point!

"I could not waste the meat, Baba… Nkosana," he continued. His pleading for me to understand was vibrant, almost obsequious. *"I could not waste the meat."*

"Where can I camp?" I asked him with unnecessary brevity.

"I can prepare a hut for you in the village," the headman said graciously.

"No… No…" I said, relenting, smiling my thanks to the old man.

"All I need is a big shady tree."

"There is a big wild fig tree over there…." The headman said pointing to a small kopje that lay further down the open vlei.

"And water?"

"I will get my wives to bring water to your camp. They will bring water whenever you need it. And my sons will bring you dry wood for your camp fire."

The village was located up against a small granite hill that was clothed in trees and shrubs all round its base. In the close vicinity of the pole and mud walled huts all the trees had been removed. Just one remained, a big shady mphafa tree in the middle of the village. This was the family's indaba tree, the place where the headman conducted his tribal and family business.

Like most other villages in the Matopos this one comprised a conglomeration of roughly constructed and loosely thatched huts surrounded by a rough-pole palisade six feet in height. The ground inside the pole wall was swept clean. It was as flat and uncluttered as the top of a billiard table.

There was a large cattle kraal on the outside of the village palisade. It, too, was made of rough tree trunks. The cattle kraal was empty when I arrived but there was a huge mound of cattle manure in it. This told me the headman's cattle slept inside the protective boma every night of their lives.

In the distance I could hear cattle lowing. The village piccannins had already gathered the scattered herd and were driving the animals slowly back to the village, back to the cattle kraal where they would spend the night.

The village overlooked a broad once grassy plain that meandered between a mass of low granite hills. The grass had been cropped short by too many cattle over far too many years. This had resulted in a huge donga that snaked its way downstream through the middle of the plain. Along the bottom of the donga, ten feet below the surrounding flat ground, there was a narrow bed of golden sand over which a shallow stream of water flowed throughout the rainy season. It was dry at the time of my visit.

All around, to the horizon in every direction, was a magnificent vista of the granite hills of the Matopos range. The native peoples of the Matopos lived and worked in this beautiful environment every day of their lives yet they never really noticed it. And neither, I realise now in retrospect, did I.

I set up my frugal camp before nightfall. My stretcher was laid out on top of a large canvas tarpaulin that was spread over the ground under the big wild fig. My game scout helper of the day, Solomon, prepared a log fire and got my paraffin Tilley lamp going. He then prepared my evening meal of boiled potatoes, bully beef and baked beans. The beef and the beans came out of tins.

I was exhausted. I was perpetually exhausted. It was a common physical state that I was getting used to. The continuous nocturnal leopard hunting I was doing in the White Waters game park was keeping my vitality and my energy levels constantly at a very low ebb. That state of affairs, more than anything else, was the factor that made me decide to spend the night camping out.

I lay down on my camp stretcher and quietly looked up into the darkening tree canopy. There were birds flitting about in the treetop but I was too tired to bother identifying them. The change, having nothing to do for a while, was a relief. And with no leopard kill to attend it seemed that I was going to enjoy the luxury of a full night's sleep. I shut my eyes and dosed off.

Solomon woke me half an hour later. He carried a tin plate in his hands full of the steaming food he had prepared.

"Thanks Solomon," I said sleepily, reluctantly sitting up on the bed. *"Put it on the table."*

I wearily lifted my body from the bed and sat down on my canvas camp chair at the table. Solomon collected the hissing Tilley lamp from near the campfire and placed it on the table directly across from my plate. I got stuck into the food. I was famished.

It was by then dark. There was no moon but there was plenty of light from the bright stars hanging in the sky high above. The Tilley lamp, however, masked all that reality with its own bright light.

No sooner had I started to eat than a commotion erupted in the village. There was the sound of cattle bellowing and of dry poles splintering. Cattle raced across the open veld their many hooves beating the ground to a pulp. The noise of the stampede was thunderous. Slowly the sound of pounding hooves and moaning cattle disappeared into the far away distance down the vlei.

I stopped eating. Listening. Hearing everything. A single beast began lowing softly in the darkness. It was not too far away across the open grassland. I judged it to be three to four hundred yards away on the far side of

the donga. It was a mournful melancholy sound that I had never heard before. It was the sound a beast makes when it is being strangled to death by the jaws of a big cat.

When the furore died down I became conscious of Solomon standing at my side. I looked up at him. *"The leopard has killed again,"* he said succinctly. I nodded. I had worked that out for myself.

I resumed my interrupted meal. *"You can make me a cup of coffee, Solomon."*

"Yes Sir," Solomon replied. He went off to carry out my instructions.

I pushed my empty plate to one side of the steel camp table and took up my mug of hot coffee. It was strong and good. It tasted much better mixed with the fresh milk from the village than it usually did. Coffee made with powdered Klim milk, my normal camp fare, made the beverage taste artificial.

There came the sound of running feet. A young man, one of the headman's sons, presented himself at my table.

"Nkosana…." The young man said out of breath. *"The leopard has come. It has killed another cow?"*

"I heard it," I answered laconically. *"I heard it all"*

"Nkosana, my father wants you to go and kill it."

"All in good time," I replied with some nonchalance. *"I want to finish my coffee first."*

"But… Nkosi…?"

"Go tell your father that the leopard is not going to run away," I explained my lack of immediate action. *"It will be feeding off its kill for many hours. And the longer it feeds the less will it be likely to run away when I go to kill it. Tell your father to get everybody in the village to be quiet. Tell them to go to bed. And tell him nobody must go near the leopard."* I swallowed the last dregs of the coffee.

"Now I am going to get myself ready to kill the leopard." I said rising from the table.

The young man turned and ran through the darkness back to the village.

In the light of the Tilley lamp I prepared my hunting headlamp and adjusted the elasticised fabric headband until it felt snug and comfortable around my head. I picked up my rifle and I snuggled my cheek into its polished wooden stock. I switched the lamp on and adjusted the reflector case over my left eye. I moved the lamp until the beam ran straight down the

barrel of the rifle. The sights came up naturally in front of my eyes. I turned the lamp off.

I fed the wires from the headlamp through the neck of my shirt, down my back inside my shirt, to the waistband of my short trousers. I secured the small battery case on its clip to the waistband. That left my body and arms free. I strapped a small bag around my waist. It contained spare batteries and four extra brass cartridges wrapped tightly in a handkerchief. The purpose of the handkerchief binding was to keep the cartridges from rattling together as I walked along.

All that remained was my rifle. I slipped four soft nosed cartridges into the magazine. Pressing a fifth round on top with my thumb, I pushed it into the breech with the bolt. I clicked the bolt shut and put the Mauser safety catch on full.

I was ready.

I doused the Tilley lamp extinguishing its bright light altogether. I knew the leopard could see the light and I didn't want *anything* to confuse it.

"Haaauuw…." Solomon exclaimed.

"Leave it off until I get back," I instructed him clearly.

"You are going alone?" he asked seemingly surprised. This was the first time Solomon had been out hunting with me. He had only recently been appointed but he must have *known* that I preferred to hunt alone. Word gets around quickly about such things in African society. Nevertheless, the native staff all tested me. It was a ritual that was getting tedious

"Yes. I am going alone," I said with emphasis. *"If you come along with me the leopard will think a herd of elephants is attacking it."* I chortled softly to myself. Solomon laughed.

I moved out from the camp directly onto the vlei. The ground was hard and flat. There was practically no grass and I heard my every footstep on the sun-baked earth. *That* was bad.

I was night blind. This was the result of eating in front of the bright incandescent mantle of the Tilley lamp for the last little while. Everything around me was black. My night vision was zero. I stopped and looked up at the stars. There was a carpet of bright sparkles scattered over the dark night sky. There was no moon. *That* was good.

I stood alone in the darkness, quiet and quite still, absorbing all the sounds of night as I waited for my night vision to improve. I had hunted on such a night many times before. I knew the stars alone would soon give me

enough light in which to operate.

A barn owl swooped low over my head. It *screeeeeched* like a demented banshee. The sound lifted the hackles at the back of my neck. I smiled. Why *that* should have happened I had no idea. I have raised many baby barn owls in my life and I am certainly not afraid of them. I am also far from superstitious.

A Mackinder's eagle owl began hooting from the hill directly across the vlei. It was no doubt hunting red rock hares on the granite slopes!

It was going be another night for owls! I smiled to myself. I love Africa's nights. They are very special. That night was no different. Every living thing spoke to me out of the darkness.

A tiny scops owl began *burrrrping* in the trees behind me. I began counting. *Burrrp*… one, two, three, four…*Burrrp*… one, two, three, four…*Burrrp*. There was an exact five-second interval between each burp.

I was in no hurry. It would take a little while for my night vision to return and I had all night long to wait. The leopard had probably not yet even broken through the cow's tough hide.

I tried to think what the leopard was doing. I had a vision of it ripping off small pieces of the soft under belly skin around the udders. *That* it would do quickly. Leopards love chewing those soft and tender titbits. And even if it *had* broken into the meat it had certainly not started to feed seriously. There would be a lot of tasty fluids oozing out of the warm hot flesh and the big cat would be licking them all up.

Whatever the leopard was doing I was certain of one thing. Once it had broken into the carcass and had begun to eat seriously, it would not be easily chased off. So there was *really* no need to hurry. In fact, I did not want to get to this new kill too early!

A black-backed jackal began wailing far away down the vlei.

I looked up at the stars. They were brighter than they had been a little while before. My night vision was coming back! Slowly the things around me began to take shape. Out on the vlei ahead of me I could make out the wide meander of the donga. It looked black against the lighter gray of the flat sparse grassland.

Ten minutes later I slipped over the edge of the donga and, on my bottom, I slid down its steep side to the sandy rivulet below. The thin ribbon of dry yellow sand looked silver in the starlight. I began to walk slowly down the silver road.

The sand had a crisp crust that crunched under my every footstep. It reminded me of my childhood days in England during World War II. I remembered the squeaking noise old snow made when my feet broke through its thin, hard surface. The sound of the sand-crust breaking was loud, too loud, but there was not much I could do about it. I worried that the leopard would hear my approach.

I had worked out where the leopard had killed the cow. I judged the distance and began counting my steps, moving slowly to minimise the noise of my passage.

When I judged that I was directly opposite the place where the leopard had made its kill, I quietly climbed the sloping donga wall and slowly lifted my head above its rim. There, with my toes dug deeply into the steep bank, I listened for many long minutes for the tell-tale sounds of the leopard feeding.

The sounds I heard were faint but distinct. They were the sounds of the leopard feeding all right but they came from some distance away downstream. My quarry was further away than I had thought.

I slipped back down to the silver streambed and progressed for another hundred yards along the donga bottom. Again I climbed to the top of the gully slowly, quietly, carefully. I was conscious all the time that I must not make any kind of detectable noise. This time the sounds of feeding were much closer but they were *still* further down the vlei.

The next time I climbed the steep and sloping donga wall, I judged the leopard to be directly opposite me. It was feeding on its kill right out in the open in the middle of the vlei.

I tested the wind by sticking a spittle-wet forefinger into the void above my head. It seemed to be still, very still. If there was any air movement at all it was slight. I sensed it was drifting down the length of the donga. That idea comforted me. My scent would be flowing, like water, down the donga drainage and not across the open veld. It would not betray my presence to the leopard.

Satisfied, I put the drift of the air out of my mind.

I listened for several minutes whilst peering into the darkness towards the feeding leopard. My eyes were at ground level. I was so close but just *how* close I really did not know. Sound travels far in the still cool air of the night. Was the leopard close enough for me to kill it cleanly?
That was the big question.

There was one way to find out.

I carefully laid my rifle on the ground just over the top edge of the donga, pointing it in the direction of the feeding leopard. Ever so carefully and quietly I kicked my toes deeper into the loose gravel of the steep bank, lifting myself marginally higher than I had been before. Then, with my elbows on the flat ground, I took up my rifle.

I shifted my position continuously, listening all the time to the sound of the leopard feeding, until I felt comfortable with the natural angle I had assumed. I snuggled into the rifle stock and imagined seeing the leopard in the sights. I was ready.

I lifted my left hand to my head and twisted the elastic band of the headlamp until the reflector was sitting over my left eye. I tried to remember the feel of its exact position when I had tested the angle back in camp. Would it be correct when I turned on the light? *Another* big question!

My fingers found the switch. The bright beam blazoned itself across the open veld.

A flock of crowned plovers took to the air with raucous screams. They had been sitting on the ground between the leopard and me when the bright light struck them. The birds had been startled and they had startled me, but I quickly put their explosive interruption behind me. In the beam of my torch I saw my quarry clearly. He was only 100 yards away!

The leopard's senses had been jolted by both the stunning explosion of bright light *and* by the sudden alarmed screaming of the birds. As the light hit him the leopard rose sharply to his feet. He turned half away and made ready to run.

I focussed the beam squarely on his face. He turned his head away. I kept the light on the back of his head. He was standing over the carcass of the cow right out in the open. He looked back at me right into the bright light of the spotlight.

My first impression was that he was a small leopard. This surprised me. He definitely seemed *very* small when I compared him to the size of the cow he was feeding on.

He looked away again and he made a quick and sudden movement. It was brief and jerky. I got the impression he was about to run away. In the darkness beyond, however, the leopard was suddenly and unexpectedly confronted by his own exaggerated shadow. It appeared like a phantom cast against the quiet and still slightly dust laden night air. This threw him completely.

He growled softly in anger and confusion.

I flicked my head from side to side. The light beam ran back and forth across the veld. It looked like a mini-searchlight. It had the effect of making the image of the leopard's shadow fade and sharpen repeatedly. It seemed to bounce from side to side. It was an old trick I had learned many years before when hunting springhares as a schoolboy. This confused the leopard more.

I stopped moving the light. The leopard froze but he kept his face away from me.

I again, briefly, flicked the light from side to side. The leopard growled again in perplexed anger. Then, slowly, he turned his head back towards me and he squinted directly into the bright light. That is what I wanted. That is what I needed.

The leopard was now alert but undecided. He had clearly never been confronted by bright torchlight before.

I knew I would have to shoot him now or he would disappear into the night. Once he was on the move he would be gone. So would my opportunity to kill him!

I was ready for him. As he squinted into the bright beam I rested the foresight bead on the bridge of his nose. I quickly brought the vee of the back sights into line. On target! I squeezed the trigger.

The rifle kicked. The recoil threw me backward into the void of the donga. I loosened my feet and tried to drop vertically. My feet hit the hidden slope beneath me and I tumbled head over heels backwards rolling to the bottom. All the while I clutched my precious rifle close to me. The lamp on my head fell over my nose.

When I hit the bottom I found myself lying on my back in a cloud of fine gray dust. The light beam cut through the murky air in a solid column.

All around the hills the reverberation of the shot echoed and reechoed into the night. The report rolled in and out of the kopjes bouncing the sound back and forth for ages. In took several moments for the resonance to fade away.

What had happened to the leopard?

I scrambled to the rim of the donga pushing another round into the chamber as I climbed. For a moment, during the instant I pulled off the shot, I had seen the leopard's head punched backwards by the bullet. I had hit him. That I knew.

Reaching the top edge of the donga again I set the light squarely on the

front of my forehead, pushing the beam towards the carcass of the cow. All around the flatland lay vacant. The leopard was nowhere to be seen.

For a moment I wondered: *Had I wounded it?*

Then the white tip of the leopard's tail flicked up from behind the dead cow. I recognised the movement immediately. It was a death throe. The leopard was *not* wounded. Neither had it escaped into the night. It was lying dead just behind the carcass of its last kill.

I approached the big cat cautiously. It was dead. The bullet had hit it precisely where I had aimed, passing right through the leopard's head and through its brain.

The *cow* was not a cow at all. It was a giant ox nearly as big as a Brahman bull. It was the biggest animal I ever heard of a leopard killing. *That* was why the leopard had looked so puny when I first saw it in the beam of the torch. It was only small in comparison to the enormous size of the ox it had killed.

The following morning I went over the scene of the night before. The leopard had walked around the cattle kraal just outside the village palisade giving the cattle a full view and a good smell. There was a wet patch on the ground where it had urinated upwind of the kraal.

Seeing the leopard and smelling its urine caused the cattle to panic. They burst out of the kraal and stampeded down the vlei.

The leopard had followed jumping on to the neck of its selected victim, getting a death grip with its teeth about its throat. It had hung on, the claws of all four feet digging into the skin and the flesh of its running victim's neck. Thus locked together, the bullock had carried its killer for one hundred and fifty yards before falling to the ground asphyxiated. *That* was when it had let out the long and mournful bellow that everybody had heard.

This was the biggest leopard I was ever to kill. It was a huge tom weighing 164 pounds.

* * *

I shot a leopard one night over a calf it had killed the night before. It came back to the carcass early the following evening. The hunt was uncomplicated, the killing simple. The only matter of consequence was that the leopard was a lactating female. Its udders were swollen and its teats were oozing milk. So I knew it had small cubs somewhere up in the hills nearby.

Killing a big cat always left me, deep down, feeling guilty. Leopards *and* lions are such beautiful and awe-inspiring beasts. On this occasion the hunt

left me with a particularly bitter taste. I carried an extra load of guilt. Killing this mother leopard was *not* a good feeling. In defense of my actions I must say that when I pulled the trigger I did not know her circumstances. She was just another stock killer that I had been instructed to eliminate. It was a job that I had to do.

For the rest of that night I combed the nearby hills looking and listening for the leopard's cubs. I ran out of torch batteries. I killed the Land Rover battery with the big spotlight. The next day I travelled thirty miles to a farm store there to purchase a new supply of torch batteries. That night, and the night after, I again combed the hills looking for sparkling eyes and listening for the cubs' mewing calls. I saw nothing. I heard nothing. Eventually time demanded that I abandon my quest. I still feel unhappy about killing that leopard. Her cubs died a lonely and horrible death by starvation somewhere out in the hills because of me.

She was small and I was curious. The day after the shooting I took the dead leopard to a nearby farm where I put her on a scale. She weighed just 80 pounds which was half my own weight at that time. Putting her on the scale that day gave me some measure of understanding about the generally small size of leopards compared to their much bigger cousins, lions.

My return journey took me through Maleme and I called in to report what had happened. Unexpectedly John Hatton flew into a rage. I had never seen him like this before. Among other things he accused me of being irresponsible. He told me I was a disgrace to my profession.

I was taken aback. Contrite! I was already feeling bad about what had happened anyway and the dressing down I received just rubbed more salt into my wounds. I had hoped John Hatton would understand. I needed him to help me salve my festering conscience. But I found no empathy in his office. I left Maleme that day with my tail clamped firmly between my legs.

Shortly after this incident John Hatton had something of a similar experience but the outcome was very different. He ventured out on a leopard hunt one night on his own. The leopard had killed a calf in a village just round the corner from Maleme so the warden decided to tackle the complaint himself.

John Hatton had absolutely *no* hunting experience. Neither had he demonstrated any hunting inclination. Hunting was not in his blood. This is not an indictment it is merely a statement of fact.

Jurie and I were both available to attend to this complaint and we were just 20 miles away from Maleme at White Waters. We would both have been quite happy to accompany *the boss*, to give him advice and to back him up should he have needed it. But John Hatton had wanted to do this hunt on his own and in his own way. He did not even tell us he was going out to hunt a stock killing leopard. There was no requirement that he should do so! He was, after all, *the boss*.

The warden told nobody about his leopard hunt. He had gone out alone not even taking a native game scout with him. Nobody even knew the hunt had taken place. John Hatton's leopard hunt happened and went by as a non-event in everybody's lives.

The following week I attended to a stock killing complaint again not too far from Maleme. I went out and shot the leopard without much ado. It turned out to be a female with slightly distended udders. Her teats were not exuding milk so I presumed she was drying off. Naturally I surmised she had been feeding babies in the recent past. That meant she probably still had large cubs lurking amongst the rocks somewhere nearby.

I again felt very bad.

A niggling question rankled at the back of my mind. If this leopard had large but still dependent cubs why weren't they with her when I killed their mother? Cubs of that size would be skulking about somewhere behind her whenever she made a kill. They would most certainly have returned with their mother to her previous night's kill. But I had seen neither hide nor hair of them.

This was the second female leopard that I had killed that clearly had still-dependent cubs hiding out somewhere in the nearby hills. Killing two mother leopards in a matter of weeks was a bit too much guilt for any conscientious hunter to carry. And I was still smarting from the dressing down that John Hatton had given me after my killing of the first one. The memory of that event left me feeling doubly miserable.

This leopard weighed 103 pounds!

After I had killed her I once again prepared myself to look for her youngsters. I believed they *must* be roaming the hills somewhere nearby.

"Aikona," the old headman of the village said to me, shaking his head. *"This leopard's babies are already dead."*

"How do you know that?" I asked him, surprised.

"*Gabadula killed them last week,*" the old man told me.

Gabadula means ‘short pants’ in the Sindebele language. The Ndebele people of the Matopos had given John Hatton that name because he was the first government official they had ever seen who persistently wore short trousers.

I wore short trousers too, but I was not important enough to have been given a nickname. Jurie *always* wore long khaki pants. Jurie had a very special native *honour* name that I can’t remember now. I do remember that it was very apt for it described his lovely placid nature to a tee.

“Gabadula killed them?”

Up to that moment I had not known that John Hatton had *ever* gone out to shoot a stock killing leopard. I had believed he just wasn’t at all interested in hunting leopards or anything else. So the old mdala’s information surprised me more than anything else.

“Yes,” confirmed the old man. *“Gabadula killed them. He came here last week in response to another complaint and, in the night, he shot two young leopards at Jeremia’s kraal on the other side of this kopje.”* He made a gesture towards the hill next to which his own village was located. *“They* must *be the babies of this same leopard.”*

In a flash I felt affronted. John Hatton’s recent tirade, when he had so ungraciously and so unceremoniously rebuked me for killing a lactating female leopard, still tormented me. I now knew why he had told nobody about his own, uncharacteristic, leopard hunting adventure.

I felt angry and hurt. Indeed, I was *very* angry and I was *very* hurt. In that instant I developed a huge dislike and disdain for my superior officer. The heavy-handed dressing down he had given me for shooting *my* lactating leopard was uncalled for. I knew *that* at the time but I had stoically accepted his attack on my integrity. Now he had done something very similar and he had chosen to keep it a secret. Deep down in my psyche I *wanted* to feel angry. I wanted to feel *justifiably* angry. Feeling angry was my way of getting some kind of emotional retribution.

Up to a few weeks ago John Hatton had done me no wrong. True, he was forever brushing me off in an arrogant and contemptuous manner but that did not make our association unique. He brushed *everybody* off in the same way. That was part of his generally obnoxious nature. I surmised he had a major inferiority complex that he hid beneath his superior rank. His off-hand treatment of me was, therefore, not out of the ordinary. He treated Jurie in exactly the same high-handed manner. Jurie felt exactly the same way about

him.

"How big were they?" I asked the old man angrily.

He leant down and, in typical native fashion, he indicated their shoulder height with his forearm parallel to the ground, the palm of his hand open and vertically spread. *"About this size,"* he said. *"About the size of my dogs."*

I looked at his dogs. They were pavement specials, mongrels, skinny, showing lots of rib. None of them was bigger than 18 inches tall at the shoulder.

The leopard's cubs had been quite small. Smaller than I had at first thought! They had been less than half-grown so they had been still *very* much dependent on their mother.

I travelled directly through Maleme that night and went straight home to White Waters. My blood was boiling. My mood was simmering.

The next morning Jurie and I discussed what I had discovered. We concluded that our illustrious superior had first of all been too proud to ask either one of us to accompany him and to show him how we went about our leopard hunting activities. He had clearly also been ashamed of the fact that he had, in the end, killed only two cubs. We agreed that the uncompromising dressing down he had given me for shooting a lactating female just two weeks before must have also rankled in his mind. Nobody is immune from feelings of guilt!

Knowing John Hatton's irascible temper and his huge self-pride, Jurie and I concluded that we would be well advised to keep our knowledge of the warden's leopard hunt to ourselves.

Unfortunate hunting incidents have occurred way back into antiquity. They will occur again and again into posterity. It would behove us all to accept that reality with empathy and with understanding. They *do* sometimes happen. We are *all* exposed to them. Nobody is immune from such acts of God!

John Hatton had discovered this! Now he had himself done virtually the same thing that he had so viciously tongue lashed me for doing. He had been too ashamed and too proud to admit the fact to anybody.

The truth will always out!

The native game scout I took along with me that night had been party to my discussions with the village headman. It is probable, therefore, that *he* spoke to the other native staff members at White Waters. Inevitably the story

travelled back to Maleme where it was brought to John Hatton's attention.

John Hatton was a strange and aloof man. He had few friends. He was married with two school-going sons. He carried his command poorly and he delegated badly. Otherwise his administration was good. He had two other outstanding attributes. He was a superb Ndebele linguist and he was a fine Ndebele historian. His command of the Sindebele language was especially good. Many people say he spoke Sindebele better than did the Ndebele people themselves.

In his office, when giving instructions to his native staff, he very often interrupted his dialogue to ask one or another of them why they had said something in a particular fashion; and why they had not expressed themselves in another way. He wrote everything down. I was impressed with his command of the language and when I lived those few short months at Maleme he quickly taught me how to speak basic Sindebele.
He also told me a great deal about the history of the Ndebele people.

John Hatton was essentially a cold man. A heartless man! He was a man with little compassion for others. He was a man who was wrapped up in his own self-centred little world and he cared nothing about the world of others. I was soon to learn he was a jealous man, too, and a man who was vindictive to the very core of his soul. Before I left the Matopos I learned to hate him with a passion. Throughout my long career in National Parks I never found anyone who really liked him. Now, when I think back on my relationship with John Hatton in the Matopos those many years ago, I feel nothing but indifference towards him. The hatred has gone but I still feel no compassion.

A week after I had shot the mother of the cubs he had killed John Hatton phoned Jurie. I was not at home but Jurie told me later that *the boss* had been furious. I stood accused of spreading malicious rumours about *the Park Warden.* He had not explained what the rumours were but he had told Jurie that they were not true. *How dare I, a mere pipsqueak, spread malicious gossip about my superior officer?*

That was the gist of their conversation. But his rhetoric, Jurie told me, was laced with extravagant superlatives that left Jurie in no doubt I now had an enemy in the camp spelt with a capital E. I had been summoned to Maleme, Jurie told me, and was required to report to the warden the next morning at 9 a.m. "o*n the dot"*.

Both Jurie and I had no idea what the summons was all about but we both suspected it had something to do with John Hatton's shooting of the

leopard cubs.

"Keep your cool," Jurie advised me sagely when I drove out of White Waters the next morning. *"Just remember… you have done nothing wrong!"*

Jurie's and my suspicions were correct. John Hatton's chagrin was all about the story of his leopard hunt. A story that was now public knowledge! All sorts of tales had apparently spread like wildfire through the ranks of Maleme's native contingent.

Half an hour later I was given the dressing-down of all dressing downs in John Hatton's Maleme office. It was a recrimination that was heard by both the native game scouts *and* the visiting tourists alike. The Park Warden did not mince his words. He did not want to hear anything I had to say. He had made up his mind. I was "*bad news"*, he said, and he vowed to make me pay "*for the malicious untruths that I had spread"*.

I said very little during the confrontation. I just stood and listened. I had no rights. I was not allowed to tell my side of the story. John Hatton had already heard it all from his so-called *loyal* native game scout staff. His mind was made up. He was so angry he could not see the wood for the trees.

One thing that did emerge from his tirade was that John Hatton wanted the world to know that he had killed *two* leopards that night. They had been young leopards, yes! They had been stock killers nonetheless. So what I had been telling people, that they had been small cubs, was *"bullshit!"*

"I have told nobody anything *about the leopards that you killed,"* I eventually protested my innocence. *"How could I? I did not see them myself. So how could I possibly know what size they were?"*

"They were young," John Hatton admitted. *"But they were big enough to kill a calf."*

"*Well…"* I remonstrated. *"Why don't we just look at the skins? The skins won't lie. Just one look at the skins will prove your case."*

At that he flew into a rage. I had said too much. He raved on. I switched off. I told myself to hold my tongue. I determined, there and then, to keep my own council on such matters in the future.

When I was able to extricate myself from his fury my mind was awhirl. Inside I was seething. I was deeply affronted. I was, quite simply, not guilty of what John Hatton had accused me of. I had truthfully not said a word to anyone about the leopard cubs he had killed, except to Jurie, and neither Jurie nor I had discussed the matter with any of the native staff at White Waters.

John Hatton was clearly feeling guilty and inadequate about the whole

episode.

As a consequence of the results of his hunting adventure, and his attempt to hide the facts, he had become the laughing stock of the whole native force in the Matopos. The native employees were not deceived by all his bluster. To achieve some kind of personal redemption for his soul I was the sacrificial lamb that he had chosen to slaughter.

John Hatton told me he had taken both the leopards, the morning after he had killed them, to the National Museum in Bulawayo. He did not know that, despite my tender years, I enjoyed a long-standing and very personal friendship with the Museum's Director, Reay Smithers. In those days Reay's well-deserved doctorate was still to come! He also did not know that I was enjoying the start of what ultimately became a close personal relationship with the museum's new taxidermist, Terence Coffin Grey.

When I next visited Bulawayo I went to the museum and Terence showed me the skins of the two leopards that John Hatton had shot. They were half-grown animals as I had suspected. There is no way they could have killed a calf. There is no way they had been stock killers. There is no way they were independent of their mother.

Thinking back on everything that had transpired I remember looking down on the skins of those two young leopards in dismay. They were the cause of the deep schism that had erupted between the park warden and myself. It was a split that remained in force for the next twenty years and more. After his shooting of those two cubs John Hatton and I never restored any kind of normal relationship. We held each other at arm's length for the rest of our lives.

The extended circumstances surrounding the killing of those two leopard cubs nearly cost me my career in National Parks! It cost John Hatton dearly. From that time on his reputation was besmirched. His officer subordinates were forever thereafter cautious in their trust of him.

I was so overwhelmed with righteous indignation over John Hatton's injustices that, a day or two later, I sneaked into the village where the cubs had been killed. I wanted to get my facts straight about what had happened. I wanted to know the truth just in case, for my own survival, I might one day have to tell the story to Les Stewart. A sixth sense told me this would be prudent.

Jeremia, the village headman, told me that *Gabadula* had seen all three leopards in his spotlight that night and that he had easily killed the two that

were the closest to him. The mother had remained aloof higher up the mountain. After the shooting she escaped into the jumble of rocks high above. She was, without doubt, the leopard I shot the following week.

I now had the story straight from every angle. The problem, I realised, was not the truth. It also had nothing to do with the stories that ran riot through the ranks of the park's native staff. I believe my illustrious superior actually understood that I had nothing to do with the rumours that had so rankled him.

The *real* problem was that John Hatton *knew* he had been found wanting by his native staff in the masculine hunting role that the Ndebele's all respected. He did not like the feeling. He felt inadequate. He was humiliated. I also have an idea he now felt guilty about the dressing down he had given *me* when I had killed that lactating female a few weeks before. His pride and his arrogance were the factors that had fuelled his attack on my person and on my integrity. His response to what he had so precipitously perceived to be my gross insubordination and disloyalty was a knee-jerk reaction. Nature's age-old defence mechanism had kicked in. *Attack is the best means of defence!*

The matter did not rest there. After his verbal attack on me that morning, John Hatton never spoke another word to me throughout the rest of my service in the Matopos. But I had not been forgotten. Behind the scenes and under the covers he was spreading a great deal of poison.

It so happened that, at about the time of the leopard cub shooting incident, a new post was created in Hwange National Park. There was an increase in the game ranger establishment at Robins Camp in the north of the park. The position was awarded to an old Plumtree School acquaintance of mine, Tony Boyce.

Tony was a nice enough fellow but, whilst he had been at school, he had not shown even an inkling of interest in things natural. He was actually, at the time of his appointment, a fully qualified land surveyor. I was as much surprised that he had even applied for such a post, therefore, as I was aggrieved by the fact that I had been overlooked. Les Stewart had *promised* me the very first vacancy that occurred in Hwange. How could he *not* have honoured that commitment?

I liked Les Stewart. I believed him to be a man of his word. There must be an explanation!

I wrote a very nice, friendly, personal but also aggrieved letter to Les

Stewart. I asked him why, after all the promises he had made to me, I had not been appointed to the new post at Hwange?

I worked out that I could not expect a letter in response for about three weeks. Three weeks passed. I received no reply.

After the unjust verbal drubbing I had received from John Hatton's tongue, being ignored like this by my *so-called* good friend, the Director, was just too much. The seething anger within me began to boil. By the end of the fourth week my wrath was bubbling out all over.

Finally, my impatience and my unrequited need for fair play got the better of me.

To hell with them all, I thought in exasperation. *I don't have to put up with this kind of crap. First my warden accuses me unjustly of things that I had not done. Then my Director reneges on the personal promise he had made to me when I was appointed. Then he ignores my pleas for an explanation. To hell with them all! Why don't I just pack my bags and move on?*

Jurie and Anna tried valiantly to get me to change my mind. I was too full of youthful indignation, high-passion and burning chagrin to listen. I packed my bags and put them in the twenty-year-old Chevrolet coupe-imp that I had recently purchased to keep me mobile.

My *new* vehicle was a far cry from the modern left-hand-drive, tinted-windshield Chevy sedan that I had arrived in just ten months earlier. I had been unable to keep up the monthly payments on the big car and was forced to step down a peg or two, or three or four, in the quality of my transport.

How my financial circumstances had changed since I had joined National Parks!

I raged out of White Waters after a tearful farewell to Jurie and to Anna. They had treated me like a son and I loved them like I loved my own parents. They had been *like* my own parents. We had been a family in all the true senses of the meaning of family. But I was young. I was impetuous. I was overwhelmed with acrimonious bad temper. I was more than just angry. I was ready to blow a gasket!

I reached the Rhodes Estate Preparatory School (REPS) twenty miles from White Waters without incident. REPS is on the Matopos Research Station. As I approached the school I felt a wobble in the steering. There was something wrong with one of the front wheels. I stopped, got out, and examined the wheels. The hub of the right front wheel was untouchably hot. I

could smell it. It was running a bearing. I realised then that I wouldn't even make Bulawayo let alone our family farm at Karoi still 600 miles away to the north.

I pulled into the home of Ted Marais. Ted was a REPS schoolteacher who had become a firm friend over the past several months. He and his lovely wife, Sandra, sat me down and gave me a cup of tea. They could see I was in a bad state so they dragged everything out of me. Getting it off my chest relieved the pressure that was raging away inside.

"Running away from the problem is not going to help," Ted stated emphatically. *"And quite frankly, Ron, I expected more of you than this."*

This was the kind of talk that I needed. Ted made me feel contrite and confused but still the anger simmered.

"You realise, of course," Ted continued, *"if you run away from this problem John Hatton will have won. You will have vindicated everything that he has said about you. And your Director will be disappointed. After all, he has done for you don't you think he deserves better?"*

The afternoon dragged on.

"I think you should give Les Stewart the time he needs to work through this problem," Ted persisted. *"If he has risen to the rank of director in a government department he can't be a fool. He will see through all John Hatton's subterfuge. It will rebound on him.* That *is how life works. You must give Les Stewart a chance. Give him time. Have patience."*

I owe Ted Marais a huge debt of gratitude. He saved my career in national parks that day and he turned my mind around when it was badly wavering. Ted drove behind me in his own car all the way back to White Waters to make sure I got home in one piece. By then the wheel bearing was roaring loudly and it was red hot. Anna and Jurie with tears streaming down their faces received me back with open arms. Their prodigal son had returned!

Les Stewart *did* respond to my letter but not in writing. He sent Bob Smith, the department's Deputy Director, to visit the Matopos. His mission was to find out first-hand what was happening with regards the development of the game park. During his visit he conducted a personal interview with me at White Waters.

When the vacancy at Hwange's Robin's Camp had occurred, Bob Smith told me, Les Stewart had immediately nominated me for the position. This is what he had promised to do. The decision was made. I was going to Hwange.

John Hatton was then officially informed of my impending transfer.

In immediate response John Hatton had sent a scathing report to the Director informing him that, in his opinion, it would be unwise to send me to Hwange. Bob Smith read to me excerpts from his report. I was aghast. The report said I was brash, irresponsible, undisciplined and a trouble-maker among a whole host of other things. I did not deserve, he concluded, my most desired objective in life which was to be posted to Hwange National Park. I had a big lesson in life to learn, John Hatton had said, before having such a prime plum dropped into my lap.

As a consequence of John Hatton's report my transfer to Hwange did not go through. Tony Boyce got the job and I was left out in the cold.

I begged Bob Smith's indulgence. I told him about the killing of the leopard cubs. The incident that had generated all John Hatton's hostility towards me! I had found out about the killing of the cubs only by accident. I had discussed the incident *only* with Jurie Grobler. It was a secret we agreed to keep between ourselves. We had, truthfully, told nobody.

The only other member of staff who knew about it was the native game scout who had accompanied me on the hunt when I had killed the cubs' mother one week later. Both Jurie and I surmised that whatever rumours John Hatton had heard *must* have started with whatever it was the native game scout had told his colleagues.

Jurie Grobler came in to our discussion at my instigation. He corroborated every word of my story. This convinced the Deputy Director.

"All right," Bob Smith concluded finally. *"I want you to write everything that you have told me today in a report to the director. Address the report for my personal attention. I will see what I can do."*

Inside two weeks, at the end of September1960, I received an official communication from head office. It came to me along the official government channel of communication. It came via a very aggressive, very antagonistic and absolutely fuming John Hatton. The letter I received that day, signed by Les Stewart, advised me that I had been posted to Main Camp, Hwange National Park.

There was, at that time, no vacancy at Main Camp so Les Stewart *and Bob Smith* created a special post to accommodate me. I was over the moon.

My eleven months sojourn in the Matopos National Park had come to an end!

FIVE

On Gin Traps, Gun Traps and Poisons

THE use of gin traps (steel leg-hold traps), gun traps and poisons for the control of stock killing predators is rarely construed as hunting. It certainly has nothing to do with hunting as a sport. The use of all these devices to eliminate stock killing predators was part of my job as a game ranger so it is appropriate that I discuss their use at this early juncture.

The use of gin traps, gun traps and poisons for the capture and killing of wild animals does, in fact, fall into the broad definition of hunting.

To 'hunt' means to chase; to pursue; to lie in wait for; to net; to snare; to trap with any kind of device; to shoot with a rifle, shotgun or bow-and-arrow; to immobilise with a hypothermic syringe-dart; to poison; to follow with a dog; or to hunt with a hawk - any kind of animal.
And 'hunting' has a like meaning.

This is the right place to discuss gin traps because we will not be visiting Jurie Grobler again. It was Jurie who introduced me to the use of gin traps and who taught me how to set them properly. My use of gin traps in later years led me into some very interesting and exciting experiences with lions, leopards and hyenas.

GINS

I had never seen a gin trap until I joined the Department of National Parks. The first time I saw one, at White Waters, I recoiled in horror. Just looking at those steel jaws with their stubby teeth sent shivers running up and down my spine. I imagined the pain that an animal must suffer when its foot is caught between those jaws. Like most honest animal lovers do today, I immediately believed gin traps to be cruel and barbaric devices that should be outlawed.

When I became so deeply involved in leopard control in the Matopos, as Jurie Grobler and I were in 1960, I was persuaded to change my mind. Jurie carefully led me into an understanding that gins had a legitimate place in our armoury of weapons. I discovered they were highly effective when used in the proper manner.

"We are not hunting leopards for sport," Jurie constantly reminded me. *"We are killing them because that is a job that we have to do. And the more leopards we can kill in the shortest possible time the better are we doing that*

job.”

Similar messages were brought home to me many times in many different ways over the years. Visiting the same native village in Rhodesia’s tribal areas week after week and seeing the growing anguish on the native headman’s face when yet another of his cows or calves had been killed by the same lion or leopard, brought out in me a sympathy that I did not expect. I also did not expect the anger that I developed inside me against such inveterate stock killers. My anger made it possible for me to condone any *reasonable* means that would help me to kill the offending predator as quickly as possible.

Any reader who disagrees with this attitude should put himself, or herself, in the shoes of the owner of the cattle or sheep or goats that the stock killer is taking.

Although I used gin traps, gun traps *and* poisons from time to time, the gin trap was always my first choice when I *had* to use one these three weapons. I have used gin traps to catch leopards, lions *and* hyenas many times but I learnt *how* to use them when hunting leopards in the Matopos.

The best lesson that Jurie taught me about the use of gin traps was that I should *not* set them in *the conventional manner*.

The gin traps we used on leopards in the Matopos were medium sized Canadian bear traps. They were steel devices that had two hinged jaws juxtaposed around the edges of which were stubby steel teeth. This configuration changed from trap to trap depending on the make.

There are two sets of flat steel springs on a gin trap one feeding out on either side of the trap from the jaw hinges. The springs are depressed by standing on them next to the hinges. This allows the jaws to flop open. A single metal tang is then fed over one jaw and its end is pushed into a notch on the metal arm that supports a central footplate. When the pressure on the springs is gradually released the jaws slowly rise. The metal tang holding the footplate up also holds the jaws down and in an open position. Thus set the footplate is fixed flat right in the middle of the open jaws.

The trap is activated when the footplate is depressed. This happens because the tang then detaches from its notched key on the footplate arm. The tang flips over the edge of the jaw it is holding down, both the springs expand in an instant and the jaws snap shut.

The footplate is depressed when the foot of a leopard stands on it. The jaws then snap tight about the leopard’s foot, ideally around its wrist. More

often than not the jaws clamp across the bridge of the leopard's foot between its wrist and the toes.

A steel trek chain 6 feet to 10 feet long is attached to the trap. The attachment is normally a steel ring around the outer extremity of one of the steel springs. The other end of the chain is fastened with 8-gauge wire to a six-foot long pole cut from the local woodland. This is called a drag log or drag pole.

The trap is set in a carefully prepared hole in the earth that holds the open jaws level with the surrounding ground. Conventionally, the springs are laid out in a straight conformation on either side of the open jaws. The hole is cut in the exact shape of the entire device. The drag log is stood up against a tree with the chain connection at the bottom. If there is no tree nearby it is laid flat on the ground amidst bushes or grass.

The most important aspect of setting a gin a trap is the camouflage that comes next. The whole device is covered in loose dry leaves or grass in such a way that even the trapper himself has difficulty in detecting its presence. The footplate is normally covered with only a light layer of sand.

Small obstacles are then placed around and on either side of the jaws. These can take the form of thorny twigs or sprigs of green leaves. A small log is laid across the front of the trap on the side from which the predator will come in the night. On the side nearest to the predator's kill I placed a sloppy cow pat or a lump of fresh elephant dung, just one inch away from the steel of the trap. The sand covering on the top of the footplate is then left cleverly exposed to entice the predator to place its foot on the bare sandy patch. It will do this rather than place its foot amongst the rough camouflaged obstacles that subtlety encircle the jaws.

Gin traps are set on pathways or openings in the vegetation through which the predator will most likely approach its kill. In the Matopos Jurie and I set three gin traps around each carcass because we had only three traps at our disposal.

Setting and camouflaging these traps took many hours. I used to plan on one hour to set one trap. The more traps you use the better can you disguise the hand of man because then you do not have to lay as many obstacles around the carcass to direct the predator's approach onto the hidden devices.

Farmers, who often own only one trap, sometimes construct a wall of bushes around the carcass leaving just one entrance in to it. They lay their one trap in that entrance. This works well for unconditioned predators but

those that are conditioned by man will never go near such constructions. I personally was never satisfied unless, when I departed from the trap site, it looked exactly the same as when I first approached it.

A trap set in the conventional manner requires that the jaws of the trap lie open one on the side from which the leopard approaches, the other on the far side. This configuration has one drawback. Sometimes the heel of the approaching predator is placed on the jaw nearest to it and the front part of its foot depresses the footplate. When this happens and the jaws snap shut, the leopard's foot is pushed upwards on the rising jaw. This sometimes results in the animal not being trapped at all. Sometimes only the leopard's toes are caught between the closed steel jaws.

When a leopard is caught in a gin trap its first reaction is to fight the trap with all its might. At that stage it feels no pain just a numbing constriction. Its mind is shocked with surprise and fright. It tries to run away but the trap about its foot cannot be shaken off. Wherever it runs it takes the trap with it. The trap pulls on the chain and the chain pulls on the loose drag log. There is therefore no resistance that the trapped animal can use to pull against. There is no way that the leopard can pull its trapped foot free.

Wherever the leopard runs it pulls the drag log along behind it until the log snags up against some obstacle like a bush or a tree trunk. By the time this happens the animal's initial fright is over and it has come to understand that it has a problem. Its escape frenzy has by then abated and already it is fighting the trap with less intensity.

When the drag log snags, the leopard moves around the obstruction still trying to escape. In the process it wraps the chain around the snag. This anchors the leopard permanently. The leopard still fights the trap but only periodically, and not with the same ferocity or tenacity. Its battle with the trap is over.

Throughout the initial frenetic process the trapped animal exerts its greatest physical power to extricate itself from the trap. This is the period of the trapping when it will escape if it can. This is when, if it is caught just by its toes, the leopard might pull its foot free and leave its toes behind.

An animal that is trapped across the central bridge of its foot, or about the wrist, will never pull its foot out of the trap. The clamping jaws of the trap are just too strong and too tight.

Once the trapped animal is properly snagged it settles down to wait out the night. Its attempts to remove its foot from the trap diminish with time. It

learns that every time it fights the trap sharp and renewed pain results. Its brain then starts to release a continuous supply of endocrines into into its blood stream. These natural tranquillisers deaden the pain. Thereafter, provided it lies still, all the leopard has to endure is a strange and heavy numbness in its foot.

This state of affairs lasts up to 24 hours. It comes to an end when the endocrine supply is exhausted. If the trapped animal is not dispatched before this time excruciating pain takes the place of the numbness. It is important, therefore, that the man who has trapped the animal puts it out of its misery just as soon as he can.

Things can go wrong with this trapping process only if the trap catches the predator by its toes. Knowing this Jurie Grobler worked out a simple yet effective trapping technique that made sure this did not happen.

Jurie did not lay his traps in the conventional manner with the springs set out in a straight line on either side. He twisted one spring at a 90 degree angle to the trap on the one side, and he set the other spring at a ninety degree angle to the trap on the other side. The set trap then took on the shape of a flat “Z”.

He then laid the trap in the ground in exactly the same way as I have described above with one difference. He was able to lay out the open jaws of the trap one on either side of the path. This precluded any chance that the leopard would step on a rising jaw. It therefore reduced to zero any chance that the leopard would end up getting caught just by its toes.

Throughout my life in national parks thereafter, whenever I laid a gin trap to catch a lion, a leopard or a hyena, I always set it *the Jurie Grobler way*. As a consequence I never caught a target animal in a gin trap other than by its wrist or high up on its foot.

When baits have been gin-trapped and the leopard does not return on the first night, the trapper may decide to keep the traps in position for the next and/or subsequent nights. When this happens the baits must be screened from aerial scavengers, like vultures and eagles, during every daylight hour when the traps remain in place. This screening normally takes the form of covering the carcass with leafy branches in the early morning, which then have to be removed in the late hours of the afternoon *after* the thermal air currents of the day have broken down.

GUN TRAPS

When I went to Hwange I had heard of gun traps but no expert on the subject

ever taught me how to set or use one. My Bushman trackers knew something of the matter and they guided me in the preparation on my every gun-trapping attempt. All the niceties my trackers and I worked out between us.

A gun trap is a device that the target predator sets off itself and so causes its own demise.

Essentially a gun trap requires that a suitable weapon, a rifle or a shotgun, be tied securely with baling wire to two saplings or two stout stakes planted and hammered into the ground. The barrel of the weapon is set parallel with the ground. A thin copper wire of the kind that can be unwound from a motorcar's burnt out generator, is used as a tripwire. The tripwire is supported along its length by two-foot high stakes hammered into the ground. Wire staples are hammered into the top of each stake and the tripwire is run through them. Normally the tripwire extends over a distance of about thirty yards. The wire runs parallel with and below the line of the weapon's sights.

The gun is aimed along a line that is between 18 inches and two feet above the ground. The height depends on the size of the target animal.

When the target predator walks across the line of fire of the weapon its front legs push the tripwire to one side or the other depending on the direction from which it comes. The wire's tension is prepared in such a way that it will pull the trigger of the weapon with only a few inches of movement. This is enough to place the heart/lung region of the animal's body in line with the weapon's sights and that is where the bullet hits.

Whether the animal moves from left to right or from right to left does not matter. The result is the same.

The only complication with setting a gun trap is with regards how to effect a reverse pressure on the trigger when the wire is pulled. The wire cannot simply be attached to the trigger because that will pull the trigger forwards! A lever of some sort has to be applied with a fulcrum in the middle. The trip wire is then fastened to the outer end of the lever and the inside end of the lever is laid against, or fastened to, the trigger.

When the trip wire is then pulled the end of the lever that is on the outside of the fulcrum moves forwards. The reverse happens on the end of the lever that is on the inside of the fulcrum. So the inside end of the lever moves backwards against the trigger thus firing the weapon.

Many different techniques have been used to activate the trigger on a set gun trap but the requirement is always the same. It is necessary to somehow reverse the forward pull of the tripwire so that the trigger on the weapon is

pushed backwards. The easiest way I have achieved this is by using a heavy rat trap.

The rat trap is fixed immediately behind the gun trap. A separate wire is tied to the trigger *and* to the killing arm of the rat trap. When the trip wire moves it sets off the rat trap. The wire attached to the trap's killing arm then yanks on the trigger. This causes the weapon to fire.

But, deep in the bush, one does not always have access to a heavy rat trap!

Gun traps can be highly effective against stock-killing predators when gin traps and/or a suitable poison are not available. They also sometimes achieve the best results on thoroughly conditioned stock killers.

POISONS

Using poisons to kill predators is a horrific solution to a stock-killing problem but poisons can be highly effective.

I hated using poisons. I still hate the *idea* of using poisons. But I had a job of work to do. So, from time to time, I *did* use poisons. I used all kinds of poisons. But I resisted using poisons and I considered them always a very last resort.

The ideal poison is one that is tasteless, colourless and odourless. It should also have a delayed reaction of five to ten minutes. A predator that eats a bait that has been treated with a chemical substance with these attributes will not realise that it is ingesting poison until it is too late.

Most poisons are painful and the pain is concentrated in the animal's stomach. Once an animal starts to feel the poison *biting* it begins to vomit and it often vomits profusely. The vomiting purges the animal's stomach of nearly all the poisoned meat.

When all the meat has been thus ejected some poison remains in the animal's stomach juices. This may or may not be enough to kill the animal. So poison dosage levels are critical.

A poisoned predator that does not die at the bait site will wander off. It will go to ground in some quiet place where it will rest up. There it will die or it will wait out the painful experience of letting what remains of the poison leach out of its system. A stock killing predator that has endured and survived this prolonged and painful experience will never again return to even its own kills. It will forever thereafter kill, eat, and move on.

Stock killers that have survived an inept poisoning are the most difficult

of all predators to bring to book and they annually account for very large numbers of domesticated animals. Just one such stock killer can bankrupt commercial ranchers and they often render tribal farmers destitute.

Strychnine is one of the most commonly used poisons in Africa today. It has all the attributes of a *good* poison. It is tasteless, colourless and odourless. It has a relatively small delayed reaction time. But it is enough. Strychnine, delivered at the right dosage, is very effective.

Strychnine is one of the most painful of all poisons and it induces very severe vomiting. Consequently when it is administered at an *incorrect* dose, strychnine is responsible for teaching more predators *not* to return to their kills than any other poison.

The correct dosage at which strychnine should be administered is a subject that has been discussed by many farmers many times. Some of them believe that, in an attempt to stop the predator from vomiting altogether, strychnine should be administered in *very* small dosages. Some farmers will tell you that the right dosage, per site application, is the amount of powdery white poison that just covers the tip of a sharp penknife blade. Others say the correct dosage is equivalent to the size of a match head.

Such minute doses often result in many predators being only half poisoned so they don’t die. Under dosing in my opinion, therefore, is responsible for creating *most* of those stock killers that never return to their kills.

It is much better to *massively* overdose the carcass with strychnine. This poison, remember, is tasteless, odourless and colourless! It is, therefore, undetectable no matter how much is put into a carcass! It is far better that the predator gets a *really* good dose of the poison than too little. When it gets a massive overdose the predator will vomit profusely but no matter how much of the poison the animal may remove from its system by vomiting more than a lethal dose *always* remains in the animal’s tummy.

Whenever I heavily dosed a carcass with strychnine I *never* lost *any* of the predators that came down to feed on it.

Other poisons I have used include arsenic and cyanide. Both these poisons, because they can be detected particularly by smell, and also by taste, are inserted into the bait carcass inside cellulose capsules. Of these two cyanide is infinitely the better poison because it results in instant death. It causes the heart to stop beating.

In later years problem animal control officers under my command used

more modern poisons that were much more effective than even strychnine but, because these did not affect *my* work with stock-killing predators, I will not discuss them here.

The biggest problem related to the use of poisons is their potential danger to non-target animals. A carcass that has been poisoned for a lion or a leopard, for example, *has* to be covered with a tarpaulin, or by leafy branches, during the day to make sure avian scavengers, like vultures and eagles, do not come down to feed on it. And once they have served their purpose poisoned carcasses must *never* be simply abandoned in the veld. They must be buried deep or cremated. Preferably both.

Any animal that eats from a poisoned carcass will die. A predator that eats poison and runs away before dying and is not found, will itself be eaten by all sorts of other scavengers, including eagles and vultures. And all *those* scavengers will die, too, of *secondary* poisoning.

You might well ask the question: Why, if poisons are so dangerous to wildlife, do government wildlife officers still use them? We still use them because they are *one* of the wildlife manager's essential tools of the trade. We use them because they can be highly effective. And when used responsibly, and when the baits and the bodies of poisoned predators are disposed of correctly, they do *not* pose a threat to the environment.

Most poisons are prescribed chemicals the use of which is strictly controlled by law and by permit.

CONCLUSION

I have often been criticised by nature-loving members of the public for my one-time use of, and my continued support for, the use of gin traps, gun traps and poisons for the control of stock killing predators. Many of my critics say that farmers, particularly, should be denied the use of any of these devices. They believe that stock-killing predators should be hunted down by *whoever* and, under totally fair play conditions, killed cleanly with a bullet through the brain. Some insist they should *only* be live-trapped humanely and released into some *safe* locality. These are totally naïve attitudes.

Stock-killing predators can cause *huge* stock losses to farmers. They return again and again, often twice a week, to kill another animal on every occasion. The stockowners often become desperate and they try anything and everything to rid themselves of these pests. They sometimes contrive the

most terrible of traps and they use every conceivable type of crop pesticide in their attempts to poison the offending predators, not worrying one little bit about the damage they may be doing to the environment and/or to non-target species. Their purpose in doing these things is simply to survive.

It is far better that government send in experts to deal with problem predators in an efficient, professional and responsible manner. This is much better than having the farmer pursue whatever his mind may conjure up to rid himself of his problem.

It just so happened that, for a time, I was one of those government game rangers who were sent in to help the farmer and Rhodesia’s native p people.

SIX

The Killing of a Gin-Trapped Leopard

ALTHOUGH I set many gin traps on my own in the Matopos I never caught a leopard in any one of them. The leopards just did not return. Jurie, anyway, set most of the gins when traps were indicated! Very few of Jurie's traps produced results either. Jurie's careful trap-setting tuition never bore fruit *for me* until later in my career.

Over the years I trapped and killed several stock-killing lions, a number of leopards and a few spotted hyenas using Jurie's passed on experience. I was successful with gun traps and with poisons, too. All this happened on the private cattle ranches and in the communal tribal areas that surrounded Rhodesia's national parks.

The reason why we caught so few leopards in our Matopos traps was probably because we hunted our quarry more often than we set traps to catch them. On those occasions when we did set traps Jurie and I normally revisited the trap sites together the next morning.

On the first occasion we caught a leopard Jurie and I went to the trap site very early in the morning. We took no native game scout with us! We walked slowly and cautiously towards where we had set the traps the previous afternoon.

I was armed that morning with my 9.3 mm. Mauser. Jurie carried his beloved shotgun. He took the lead.

Fifty yards short of the carcass he came to a sudden halt. I stopped alongside him.

"Sssshhhhush," Jurie whispered turning his head slightly towards me. His eyes never wavered from watching the bush in front of him.

For a long time he said nothing. He stood perfectly still looking dead ahead. Very slowly he began to shift his head from one side to the other. He was listening! His eyes continued to wander over the bush at the base of the kopje where we had set the traps.

After a while he said quietly: *"One of the drag poles has gone."*

I looked at the trap site with new eyes. One of the drag logs was indeed no longer standing up against the supporting tree trunk. That could only mean one thing. A leopard had been trapped. The leopard had run off with the trap and the chain, and the drag-log had been pulled off its support.

I was impressed. It was a valuable lesson. Whether you were hunting leopards or trapping leopards you had to be alert and observant all the time! I had been negligent. As we approached the trap site that morning the fact that there *should* have been three drag logs standing upright against three tree trunks was the last thing on my mind.

Jurie was a professional. I was a green horn. The difference between us showed through repeatedly in little niceties like this.

"O.K.," Jurie said. He leant over towards me talking just above a whisper. He never took his eyes off the bush ahead. *"We've got a leopard in a trap. It won't have gone very far and it already knows we are here. So we're going to have to move forward from here on very slowly and very carefully."*

He looked me in the eyes. He smiled. The corners of his eyes crinkled. *"Would you like to take the lead on this one?"*

I grinned. *"Jah*!*"* I responded succinctly, excitedly. *What a question!* I was delighted. I must say I had not expected *that* question. Nor the opportunity!

"O.K.," Jurie cautioned me. *"Just remember… we don't know how well the leopard has been trapped. If he is caught around the wrist we will be safe. If we've caught him just by the toes and he rushes us, we may be in a spot of trouble. The force of his charge may just be enough for him to rip his toes out of the trap. If* that *happens we could be in* big *trouble. So if he comes at us and one of his feet is not in a trap, just get out of my way. Move to one side. My shotgun will then be a better option than your rifle"*.

"O.K.," I said obediently, nodding. I understood.

"Next," Jurie said with some emphasis, *"We will probably not find this leopard with our eyes. We are going to be hunting him with our ears."*

Jurie looked at me earnestly. *"Look me in the eyes and let me know that you understand."*

We had been over all this before many times. It was unlikely that we would first *see* the leopard in the initial encounter. The first intimation of a trapped leopard's whereabouts, he had repeatedly told me, would be the sound of metal clinking on metal. It was the sound the links of the trek chain make when the leopard moves! As we got closer to the leopard Jurie had assured me, it *would* move. The leopard would re-arrange its position as it prepared itself to charge.

I looked Jurie in the eyes as he had commanded and I said*: "We will be listening for the clinking sound of the chain links when the leopard moves."* I responded, telling Jurie what I knew he wanted to hear.

"Good!" he said purposefully, quietly. *"O.K. You go ahead now. I'll be right behind you. Just remember… softly, softly, catchee monkee."*

I took the lead. Moving very slowly I made my way towards the trap site. My whole being was aquiver with excitement. My nerves began to hum. Jurie followed just behind me, slightly to one side.

I carefully placed my feet in all the right places making the minimum of noise. My eyes scanned the bush ahead. My ears were wide open. I breathed through my mouth, deep breaths that filled my lungs followed by shallow ones that allowed me to hear better.

The spittle in my mouth dried up. My throat felt raw. My nasal passages were burning with dryness. My whole body was tingling with tension. My spirit was buoyant with exhilaration. My hands were trembling as they held my rifle across my lower body. It was ready to fire. The safety catch was altogether off. All I had to do was to aim and pull the trigger.

We were only ten paces from the trap site before I saw the disturbed bush. It had been completely flattened in many places. The leopard had obviously rushed around like a mad thing when the jaws of the trap had snapped shut over its foot.

There were gouge marks in the soil made by the drag pole. I pointed to them with my rifle and looked back at Jurie. He nodded impatiently, indicating with a silent forward thrust of his shotgun barrel that I should follow them.

I gave the baboon carcass bait a cursory glance. Skirting past it I kept well clear of the two traps that were still set and concealed. I began walking along the line of the drag marks!

Here was further proof that we had trapped a leopard. There were footmarks in the disturbed soil, pugmarks, plenty of them, but they were not clear enough to tell me they were those of a leopard. I did not want to take my eyes off the drag marks. I did not want to stop looking into the bush ahead. The situation was tense. The whole ambience was vibrant with a threatening danger. I just knew that I could not and should not squat down on my haunches to examine the tracks more closely. I had to accept they were those of a leopard. What else could they be?

Clink… Clink, clink.

The sound was as clear as a ringing brass bell in the crisp silence of the early morning cold air. There had been three distinct syllables. It had come from somewhere directly up front.

I froze. Jurie froze. My heart was beating furiously. My trembling hands started to shake.

I felt Jurie moving out more to my right. I didn't look at him. I didn't have to. I knew he was positioning himself so that he, too, would have a clear shot at the leopard should it charge.

Clink. One syllable!

The palms of my hands were sweating. One by one I wiped them dry on the sides of my short trousers.

I strained my eyes probing every nook and cranny. I now needed visual proof of the leopard's exact position. Nothing! There was not a sound. Not a movement! There was no visible sign to give the leopard's exact position away.

Jurie and I stood still, almost side by side now, for many long minutes. Listening, looking, waiting! Nothing happened. There were no further clinking sounds from the chain. There were no growls or snarls or hissing sounds. Just silence. Just stillness. We didn't move. Nothing else moved. The tension was huge.

The leopard was lying doggo. I visualised him squashed flat onto the ground watching us intently. At twenty yards I believed we *should* have seen *something* of him. Even just a swishing white tail tip! There was nothing. No sight! No movement! No sound! Nothing! And if we could not see the leopard we could not shoot it.

Long tense moments dragged by. They were dripping with danger. Nothing!

What to do now? It was an impasse.

I glanced at Jurie. He frowned and made a shushing gesture with his lips. He gently shook his head. He wanted us to stand still! One minute dragged into the next. The tension was enormous. I became conscious of the fact that my hands had stopped shaking. My mind had regained its control.

The stand off continued.

My mind was active. *Who would lose patience first? Us or the leopard!*

Nothing happened. No further clinking sounds came from the chain. There were still no vocal noises coming from the leopard. The leopard still

did not move. Although we knew where it was now we still could not see it. Time moved on.

I was getting impatient. I looked meaningfully at Jurie. I made a sign that told him I was prepared and ready to move closer. He frowned, heavily shaking his head. In Jurie's opinion *that* was obviously *not* a good idea!

Slowly Jurie lifted a hand in front of his body, palm uppermost. He gestured, with all fingers moving, that we should back off. He started to move backwards, his shotgun ready, retreating cautiously from the leopard's position. I followed suite walking backwards too. We stopped only when Jurie decided we were out of immediate danger.

"We know where he is now," Jurie whispered to me hoarsely. *"So we will approach him from a different angle. Maybe we will be able to see him from the other side."*

He gestured that I should again take the lead.

We walked quietly round the leopard's position and came at him again from the other side. A light morning breeze began to rustle the leaves. It was blowing directly from us towards the leopard.

"The wind…?" I whispered.

Jurie shook his head. *"Doesn't matter,"* he responded in a soft undertone. *"The leopard knows where we are and he is watching us. Just try to get into a position where you can see him. "*

I started my second approach to the leopard's position. Again my ears were wide open. Again I canvassed the bushes with my eyes. Again I breathed through my mouth. Again I became conscious of my dry mouth and burning nasal passages. Step by step I drew closer. Jurie was at my side, one step behind, two paces to the right.

Silence reigned.

Clink… clink, clink, clink, clink, clink…, clink, clink… clink.

A whole series of metallic sounds came at us from the leopard's hidden position. He had turned right around to face us. He was again now making ready to charge. This time, when he shifted position, there was some movement in the bushes. It wasn't much, just the quiver of a few leaves, but it told me exactly where the leopard was located.

I was focussed. I had him pegged. The leopard was lying up in thick bush next to a large boulder at the base of the hill. He was only twenty yards away and directly to my front.

I took another step forward.

"Stop!" Jurie ordered me softly, quietly. I stopped.

Both Jurie and I stood perfectly still. Our eyes searched the thick bush probing the exact place where we now definitely knew the leopard was lying watching us. We now had a *very* small patch of bush on which to direct our attentions but we could still see nothing.

Again one minute dragged into the next. Again we had a stand-off. Again the tension was vibrant.

Jurie poked me in the buttocks with the barrel of his shotgun. I looked round. He gestured that we should again retreat. I did not question him. We backed off slowly not taking our eyes off that bit of thick bush at the base of the rock.

When we were again out of danger's way Jurie turned to me and said*: "If we go any closer he is going to come at us and it would be stupid to knowingly provoke a charge. I suggest you climb the kopje.*" He looked up at the steep and broken hill on our right hand side. *"Go up the kopje and come down on him from above. You will then be looking down through the bushes from the top. You will probably get a better shot from that angle."*

I smiled ruefully. This was getting more complicated by the minute.

Jurie picked up the vibes. He smiled.

"Take your time," he cautioned me sagely. *"Take your time. If you want to succeed in this game and stay alive you must have patience, you must have perseverance, you must at all times be cautious and you must exercise a great deal of simple common sense. There is no place for bravado! This is no game for fools. If you are impetuous and stupid sooner or later you will die."*

I looked up at the hillside and planned my route. Jurie elected to stay where he was and to let me go solo. I walked some distance back along the base of the hill before climbing up, through, and over the jumble of boulders at its base. Slowly I made my way across the hillside to a rock I had previously marked in my mind. It was a position that was directly above the big boulder where I knew the leopard was lying waiting. I then picked my way cautiously down the hill towards him.

As I drew closer I heard the now familiar clinking sounds of the trek chain links. The sound told me the leopard knew I was on the hillside above. It had again positioned itself to attack. Attack was, at that stage, the leopard's only means of defence.

Jurie had been right. Looking down into the leopard's hidden position

from above was a whole new ball game. Here the lateral cover that had been hiding the leopard before was of no consequence. I moved onto the top of the big boulder immediately above the leopard's hiding place and, when I looked down on him from above, there was no cover to conceal him.

I saw the leopard clearly. He was lying flat on the ground looking up at me askance. In my position on top of the rock I was out of his reach and he knew it. I could see his paw was held securely in the trap at the wrist. The chain was wrapped around the stem of a small bush. He could not get away. He knew that, too. He did not even try to run. Instead he looked up at me. His lips drew back exposing his teeth and he snarled at me silently.

I wasted no time. I put a bullet through the leopard's head from a distance of only thirty feet. The hunt was over. The leopard was dead. The job had been done. But the experience had been far from the pushover that I had expected. I discovered that hunting down a trapped leopard was far more complicated, far more dangerous and greatly more exciting than I had ever imagined.

Dispatching that leopard stood me in good stead for much bigger things to come when I eventually got to Hwange.

* * *

Although I never caught a *leopard* in a trap that I had myself set in the Matopos one of my traps *did* catch a very rare and most unexpected animal. It was a Brown Hyena. This was a species that had never been recorded anywhere in the country. It was caught in a gin trap that I had set in the middle of a dry sandy riverbed in the game park. Jurie accompanied me on the follow up that morning and immediately recognised the value of the animal I had caught. He insisted we back off.

Jurie recovered his .22 rifle from the Land Rover and we returned to the hyena where he shot it easily and cleanly in the head. The tiny bullet caused minimum damage to the animal's skull.

Jurie, knowing the animal's rarity, instructed me to immediately take the fresh carcass directly to the National Museum in Bulawayo. It was a perfect specimen and it was skinned out professionally by Terence Coffin-Grey.

A few weeks later I revisited Terence in his museum studio and was dismayed at the tale he had to tell me. Even before the skin was dry, he told me, one of his own native staff had cut off the hyena's nose. Why? To sell it, or to give it, to a local witch doctor for *muti*.

This is one of the many foibles of Africa's people that never ceases to

amaze me, and it has frustrated the hell out of me all my life. In this case the culprit was a perfectly respectable and seemingly sophisticated African gentleman who was holding down a responsible, secure and well-paid government job. Yet he felt compelled to risk his position and his salary by cutting off the nose of a rare and valuable animal to satisfy his inbred and irresistible superstitious beliefs. I have seen many such incidents throughout my life in Africa. It was not financial reward that made the man cut off that hyena's nose. It was an indescribable and irrepressible urge to fulfil an instinctive superstitious need that was hidden deep down within his psyche.

* * *

There is just one more Matopos leopard-hunting tale that I would like to tell. Just a snippet! It is drawn from the repertoire of Jurie Grobler's many unusual stories. This all happened many years before my time.

Jurie had set traps for a stock killing leopard in the northern part of the Matopos. The next morning he discovered that one trap had been activated. But there was no leopard in the trap. Instead he found half a leopard's tail caught between the jaws.

The trap had been set near the carcass and the leopard had stepped over it. It had then lain down next to the carcass to feed. As the leopard was feeding it must have swished its tail about. The tail had slapped across the footplate snapping the jaws of the trap shut tight.

Jurie took the half-tail home where he skinned it and cured it. He kept it as a souvenir in his office. Several years later he trapped a leopard with only half a tail in the same locality. The missing part of this leopard's tail matched the piece of tail that Jurie still had at home. So it took Jurie several years to get the full trophy of that particular cat.

* * *

Jurie Grobler made a huge contribution to the overall hunting expertise that I was to develop in the years ahead. The foundation he helped me lay for my big game hunting career served me well.

At the end of my spell in the Matopos I had become a competent leopard hunter in every dimension. Gone was the ignorant timidity I had experienced with my first leopard on the Angwa. I no longer feared the leopards that I hunted but I never lost my respect for them. I tackled them now with absolute confidence borne out of the experience that I had accumulated. Whatever my fears during a hunt, and there were often many, I had learned to keep them firmly under control. I have Jurie Grobler to thank for this important change

in my hunting character.

Jurie and Anna are both long dead. I shall forever cherish my memories of the life and the love they shared with me for those few short months in 1960 when I lived with them in their lovely and happy home at White Waters.

SEVEN

Hwange National Park

HWANGE National Park was established in 1928 by the Southern Rhodesian government. This was just 38 years after the white settler pioneer column arrived in the country.

Ted Davison was the park's first game warden. He had been employed in the country's fledgling Tsetse Fly Department before his appointment to Hwange. The reserve was named after a local native chieftain. The new warden was accommodated in a small house on a pioneer farm that had been bought out by the government. This became the park's headquarters. He called it Main Camp.

Today Hwange National Park comprises 5000 square miles of wild Africa. Seven eighths of the park consists of fossil Kalahari sand dunes clothed primarily in teak forest. The remainder is basalt country covered in mixed woodlands mainly mopani. There are only three water 'seeps' in the Kalahari sand region so it is naturally waterless in the dry season. By comparison the basalt country with its gravel soils is richly endowed with perennial streams, wet vleis and both hot and cold springs.

At the time of my appointment Ted Davison was still the warden in charge of the whole park. The Main Camp region was administered by Senior Warden Bruce Austen. Robin's Camp, a small tourist camp on the north-western boundary, was run by Assistant Warden Jordy Jordaan.

I was the last young game ranger to be appointed under Ted Davison. This just brought me into the fold of those who pioneered the old Hwange. I fell directly under the command of Bruce Austen.

I ARRIVED at Dett railway station at 2 o'clock one mid-October morning in 1960. My clothes were contained in one small suitcase. My camping pots and pans were packed into two small cardboard boxes. My old Chevvy motorcar was gone, sold to clear myself of its financial burden. My 9.3 Husqavarna Mauser was gone, sold because I was severely cash-strapped.

I was at a very low financial ebb but my spirits were buoyant. I was on my way to Hwange's Main Camp! My dream was at last coming true!

I stepped off the railway carriage onto the bleak Dett station platform. It was illuminated by two dirty electric light bulbs. They stared down at me from under the protection of steel lampshades that were affixed to the tops of

two tall gum poles. The aspect was austere, gloomy, and dismal. Everything was covered in thick black grime. Dett station was a hovel.

I packed my meagre possessions up against the red brick wall of the empty waiting room. Inside were two or three wooden benches. Everything was dirty and inhospitable. I stayed outside. Out on the platform I could at least smell a hint of the nearby African bush.

The engine stood against the western end of the short platform. Steam hissed out of its pipes. Dark smoke dribbled from its smokestack. The Rhodesia Railways, in those days, worked only with steam engines. Every now and again when the light breeze changed I nearly choked on the acrid stench of burning coal.

Two men, the engine driver and the stoker, climbed out of the engine cab. They each carried duffel bags and they made their way round the waiting room building to the car park behind.

The guard climbed down onto the tracks from the guard's van at the rear of the train. He made his way along the tracks to the platform. He tipped his cap to me. Then he, too, disappeared into the car park behind the waiting room. There was the sound of a vehicle starting up and driving off. The three men were wending their way to their respective homes in the same car.

Presently there was the sound of a car arriving. Three different men made their way onto the platform. Two of them climbed into the engine cab. The other one went to the guard's van. I could hear the sound of coal being shovelled into the engine's furnace.

I waited. The night was dark. It was thankfully warm and balmy. I had been told transport would be waiting for me at the station ready to take me to Main Camp. I walked around to the back of the waiting room. There were two cars standing in the gravelled parking area. They were empty. There was no vehicle from Main Camp. The whole scene was desolate and quiet. I returned to my stacked possessions on the platform. I lent up against the red brick wall and I waited.

Away in the distance there came the mournful sound of a train hooting. It was a signal to tell the people of Dett that the southbound mail train from Victoria Falls was about to pass through town. After a while the chuffing sounds of a steam locomotive came to me through the still night air. They grew louder and louder. The probing spotlight on the front of the engine suddenly cut through the darkness.

The train from Victoria Falls stopped on the parallel set of tracks on the far side of the train that had brought me to Dett from Bulawayo. *My* train was the northbound mail train from Bulawayo. It was en route to Victoria Falls. My train hooted and the sound of heavy chuffing filled the air. A cloud of white steam blew out over the platform. The signals changed from red to green. My train began to move, gaining speed jerkily with every second that passed. It cleared the station and moved onto the single track that would take it to Victoria Falls more than two hundred miles away to the northwest.

Another three men emerged from behind the waiting room and stood waiting on the platform. I had not heard their vehicle arrive. Three men from the southbound mail train climbed down onto the tracks and made their way to the platform. The two groups exchanged greetings and laughed at some joke. Soon the three men from Victoria Falls were in their car and on their way home. Their replacements climbed onto the southbound mail train. After a single hoot the train departed *en route* for distant Bulawayo some two hundred miles away to the southeast I waited alone on the bleak Dett railway station.

I had just witnessed the *changing of the guard* on the mail trains that plied between Bulawayo and Victoria Falls every day. There was only one set of tracks on the main line so the trains had to wait to pass each other where there were double lines available. One of those places was Dett.

Dett was exactly halfway between the two destinations so it was in Dett where the engine drivers, the stokers and the guards had their homes. Dett was a small railway village nothing more. One of the two daily staff changeover times was two o'clock in the morning. The other changeover happened at two o'clock in the afternoon.

An hour after the trains departed a green government Land Rover from Main Camp arrived. It was driven by a very likable, chubby and charismatic native man called Munene. He was profuse in his apologies. He admitted honestly that he had overslept. That was the simple reason, he said, why he was late. He did not try to make excuses. I immediately took a liking to the man. Our meeting that night was the beginning of an honest friendship that was to last, on and off, for the next 20 years and more.

We drove the eleven miles to Main Camp firstly along the rough and sandy dirt track located on the edge of the railway line fireguard. Tall teak forest grew on our right hand side. There was bare chopped out and burnt off sandveld on our left. This was the fifty-yard wide fireguard on the game

reserve side of the track! The railway line was the boundary that demarcated the north-eastern edge of the park. The game reserve staff burnt the fireguards all along the railway line every year just as soon as the grass was dry. This was done to make sure that red hot coals falling onto the track from the railway's steam engine furnaces did not set the game reserve bush alight.

In the bouncing lights of the Land Rover we saw several buffalo. They suddenly appeared out of the opaque darkness in the vehicle's bright headlights. They were big, malevolent looking black shapes that seemed part and parcel of the rapidly advancing night. Munene told me they were eating the regenerating green grass shoots growing out of the burnt stubble on the fireguard.

We also saw some zebra and a single kudu bull.

Halfway to Main Camp we turned off the fireguard track and penetrated the teak forest. Here the tree canopies met over our heads and on either side of the narrow sandy track the thick bushy under story rose up like two walls on either side.

We slid past a lone bull elephant almost close enough to touch. Unperturbed Munene whisked us through its dust matter-of-factly and without comment. My heart was left beating like a drum.

We emerged onto the close-cropped Main Camp plain and passed through several herds of Burchell's zebra and blue wildebeest. Buildings loomed ahead. We drove behind a small whitewashed structure.

"The office", my driver explained succinctly.

Munene took me directly to the single quarters. There he dumped me and my katoonda in one of three free-standing square rooms at the rear of a small house.

"Malindela wants you to report to him in the office at eight o'clock," Munene said to me in parting. *"Don't be late!"* Those last three words contained a malevolent undertone.

"Malindela?"

"Mr. Austen."

"Oh," I said in final understanding. *"O.K., Munene. Thanks. And thanks for picking me up at the railway station."*

"It is my pleasure, Sir." He got into the Land Rover and drove off into the night.

I was deadbeat. I stripped down to my nothings and crawled into a bed that someone had prepared for me. I fell into an immediate deep sleep.

Somewhere deep down in my subconscious I knew that I had, at last, started my *real* career as a game ranger. Everything felt just right!

* * *

I reported to the office long before eight o'clock the next morning. I had heeded Munene's warning. I was not going to be late for my appointment with Bruce Austen.

When I arrived at the office nobody was about and the door was locked. So I looked around, and I walked around, and I took in the visions and the ambience that permeated to my very soul. I liked this place.
It was all Heath Robinson-ish, ramshackle even, but I *felt* at home.

The administration office at Main Camp was an old two roomed unplastered brick building painted on the outside and on the inside with common whitewash. There was a lean-to verandah on the front. Both the main office roof and the lean-to verandah roof comprised corrugated iron sheets painted green.

The smaller of the two rooms, at the back, was the sanctum of the Chief Warden, Ted Davison. He was the doyen of Hwange. He was the doyen of Rhodesia's national parks. He was the doyen of the country's public wildlife conservation community. I don't think any other wildlife personage in the country enjoyed anywhere near the kind of reputation and respect that Ted Davison commanded.

The front room was where the field officers worked. Here Bruce Austen had his own desk that *nobody* touched. There was one other table. It was a long homemade plank platform nailed firmly to the wall and mounted on a rough three by four wooden frame. It was covered with an old grey blanket. This table, like Bruce Austen's desk, drew light from the only window in the room. The window overlooked the verandah. Besides Bruce Austen's chair there were two others.

There were sundry old wooden cupboards standing against the back wall. These housed the station's supply of new stationery. There was also an array of plank shelves that carried a host of bulging files.

There were two ancient typewriters. One stood on Bruce Austen's desk. One resided on the plank table with the blanket covering.

Small, untidy, scruffy and unkempt though this second room may have been it was, nevertheless, the national park's administrative engine. This was where everything happened.

The main office was normally devoid of personnel so most of the time

Bruce Austen had the big room all to himself. Sometimes, however, it was hugely overcrowded. This happened, I was to discover, at month end. That was when the staff reports had to be written and laboriously self-typed with single-finger taps on the letter keys by their respective authors. Besides Senior Warden Bruce Austen, Ranger Harry Cantle and Ranger Tim Braybrooke worked in this room. And now so did I, the park's first cadet ranger. I had turned twenty-one years old just two months before my arrival.

Next to the office was the original old farmstead where Ted Davison and his wife, Connie, lived. Everybody normally and affectionately called Connie by her native honour name, *Bambadoozie*. It meant *the one who holds you close*. The native staff had awarded her this name because she was wont to wrap her ample arms around the young rangers on station and to proclaim her personal ownership of them to all and sundry. *"This lovely young man is* mine," she used to say. She had a heart of gold.

The Davison garden was ensconced within a seven-foot high game proof fence. The house and garden snuggled under two ancient camel thorn trees, wide spreading and enormous. These were the very same trees under which the famous hunter Frederik Courtney Selous camped when he hunted these areas in the late1800s.

A hundred yards away to the admin office's left front was a prefab concrete building roofed with corrugated asbestos. This was the single roomed tourist reception office where visitors reported when entering and leaving the game reserve. There was a simple traffic boom across the road in front of the building manned by a uniformed native game scout.

Visually dominating the administration zone was a flat expanse of short cropped grassland that stretched from the offices right across to the edge of a teak forest ridge about a mile away. The plain was dotted with small thorn trees. It carried small groups of zebra and blue wildebeest everywhere. This was called the Main Camp Vlei although it was not a wet grassland in any shape or form.

In southern Africa the term 'vlei' normally conveys the idea of an expansive grassed drainage line that is impassable to motor vehicles during the rains because it is then very wet. I was to discover that any kind of open grassed area in Hwange, wet or dry, was referred to as a vlei.

I was immediately and very strongly affected by Main Camp's pervading atmosphere. It was dominated by the pleasant and continuous *gnuuuing*

sounds of the wildebeest. Their soft mewling call was the reason why wildebeest had, at one time, been called gnus. The somnolent ambience was periodically interrupted by the laughing, piping, call of a zebra.

All around I thrilled at the melodious liquid songs of white browed sparrow weavers. Their untidy yellow grass nests were festooned, everywhere, on the outer branches of many of the thorn trees. In every case the nests had been placed on the same sides of the trees, on the side that was furthest away from the prevailing wind. It was one of the many natural pointers that helped people, who were *in the know*, to determine their directions on overcast days.

Cattle began lowing. It was a sound that I had not expected to hear at Main Camp. A herd boy was chivvying about 50 head of cattle through the teak forest behind me. They meandered right past me and wandered out onto the plain in front of the office. There they mixed with the wildebeest and the zebra.

The cattle belonged to Ted Davison. He had *an arrangement* with the Tsetse Department to maintain what the veterinarians called a *test herd* at Main camp at no cost to government. Once a month a veterinary officer came to Main Camp and took blood samples to test the cattle for *trypanosomiasis*, more commonly called *nagana.* This is the disease transmitted from game to cattle by tsetse flies. Most wild animals are immune to nagana. It is fatal to cattle. The existence of ‘tryps’ in the cattle’s blood would have told the vets that tsetse flies had become established in the game reserve.

The start of the tsetse fly belt was less than a hundred miles north of Main Camp in the Kavira forest area of the Zambesi Valley. Government was concerned about the fly spreading into the national park.

Main Camp’s cattle test herd arrangement was a win-win situation for everybody. Ted Davison had his own private herd of cattle in the game reserve. He had permission to breed them and to sell their progeny to his own financial advantage. And the Tsetse Department had a cattle test herd in the game reserve that was maintained at no expense to themselves but which was available to them at any time for blood testing.

The issue that prompted most adverse comment about this arrangement was the number of cattle in the herd. Similar test herds elsewhere in the country numbered no more than ten animals. So many people criticised *Uncle Ted* for kicking the backside out of the situation to his own advantage. That fact never seemed to bother him. I was to learn that, when it came to such

criticism, Ted Davison had a hide like a rhino!

Harry and Betty Cantle lived in a house that had been built overlooking the Main Camp vlei, too. It was located just beyond the Davison's house. Bruce Austen, and his wife Judy, lived in yet another house overlooking the vlei just beyond the Cantle establishment.

Behind the Cantle house and just inside the edge of the teak forest was Single Quarters. There Tim Braybrooke was the boss. This is where I was destined to live for the next three and a half years. I had slept the night before in one of the bedrooms at the back of the single quarters main house.

Some distance away to the left of the admin office, were two prefabricated houses. These accommodated the station's two tourist officers and their families. Beyond these houses was the high-fenced tourist rest camp and camping ground.

The rest camp, in those days, comprised a dozen square brick rooms under thatch and twelve more with asbestos roofs. Each unit contained two beds. Forty-eight tourist beds in all! There were two ablution blocks serving the rest camp visitors.

The camping ground was an open stretch of flat ground dotted with a few thorn trees where visitors were allowed to erect their own tents. A single ablution block served the campers.

Immediately behind the Davison house were a number of old ramshackle outbuildings. These housed the station workshops and various storerooms. A hundred yards away behind the workshop was Main Camp's source of electricity. The generator was housed in a small isolated engine room. It was powered by a large single-piston Lister diesel engine with a huge and heavy flywheel.

Still further away, hidden in the teak forest proper, was the compound where the native employees lived. There were a number of brick rooms with asbestos roofs in the compound but not enough to accommodate all the native staff. Most of them lived in pole and mud walled huts roofed with thatch. There were two ablution blocks.

In those days *that* was Main Camp. It was the primitive headquarters of the country's biggest and most prestigious national park. I did not know all this detail immediately, of course. It was a state of affairs that I was to learn about over the days and weeks ahead.

Considering the size of the national park and its responsibilities the staff establishment was surprisingly small.

Ted Davison, the Chief Warden, commanded the whole park. This included both Main Camp *and* Robins Camp 100 miles away to the northwest. Senior Warden Bruce Austen was in charge of the Main Camp region. This encompassed three quarters of the Park. Bruce had two game rangers under his control, Harry and Tim, and there was now me a brand new cadet ranger.

Ian Miller was the resident tourist officer at Main Camp. There was also a seasonal tourist officer called Fred Starkey who resided in the park only during the open tourist season, May to October. During the rains, November to April, the park was closed to visitors because the dirt roads were then impassable to civilian vehicles.

Assistant Warden Jordy Jordaan was the field officer in charge of Robin's Camp. His new resident ranger was Tony Boyce. The rest camp at Robin's Camp comprised just twelve two-bed huts. Twenty-four tourist beds in all! The permanent tourist officer at Robins was Chris Brits. The seasonal tourist officer was Fred Balestra.

That was the entire European officer staff compliment in Hwange in 1960. This information will help put the stories that follow into some sort of perspective.

It was a blessing in disguise that I had not been given the new post at Robins Camp. This was the post that Tony Boyce had been awarded when I was in the Matopos! I would not have enjoyed Robins nearly as much as I enjoyed Main Camp. What is more my life would have turned out very differently had I not been posted to Main Camp in October 1960.

* * *

Ted Davison was the first person to appear at the office that morning. I knew all about Mr. Davison but I had never met him. The squeak of his garden gate opening drew my attention to his impending arrival. I watched him close the gate behind him. Our eyes met.

I stood on the office verandah and watched him walking towards me. He was an elderly robust man with sparse white hair. There was a casual air of confidence in his ambling gait. He was dressed that morning in long khaki slacks and a light checkered shirt. He looked very ordinary but I knew he was a legend. I suddenly felt very important. I was about to meet a very great

man.

"You must be Ron Thomson," he stated coming up to me and offering his hand. I shook his hand. He had a firm grip.

"Yes, Sir," I replied. *"And you are Mr. Davison."* I recognised him from pictures I had seen in National Park literature.

"Right first time," he smiled. *"Come into the office*," he said feeling in his pocket for the door key. *"I believe you are a fundi on birds…."*

That was how our first conversation began. I liked this man immediately. He was my kind of man. He knew his stature but was totally unaffected by it. And I was soon to discover that, even at his age, he was still collecting bird's eggs. It was his interest in birds and his interest in collecting their eggs that had started his interest in wildlife. That plus my passion for hunting was exactly what had triggered my own interest too.

We had a common friend in Reay Smithers, the Director of the National Museum. He told me that when he had learnt I was coming to Main Camp he had phoned Reay and had asked his opinion of me. *"He gave me a glowing report,"* the old man said happily. *"He said you were a bright young naturalist and that he believed you would go far in national parks."*

I felt a warm and happy feeling grow inside me. I was suddenly aglow with pride and contentment. My morale soared.

"Thank you," I responded in all sincerity. I felt embarrassed. *"I have been collecting birds and small mammal specimens for Mr Smithers since I was a very young schoolboy."*

"So he tells me. And you have got many 'firsts', too. The first Greater Sparrow in the country from Plumtree. The first record of cattle egrets breeding in Rhodesia from Marandellas. And now, recently, I believe you were responsible for trapping the first Brown Hyena… in the Matopos of all places."

"All true I am afraid."

"And you collect bird's eggs?"

"Yes… I have quite a collection."

"So do I. I can see we are going to have a lot to talk about…."

At that moment Bruce Austen came into the office. *"You've met Mr Austen?"* the old man asked. I was soon to discover that everybody referred to Ted Davison, affectionately and respectfully, as *'Mister D'*.

"At Ngamo…. When we were catching game for the Matopos." Bruce responded for me. He held out his hand and shook mine. *"Welcome to Main*

Camp," the Senior Warden said affably.

"O.K.," Ted Davison said. *"Then I shall leave you to it. I am sure you two have a great deal to talk about"*.

Tim Braybrooke and Harry Cantle, talking avidly between themselves, then entered the office. *"I want to have a long talk with you after breakfast"* Bruce informed me quickly before Tim and Harry could enter the conversation.

"Morning Harry… Tim," Bruce addressed the two men with a smile.

"Morning Bruce," they responded in unison. Both men clearly respected their superior but there was no servility in their manner. I picked this up immediately. These men enjoyed a happy and natural working relationship. This was very different to the stiff staff interaction that I had grown used to at Maleme.

The Warden turned and addressed himself to some papers that were lying on his desk.

"Hello Ron," Harry said holding out his hand. The broad grin on his face showed lots of teeth. Harry Cantle always had a lovely carefree smile. *"Welcome to Main Camp."*

Tim shook my hand. There was a crinkle in his smile that enveloped his whole face.

I had not seen Harry or Tim since I had left Ngamo with the last batch of captured animals for the Matopos.

The next fifteen minutes were taken up with Bruce discussing with Tim and Harry just what they had accomplished yesterday. Together they then worked out what everybody was going to do today.

I stood on the sidelines. I watched and I listened. It seemed everybody was going to be engaged for the next several days making bush pole platforms in trees overlooking waterholes.

I had arrived in Hwange just before the annual game count.

"Ron, you had better go along with Tim today," Bruce changed his plans. *"He will show you the ropes. We'll have our chat later."*

Tim and I returned to single quarters. We had breakfast together. Toast and fried eggs with bacon followed by strong hot coffee. Josepha, the single quarters native cook boy, had prepared everything.

Single quarters was an L-shaped old farm house. The entire front of the building was taken up with a large verandah screened with copper mosquito

gauze. It was equipped, frugally, with two metal and canvas camp chairs and a folding metal camp table.

One of the two rooms immediately behind the verandah was Tim's bedroom. Next to it was a sitting room of equal size.

The sitting room was furnished with four cushioned Morris Chairs. There was a low coffee table in the middle of the room. Tim's beautifully polished wood and glass-fronted private gun cabinet stood up against one wall. Inside the cabinet were four of Tim's rifles. They were standing in a notched gun rack.

A double French door connected the front verandah to the sitting room. A door fed off the sitting room into Tim's bedroom. Another led us from the sitting room onto the back verandah. The back verandah was L-shaped because it followed the shape of the building. It, too, was screened with copper mosquito gauze.

On the left hand side of the back verandah there were two rooms, a bathroom and a kitchen. They formed the bottom leg of the building's Lshape.

A large dining table with six chairs occupied centre stage of the right hand wing of the back verandah. This was the dining room. There was a paraffin fridge, a paraffin deep freeze unit and a chest of drawers standing against one wall.

Three square bedrooms stood in a row behind the main house. Each contained two beds and a chest of drawers. There were two built-in cupboards in each room, one on either side of the centrally located door. These back bedrooms were normally occupied only by visiting staff from other stations. They completed the single quarters establishment. I had slept in one of them the night before. It became my permanent place of residence. The other two rooms were unoccupied.

A sandy open yard surrounded the single quarters buildings. Nobody could call this open space a garden. The boundary was demarcated with a three-foot high garden fence that had been reinforced with pig mesh. The only plants growing in the yard were Rhodesian teak trees, part of the natural forest that surrounded us.

"How do I pay for the breakfast, Tim," I inquired, wiping my mouth with a clean and neatly folded serviette.

"We have a simple system," he replied. He pointed to a black book that

was lying on top of the chest of drawers.

"When we go out on patrol we log out, date and time, in that register. We log in when we get back, registering how many meals we have missed during the period of our absence. Breakfast, lunch and dinner all have the same value."

"At the end of every month we count the number of single quarter's meals we have each eaten during the month. We then calculate what percentage these represent relative to the total *number of meals eaten by everybody."*

I must have looked a little perplexed. I wasn't. I was just concentrating on what Tim was saying.

"For example," Tim continued in explanation, *"if you and I are living here, just the two of us, and we miss* no *meals during the month, we will each pay half the single quarter's* total *monthly bill."* He smiled then and added wryly, *"But it never works out like that. There will* always *be differences in the numbers of meals we each eat every month."*

"In simple terms, if you *eat thirty meals a month and* I *eat sixty meals a month then I will pay two thirds of the single quarters* total *bill and you will pay one third."*

"I understand." I understood everything that Tim had said so far. I was fascinated.

Tim ended off by explaining. *"The* entire *single quarters monthly costs are divided up, proportionately, according to the number of meals we have each eaten. It is a simple system. And it works."*

Tim appeared, at that stage, to be a little agitated. He must have misinterpreted my look of concentration. He clearly was not about to entertain any changes that I might suggest.

"And Josepha's wages?" I asked.

"They are included in the overall costs. So are all the other household costs like dishwashing soaps, red polish for the cement floors, eggs, cheese and bread. Everything."

"So we each *pay the single quarters expenses at the end of the month according to our respective proportions of the overall number of meals we have eaten during the month."* I summed up the dispensation arrangement.

"That's right." Tim said smiling.

It all made complete and simple sense to me! In fact, I thought it was a brilliant and most equitable way of allocating our joint living expenses.

The arrangement was Tim's brainchild.

"So how do I start? Do I have to pay a deposit or something?"

"No," Tim said succinctly. *"All you have to do is to log in with today's date indicating that you started your stay in single quarters with today's breakfast."*

"And when we go on patrol! Who pays for our food on patrol?"

"You *do,"* Tim explained again. *"Unless, like today, we are going together. We'll take a packed lunch. We just won't log out for lunch. And don't forget. You get the normal government Travelling and Subsistence allowance, T&S, when you are absent on patrol for twelve hours or more. It is valued at seventeen shillings and sixpence a day."*

"As long as we are honest," Tim ended the conversation meaningfully, *"you will find the system works very well."*

* * *

I spent my first day in Hwange with Tim Braybrooke at Guvallalla Pan. Guvallalla is situated thirty miles outside Main Camp on what was then the main tourist road to Robins Camp. Our job was to build a bush pole platform in a tree overlooking the waterhole. Someone would be sitting on the platform counting the elephants and other game animals that came down to drink during the day and night of the next full moon. Full moon was just one week away! The census was conducted every year over every single waterhole in the park during a 24-hour period.

The road was a dirt track. It had been gravelled with white calcrete only for the first seven miles as far as Nyamandhlovu Pan. Translated the name means *meat of an elephant.*

A pan is a natural clay-lined hollow in the ground shaped like a cupped human hand. They become established as a result of mud wallowing animals like warthogs, buffaloes and elephants taking baths in puddles of water during the rains. Each animal carries away a small amount of wet mud on its body after every bath. This mud dries on the animal's skin and is dusted off in the veld during its daily perambulations. Every time an animal visits the mud puddle for another bath it takes away yet more wet mud. Over the centuries these water holding depressions get bigger and bigger. The animals' dung and their trampling feet cause a water proof seal to develop on the bottoms of the constantly enlarging pans.

Nyamandhlovu is a large pan set in a bare open space in the middle of the sparse teak forest scrub. The soil all around is golden yellow Kalahari

desert sand. Two bore hole pumps run by diesel engines keep the pan full of water throughout the year. When full the pond at Nyamandhlovu is thirty yards across. It is one of Hwange's biggest game waterholes.

The Kalahari sand region of Hwange is covered with literally hundreds of thousands of similar natural depressions. They are *all* called pans, big ones and small ones alike. For most of the year Hwange's natural pans are dry. They fill with water only during the rains.

In 1960 fifteen of Hwange's pans were being kept artificially full of water during the dry season by way of bore hole pumps. The underground water table in the Kalahari sand region of the park is deep. Many of Hwange's bore holes go down 400 feet! Windmills operate on most of these bore holes all year round. But the windmills alone cannot supply enough water for the thousands of game animals that visit these waterholes during the dry season. When the rains stop, therefore, diesel engines replace the windmills and they pump night and day for the duration of the six months long dry season.

There is a high thatched game-viewing platform located about 100 yards away from the water at Namandhlovu. Cement brick steps lead up to the platform at the back of the blue-gum pole structure. There were a number of deckchairs on the structure's plank-floor. As we passed by I could see two young tourists sitting on the deckchairs waiting expectantly with binoculars and cameras. Their red sedan vehicle was parked close to the bottom of the steps.

We passed by the waterhole at nine o'clock in the morning. Except for a few blacksmith plovers cavorting in pre-nuptial displays at the water's edge there was no other life on the pan.

Lumps of elephant dung, pats of buffalo dung and the round, black raisin-like droppings of many kinds of antelope covered the ground as far as the eye could see. Although the vista was devoid of wildlife it was plain to see that lots of game animals came down to drink at Nyamandhlovu every day.

"This pan is one of Hwange's favourite tourist destinations," Tim explained. *"You won't believe how many elephants come to drink here in the evenings.* Then *the platform is packed with tourists standing shoulder to shoulder. I think* all *of Main Camp's tourists come here every day just before*

sunset."

Beyond Nyamandhlovu the white calcrete gravel on the road stopped. After those first seven miles the road followed the natural drainage lines where it could because in the depressions the dry black soil was hard. Where it couldn't follow a depression the soft sandy areas on the road were patched with calcrete. This occurred particularly in those places where tourist vehicles regularly got bogged down in the sand.

As we drew closer to Guvallalla the road got better and better. This was because the track then followed the edge of the basalt country.

There are huge white calcrete deposits lying close beneath the black soils of all the long depression lines in the Kalahari sand regions of the park. Wherever it was necessary this calcrete was used to gravel those sections of the tourist roads that would otherwise have been impassable to tourists.

The liberal use of calcrete on the tourist routes caused clouds of white dust to trail behind every vehicle that travelled along them. Every vehicle that plied the park roads, therefore, carried a perpetual film of white dust over its surfaces and every tourist who returned to Main Camp in the evenings was covered in the same fine dust. When the tourists got out of their cars they looked like ghosts emerging from a desert storm.

Guvallalla was a deep depression that was set, then, amidst a ring of heavy *Terminalia sericea* scrub. The Bushmen called the scrub *msusu.* Msusu was the common vegetative interface between the heavy teak forest that grew on the Kalahari-sand ridges and the lower lying grassed drainage lines that interrupted what would otherwise have been continuous teak forest. These drainage lines, sometimes referred to as fossil rivers, ran throughout the Kalahari sand regions of the park. The longest of them stretched, diagonally, right across the extent of the game reserve. It is along these extended drainage lines that Hwange's myriad natural pans occur.

Guvallalla's water came from a single borehole. Another was added sometime in the latter part of the 1960s. Guvallalla was a *good* pan insofar as it supported a large number of elephants and a variety of other game animals. It was not popular with tourists, however, because game viewing was impeded by the heavy msusu scrub that surrounded it.

"We've got ten drums of molasses back in camp," Tim explained. *"We will be using it soon to spray on the msusu here. We hope the added sweet taste will get the elephants to eat it. If they do it will open up the bush and improve the game viewing."*

Tim sighed deeply. *"What we do for damn tourists!"*

It was a common fault amongst young game rangers to thus denigrate our vital visitors. We all considered that attending to the needs of our tourists interfered far too much with our much more interesting game ranging work. It was beneath our dignity to work with *people*. Working with tourists was something that tourist officers did. We were rangers not tourist officers and it took time for us young field officers to accept tourists as an integral and hugely important part of our work. Acceptance happened gradually. It came only as we matured and were promoted into more senior positions in the department.

The ten drums of molasses stood behind the Main Camp workshop for a long time. We never ever used it on Guvallalla's msusu. What happened to those drums of molasses I don't know. It wasn't necessary. Over time the elephants *did* eat the msusu at Guvallalla and they ate much more too. Within twenty years Guvallalla looked like a desert.

On this my first visit to Guvallalla there was a huge *Ziziphus mucronata* tree growing right on the edge of the pan. The Bushman call this tree the *mPhafa.* It is the sacred tree of the Zulus. This particular tree had strong and high lateral branches from which hung the remnants of last year's platform.

We pulled down the old poles and secured new ones with 8-gauge wire. Tim and I did much of the work ourselves but we were ably assisted by the two Bushmen trackers who had accompanied us. Japan was Tim's personal tracker. Mbuyotsi, pronounced 'uMjoys', was the other. Mbuyotsi and I were to have a long and fantastic relationship in the years ahead.

The two trackers cut new poles from the surrounding msusu and brought them to the base of the big tree. They had done this job many times before and they knew exactly what to do. The new platform was complete by four o'clock in the afternoon.

Tim and I sat on the finished platform and talked quietly together as we watched the afternoon's wildlife come down to the water to drink. The two Bushmen picked up all the cut pole-ends and loose wire pieces and put them, together with the tools we had used, in the back of the Land Rover. Mbuyotsi then drove the vehicle to the far side of the pan where the two trackers waited for us next to the bore hole.

A lone bull elephant came down to the pan. It stood not thirty yards away from the Mphafa tree oblivious to our presence. I watched fascinated as it sucked water into its trunk. It was close enough for me to see every wrinkle

and every bristle on its long appendage. The elephant then squirted the water into its mouth. This process was repeated again and again until the elephant's tanks were full. A great deal of the water spilled back into the pan from its mouth. I had never seen an elephant drink before.

A small herd of roan antelope came down, drank, and walked off slowly into the msusu scrub. I had never seen roan before. Warthogs were plentiful. Nothing looked up at us on the platform and we did not draw attention to ourselves by moving about.

"I believe you had a run-in with John Hatton" Tim said quietly. It was a statement not a question.

I nodded. *"Sort of…."* I replied. Tim smiled at my noncommittal answer. I saw the smile and felt embarrassed. The least I could do was to be honest. *"O.K… Yes,"* I said more emphatically. *"I had a run-in with John Hatton."*

"He shot two leopard cubs…?"

"You know, Tim," I answered quietly, *"I'd rather not discuss it,"* I said plainly. *"It's a long story."*

"We know all about it," Tim said then much to my surprise. *"Your report to Bob Smith and Hatton's report to the Director about you were sent to Mr. D and to Bruce to read. Harry and I don't know any of the finer details but we know the basics. Bruce seems well satisfied with your conduct and he believes* your *side of the story.* That *I do know."*

"Mr Austen had no right to tell anybody about what he read in those reports," I retorted emphatically. *"They were confidential."*

"Bruce believes he does have such a right…." Tim continued. *"You see, he was told by head office that you are on probation for the next six months. If you don't pass muster inside six months you are* out. *Bruce specifically asked me to tell you this."*

A heavy cold feeling washed over me. My soul kicked painfully deep inside. Suddenly I felt very vulnerable… again! All the good feelings I had been experiencing about my being posted to Hwange suddenly evaporated. My face blanched. *Was my dream going up in smoke?*

"Bruce told Harry and me enough about what was in those two reports for both of us to understand the implications," Tim continued. *"He wanted us to know, deep down, what* your *problem had been in the Matopos. He wants us to help you get through the next six months. He* wants *you to succeed, Ron…."* Tim smiled. There was empathy in the look on Tim's face.

It touched me deeply.

I began to breathe again.

"He also knows that you and I were at Plumtree School together and he wants me to take you under my wing."

I suddenly understood what Tim was telling me. The field officers at Main Camp had been told to take me by the hand.

"Just so you know it Ron, I have been officially appointed your mentor!"

Tim looked over at a small herd of buffalo that was wandering down to the water.

He lifted his eyebrows and poked his face in their direction, drawing my attention to the new arrivals.

'Dagga Boys', Tim called them. There were five of them. All bulls. Their bodies were covered in thick dried mud. It was an appropriate name, I thought, for *dagga* in the vernacular means *mud*.

I watched the dagga boys slouching along through the heavy sand but I did not really *see* them. I knew nothing about buffalo. I should have been studying these ones closely as they approached. But at that moment I was totally absorbed in listening to what Tim was saying.

He continued*: "Bruce hasn't twigged on to the fact that I was four years your senior at Plumtree or that we had very little contact at school. But he knows me and he knows that whatever he wants me to do I will do…. Bruce Austen is that kind of man. He gets everybody eating out of his hand."*

I didn't say a word. I was still too shocked to fully comprehend all that Tim was telling me.

Tim must have seen my anguish. It must have been written all over my face. He had probably noticed its sudden pallor too.

"Don't worry," he said almost in a whisper, laughing softly so as not to disturb the buffaloes. They were now drinking from the pan almost directly beneath our platform.

He slapped me softly on the back of my shoulder. *"I'll let you into a little secret."* Tim chortled quietly to himself. *"Bruce can't stand John Hatton!"*

So I have an ally I thought, suddenly realising the importance of *that* information.

"Just what their history together is I don't know," Tim continued, *"but Bruce is always very derogatory about John Hatton whenever his name crops up in conversation…*.

"So I think you are home and dry." Tim opined sagely. *"Bruce would never let it be said that he had failed to make something of* you *when anybody and everybody of importance in the department knows that John Hatton failed."*

"John Hatton had nothing to do with making *anything of me when I was in the Matopos,"* I retorted in an angry whisper. *"I lived with Jurie and Anna Grobler at White Waters most of the time. I hardly ever saw John Hatton. Jurie Grobler was the* only *one in the Matopos who taught me anything at all. He and I got on like a house on fire."*

"Don't worry about it," Tim could see I was getting riled. He now tried to calm me down.

"All John Hatton did for me at the Matopos was to use me as a smoke screen." I continued almost in a rage finally letting the cat out of the bag. *"He* created *an altercation with me by blaming me for spreading rumours about his shooting of those two leopard cubs. It was his way of shifting the focus of attention away from himself. He was embarrassed. He had become the laughing stock of all the native staff on the station."*

"And you did nothing? You didn't spread those rumours? If you did it would have been gross insubordination and a lack of loyalty to your senior officer!"

"No!" I said emphatically. *"I found out about the two cubs completely by accident. I shot the mother just one week later. She was killing calves in the same general area where John Hatton had shot the two cubs. The only person I discussed it with was Jurie Grobler. And Jurie and I agreed to let sleeping dogs lie. It must have been the game scout who was with me when I shot the mother. It* must *have been* him *who leaked the story about the cubs."*

I had vowed not to discuss this debacle ever. But Tim had cleverly cajoled it out of me. And I knew, now, why he had done so. He was as sure as all hell going to report our conversation to Bruce Austen when we got back. I was angry. At the same time I was relieved. At least the truth would be told where it mattered the most, here at Main Camp, where Bruce Austen held the future of my career in his hands.

What the hell! I thought. *What will be will be!*

The talk that Bruce Austen had said he wanted to have with me *later* never took place. It was not necessary because he had read the reports and he had already made up his mind about their veracity. He had also made up his mind about me. He was determined even before I arrived at Main Camp that I

was going to succeed.

The way that Bruce Austen operated ensured that he got to the nitty gritty of *everything* of importance without formality. That was his nature. That was his charm. That was why he was so successful. And that was why the Bushmen called him *Malindela, the one who follows.* The name implied that he followed everybody anywhere and everywhere all the time. It meant too that he got to know everything about anything and everything that was going on.

Main Camp was far too busy a place for the station programmes to stall for want of unnecessary formality. I was just notched into the system as one of the team. I learned the ropes mainly as a result of Tim's friendly yet always demanding mentorship. What Jurie Grobler did for me in the Matopos, Tim Braybrooke did for me at Main Camp. He is one of those few people who made a difference in my life and who significantly shaped the future of my career.

But there was one man at Main Camp who was greater than Tim. He did more for me than Tim ever could have done but in a totally different dimension. That man was Bruce Austen.

Bruce Austen was always in the background. He was the one who pulled the strings that made things happen. He was the one who recognised the potential in me and gave me my head. He took chances with me. He gave me the opportunities that I needed and craved. I hope he never felt that I had ever let him down. Bruce Austen is the one and only man in my whole life for whom I generated complete and unconditional respect.

* * *

By 1960 the veterinary and national park authorities were well aware that the African or Cape buffalo carried and transmitted a fatal disease to cattle called *Theileriosis*, more commonly called *Corridor Fever*. The vector is the brown ear tick.

The brown ear tick begins its life, after hatching from a cluster of tens-of-thousands of microscopic eggs, as a larva. The larvae from several females often numbering in their tens of millions, scramble in heavy masses onto the tops of the grass stems under which they were hatched. The man in the street calls them '*pepper-ticks'*. They then look like and are no bigger than a particle of crushed pepper. Any animal that brushes past these larval clusters is immediately invaded by the mass and its body is quickly swamped by a swarm of the tiny biting parasites.

The larvae suck the blood of their hosts then fall to the ground where, amidst the grass stems at ground level, they pupate and transform into nymphs or first stage little ticks. These, too, await the passing of another animal on the tops of grass stems. The same blood-sucking performance occurs. The nymphs fill themselves up with the blood of their second host and, again, they fall to the ground where they again transform.

The third phase development on their third host brings the little ticks to full adulthood. The females now become the well-known bloated, fat, blue-coloured ticks full of blood that most people remember when they think of ticks. The males are much smaller, becoming the hard and flat brown ticks that are often thought to be undeveloped adults. At this stage, when the females are full of blood and full of eggs, they detach from their final host and lay their thousands upon thousands of eggs at the bases of the grass stems amongst which they fall. There they die having completed their full life cycle.

During all these phases of development the ticks pick up any disease that is in the blood streams of the animals that they feed upon and when they migrate from one host to the next they pass on the disease to their new hosts. In this way the ticks spread highly infectious diseases far and wide in the herds of the wild animals that they subsist upon.

It is physically impossible to inoculate wild animals against any of the several tick-borne diseases that exist, so they become disease reservoirs. Wild animals, in fact, don’t need to be protected against most of these diseases because they are immune to them. Domesticated animals do not have this natural resistance.

Many of the diseases that wild animals carry would not be important were it not for the existence of vector ticks which readily transmit these diseases to domesticated animals. This is why cattle ranchers have an understandable reluctance to share their properties with those wild animals that are known to be serious carriers of those tick-borne diseases that are fatal to their cattle.

A true *carrier* is an animal that permanently harbours a particular disease in its system. It thus *carries* the disease wherever it goes. Carriers normally don’t show any of the disease symptoms. With some diseases the carriers show symptoms *only* when their condition is down. This happens during severe droughts when nutrition levels in their then limited food supplies are

extremely low. Carriers, therefore, don't always transmit the diseases that they are carrying. Transmission only occurs when the environmental conditions are exactly right.

The Cape or African buffalo is a true carrier of corridor fever to which cattle have no immunity whatsoever. Corridor fever is quickly fatal to cattle. It is little wonder, therefore, that the cattle ranchers of the
Gwaai River Valley just outside the boundaries of Hwange National Park became very agitated when buffalo wandered out of the park onto their cattle ranches.

In 1960 it was believed, but not *then* yet proven, that buffalo had *something* to do with the spread of foot and mouth disease, too. Ten years later Dr. John Condy of the Rhodesian Veterinary Department proved that they were true carriers of this disease also.

Most cloven-hoofed animals contract foot and mouth disease when it is active and they spread it whilst they are infected. Most infected animals die. Some survive. The survivors have, thereafter, a natural individual immunity.

No species other than the African buffalo is known to be a true carrier of foot-and-mouth disease. This makes the buffalo a major factor of veterinary concern in Africa because, when eruptions of foot and mouth disease occur, international imports of domestic beef from the infected country are immediately banned.

> *Twenty years after we had introduced half grown buffalo to the Matopos therefore, when their numbers had grown to several hundred,* all *the buffalo in that national park were shot out - most of them by my young brother, Ian.*

John Condy also discovered that unweaned buffalo calves are *not* carriers of either corridor fever or of foot and mouth disease. They pick up their carrier status from their parental herds immediately after they are weaned. So, in the 1970s, national parks captured several hundred unweaned buffalo calves and, under Dr. Condy's supervision, they were reared in isolation of their mothers. They were contained inside secure veterinary quarantined paddocks that were far away from any possible contamination by either infected cattle or by adult buffalo.

> *These disease free animals were used to stock small game parks and private game ranches. They were also used to replace the buffalo that had been eliminated from the Matopos. So buffalo are once again*

roaming the Matopos hills.

Fortunately all buffalo cows calve down at roughly the same time, in February and March, each year. This makes the capture of large numbers of unweaned buffalo calves a relatively easy procedure.

No veterinary treatment can remove either corridor fever or foot and mouth disease from buffalo once they become carriers.

In due course it became government policy to eliminate buffalo wherever they occurred in areas that were not protected wildlife sanctuaries, that is, outside what was known as *The Parks and Wildlife Estate.*

* * *

I had only been at Main Camp a few days when four buffalo bulls were reported on the lower Dett Vlei section of Dahlia Ranch just outside the park boundary.

Dahlia Ranch was owned by Bert Riding and Harold Bloomberg. Bert and Harold also owned the Gwaai River Hotel. This old country hotel was located at the Gwaai River bridge on the Bulawayo to Victoria Falls main road just twenty five miles from Main Camp. It was an establishment that I was to come to know very well over the next three years. *The Gwaai* was the principal social *watering hole* of Main Camp's officer staff.

Gwaai is a common native name for tobacco. It is also the Msili Bushman name for water. The Gwaai was the first of the rivers with permanent water that the Bushmen of old came across when they moved northwards out of the Kalahari Desert in Botswana. Hence the river became known as The Gwaai, *The Place of Water*.

Bert Riding, who had a long history with Bruce Austen in the British Royal Air Force during World War II, had phoned his old friend and comrade to say he was anxious about the spread of disease to his cattle. He requested that the four buffalo bulls be removed.

Tim Braybrooke was tasked with the job of shooting them. I tagged along for the experience. In those days I went everywhere with Tim. I was like his shadow.

We both went out armed with government-issue .375 Magnum rifles. I had never handled such a heavy calibre before. Just the thought of using a .375 Magnum was a thrilling enough experience. The fact that I was to help Tim shoot these four buffalo bulls was the cherry on the top of that day's cream cake. I felt a warm glow burning inside me as we drove along the dirt

road out of Main Camp.

My dream was starting to happen!

We found the buffalo very quickly. They were wandering down and quietly grazing in the middle of the wet drainage about a hundred yards from the edge of the gravel road.

Tim stopped the vehicle on the road directly opposite the buffalo. The huge black animals looked up at us menacing. They seemed to be not too alarmed. They shifted their position to face us. Then, lifting their heads high, they peered down their noses at us.

This was my first hunting experience with buffaloes. I found their attitude very intimidating. I understood at that moment why so many people find the African buffalo so frightening.

Tim climbed out of the vehicle closing the door quietly behind him. He turned to his tracker, Japan, who, with Mbuyotsi, was sitting in the back of the open Land Rover. He took his rifle from the tracker's hand and worked the bolt slowly pushing a round quietly into the breech.

I emerged from my side of the vehicle with my rifle in hand. I too softly jacked a round into the chamber and stood at Tim's side.

What appeared to be the lead bull blew a heavy whistling snort through its nostrils. One after the other each of the other bulls followed suite. They were clearly not happy with the fact we had emerged from the Land Rover.

Our two Bushman trackers remained sitting quietly on the back of the vehicle. Their eyes watched the buffaloes carefully.

"You start from the left. I'll start from the right," Tim reaffirmed the plan we had agreed upon. *"Remember, no head shots. Go for the heart and lungs."*

Tim shot first. My shot came close on the heels of his muzzle blast. Both our bullets went into the *vee* of our respective victim's throats. All four animals spun round. The ones we had hit showed no incapacitating signs. They all galloped away across the vlei as if nothing had happened.

I had visions of us tracking wounded buffaloes for the rest of the week. All the horror stories about how dangerous wounded buffalo can be flashed through my mind.

Tim shot as fast as he could aim and reload. Standing at his side I did the same. As the animals turned I slapped bullets into the lung areas of both my

selected targets. The bullets smashed into their massive bodies just behind their shoulders. They didn't even flinch. This taught me my first lesson about how tough and how resilient buffalo can be.

I placed five good shots into both my allocated bulls. Two into one, three into the other!

My rifle was empty!

I scrabbled at the cartridge belt about my waist and pulled a single round out of its loop. The gaping bolt of the rifle exposed the open slot of the magazine. I quickly pressed the cartridge down into the steel box.

I still had a lot to learn about cartridge belts and about reloading my rifle hurriedly in the middle of a big game hunt.

Carrying twenty-five spare rounds of ammunition in a leather cartridge belt about my waist was very new to me. I had never even seen a cartridge belt before I got to Main Camp. That morning I found my government-issue leather cartridge belt heavy and cumbersome. It sat ponderously on my hips. I wondered if I would ever get used to it. I was used to carrying just a couple of spare cartridges wrapped in a handkerchief in one of my trouser pockets.

Hunting big game animals out of Hwange, however, was a very different proposition to the kind of hunting I had been used to. It didn't take me long to discover that being able to carry an extra twenty five rounds of very accessible ammunition on my person was a real Godsend. I just had to learn how best to use those cartridges.

Suddenly Mbuyotsi was standing by my side. He had an open packet of ammunition in one hand. In the other hand he held out two shining brass cartridges. I snatched at them and pushed them into the magazine. Even as I was loading the first two he hauled out another two from the box. These he held out to me also. His hand hovered just two feet away to one side of my face. This was another innovation. I was not used to having a tracker being so supportive in the heat of a hunt.

All the while, out of the corner of my eye, I watched the buffaloes running further and further away across the vlei.

I never had the opportunity to fire my rifle again. It wasn't necessary.

"Enough," Tim shouted at me loudly, holding an open hand across my front. He was watching the buffaloes carefully and he had read all the signs.

Tim's tracker, Japan, was standing by his side. He, too, was offering Tim spare cartridges in an outstretched hand.

One by one all four of the big black bulls staggered to a halt. One by one they collapsed onto the ground. Each of them struggled for perhaps half a minute to get back onto its feet. All the while they spewed great volumes of frothy pink lung blood from their nostrils.

They were finished. The relief I felt at that moment was enormous.

Once the first buffalo went down the hunt was all over. In less than half a minute all four buffaloes were squirming on the ground. In their dying moments they let out plaintive, prolonged and anguished bellows. This was a sound that was to become very familiar to me in the years ahead. It was the swan song of a dying buffalo!

My first buffalo hunt had come and gone. It had happened in the blink of an eye. As I stood at the side of the road my body was quivering all over. It was not so much what had happened that had hyped me up but rather what *might* have happened had not all the buffaloes gone down. I had read so much about how dangerous wounded buffalo can be and I hadn't been at all sure what to expect.

The hunt had been an anti-climax. Everything that happened had occurred so quickly and so easily. It had all gone down like clockwork.

Only hunters will understand and appreciate the exhilaration that I experienced at that moment. I was glowing at the end of my very first buffalo hunt. Anti-climax or not, I had shot and killed my first two buffaloes!

* * *

The following week we conducted the annual game count. Every one of the white officers in the park was involved. People Ted Davison and Bruce Austen knew and trusted came from far and wide to participate.

Even the Chief Justice, Sir Hugh Beadle, attended. For him it was an annual pilgrimage. The Chief Justice was, at that time, Chairman of the National Parks Advisory Board. He was also, I was to learn, an avid big game hunter.

Les Stewart and Bob Smith were also on hand to participate in the count. They, too, came every year.

The more athletic individuals were allocated those waterholes where we had constructed platforms in big trees. In other areas, where there were no suitable trees for platforms, the observers sat in their vehicles.

The count covered a period of 24 hours, from midday on the first day to midday on the second.

Date selection was important. Every year the count was scheduled for

the night of the bright full moon in October. Day temperatures were then always well above 100 degrees. This is the height of the hot dry season when it was presumed every water-dependent animal *had* to visit a waterhole at least once during that 24-hour period.

The rains in Rhodesia break early in November, more often than not on Guy Fawkes Day, the 5th November. I remember those nights at school when we lit a bonfire so that we could burn a stuffed effigy of Guy Fawkes, *the guy*, the man who had in 1605 tried to blow up King James I of England and the British Houses of Parliament. He was burnt at the stake for his troubles. More often than not the night of November 5th was marked by the first tropical rainstorm of the new wet season and we had to endure damp squibs and to see our rockets and other fireworks fizzle out in the rain.

Just as soon as the first real thunder and lightning storms of the season racked the skies the elephants and the other game animals in Hwange just *disappeared*. It was an incredible experience and it happened every year. One evening the waterholes would be full of elephants, all screaming and trumpeting and jostling with each other to get down to the water first. The next night there were no animals at all. It was as though a switch had been flicked.

The night of the October full moon was important for the count because the bigger animals could be seen and be counted no matter what time of the day or night they came down to drink. Binoculars helped immensely. Binoculars on a bright moonlit night magnified the light factor just as much as they did the images. This made it easier to identify and to count the animals that came down to drink.

The count was carried out, principally, to see how many elephants there were in the park. I was soon to find out that even in those early days there were signs that Hwange's elephant population was too large.

Elephants are very partial to eating *mukwa* trees (*Pterocarpus angolensis*) known as *kiaat* elsewhere in southern Africa. They ring-bark and push over the bigger trees and they eat up every sapling they can find. They also like to push down big mlala palms and they eat the growing cones of the young palms when they are only a few feet high. In 1960 Ted Davison and Bruce Austen were deeply concerned that the elephants would very soon eliminate all the mukwa trees and all the palm trees in the park.

Besides elephants we counted every other animal, from the size of a jackal upwards that came down to drink during the twenty-four hour period.

This required that we remain awake and vigilant for the whole 24-hour period of the count. This was easier said than done. In the middle of the night, when nothing seemed to be happening, it was only natural that the observer would periodically dose off. For this reason it was a rule that there be *at least* two observers in each team. They could then take turns keeping awake.

My first game count at Hwange was a brilliant experience. The Bushman tracker, Mbuyotsi, was instructed to be my companion. We were allocated Guvallalla Pan.

At that time there were 15 water points in the park equipped with bore holes. There were another 20-odd dams and springs in the basalt country and three soaks in the remote Kalahari sand regions. However many there actually were *every* waterhole in the park was covered that night.

When Mbuyotsi and I arrived at Guvallalla that day there was a herd of sable antelope and two groups of kudu drinking at the pan. At precisely 12 o'clock noon I recorded their numbers and sexes and noted the age composition of the groups as best I could. As I had been instructed to do, and in accordance with the forms I had been given to fill in, I broke the numbers down into rough age and sex classes. That meant I recorded the numbers of adult males and adult females present, the numbers of half-grown sub-adults and the numbers of juveniles and calves.

Mbuyotsi explained to me that different species of animals drank at different times of the day. This information switched me on to this reality and from that day on I made a special note of the implications.

Sable and kudu normally come to the water during the hottest parts of the day, between eleven o'clock and two o'clock. During that period other game activity at the waterholes is minimal.

The big buffalo herds drank in the late afternoon.

Elephant cowherds preferred to drink at dusk. *Sometimes*, however, the cows and calves drank a second time during the heat of the day. This made the counting of elephants problematical. The numbers and compositions of each herd, notches on ears and shapes of tusks, and the existence of recognisable fresh tide markings on their hides left by water and mud from an earlier visitation, were the factors that told us we had already counted those herds before. We made notes of such second visitations.

The very big elephant bulls came down alone or in small groups after

dark. By this time the hustle and bustle that accompanied the visitations of the cowherds had come and gone.

The absolute silence of the big elephant bulls as they came and left the waterhole was eerie and uncanny. Sometimes I was only alerted to the fact of their arrival beneath me when I heard the water dribbling back onto the surface of the pan from their trunks and their mouths.

Most of the predators sneaked in silently throughout the night. The lions, leopards, hyenas and jackals slipped over the open sands to the water's edge like silver ghosts. They would have come and gone before I knew it except for the fact that Mbuyotsi or I had been awake and alert.

The night sounds were electric. The background cacophony of crickets and other insects was a constant orchestration. There were the calls of owls and nightjars and the whining screeches of water dikkops and blacksmith plovers. Lions roared. Leopards grunted or *sawed* their songs of the night. Spotted hyenas howled eerily in the distance. Black-backed Jackals barked their melodious howls. In between was the silence, that wonderful balmy stillness that I had long ago learned to love the most in the African night.

I revelled in every moment of my first game count at Hwange. I was in my element. This is what I had been born to do!

After the event all the census forms were collected. The information was collated and logged onto a single table of figures. Just over 3 500 elephants had been counted. This told us there were 0,7 elephants per square mile in the park or 0,27 elephants per square kilometre. These were figures that I had good reason to remember in the years ahead.

For the first time concerns were expressed that year about the growing numbers of buffalo, wildebeest and zebra, too. The park's grazing was also under pressure.

At that time, not knowing anything about the intricacies of wildlife management, I felt that 3 500 elephants was an incredible number for one national park to carry. Visual impressions left me with the idea that there were very large numbers of elephants everywhere inside the national park. Whenever we ventured onto the tourist game viewing roads in the afternoons we encountered elephants. Tourists never complained about not seeing enough.

Two days after the game count the Main Camp field staff held a round table conference. The Director, Les Stewart, and the Deputy Director, Bob Smith, stayed to attend the meeting. Sir Hugh Beadle stayed on, too. It was

an annual event of great importance on the Hwange calendar.

Ted Davison and Bruce Austen had the most to say about the numbers of elephants the park was carrying. Harry Cantle contributed some useful information. Tim was largely silent. I was completely silent. In fact I was totally out of my depth. Strangely, I remember feeling alarmed and concerned that the word *culling* kept cropping up in the discussion.

How could people like Ted Davison and Bruce Austen talk about culling elephants inside Hwange National Park? Hwange was already the epitome of an elephant sanctuary in my mind. Like most nature lovers I believed that no matter what, elephants should be afforded *total* protection inside Hwange.

This was the mark of my total naiveté in those days. It was also an indication of just how great was the impression on me that the African elephant had already made.

How times have changed! How I have changed.

During the meeting the destruction of Hwange's mukwa trees and mlala palms by elephants was brought up again and again. It was emphasised by both Mister D. and by Bruce that these *seemed* to be the *only* tree species that the elephants were actually killing off. They stressed, however, that there might be others that we had not yet realised were in the same predicament. How many *more* species, especially woodland top canopy trees, were being damaged beyond recovery without our knowledge? How many *lesser* plant species were under threat? Nobody had answers to these questions.

What did they mean by a *top-canopy tree*? The label seemed obvious but I wasn't sure. I wanted and needed clarity on this question, and about so many other matters that were discussed, but I held my tongue. Instead I made notes.

I used my notes a day or two later. Mister D sat me down in his office and he patiently gave me the answers I wanted and needed. I got the impression he really liked doing that! His answers opened up another Pandora's Box.

This was my first lesson in ecology and wildlife management although in those days such terminology was never used. The sciences of ecology and of wildlife management were then still under construction.

The mukwa trees and mlala palms, Mr D. said, were *indicator* species. They were trees we *knew* were being damaged beyond recovery. They were trees that we *knew* would be eliminated entirely from the national park if some kind of elephant population control management was not implemented.

An indicator plant species, he told me, was a species that informed us - that *indicated* to us - all was not well in the Hwange environment. The obvious destruction of mukwa trees and of mlala palms by elephants, beyond the stage of possible recovery without the help of man, told us there was *something* wrong with the *natural* balance between the plants and the animals in the park.

"Fundamentally", he said, *"the elimination of these trees by elephants tell us there are too many elephants in Hwange. It also tells us that a full scientific investigation is overdue."*

But there was nobody to undertake this research! In those days there were *no* scientists employed by the Department of National Parks.

My mind was spinning with all these new ideas. I remember thinking: *What did it matter if a few trees became locally extinct in Hwange? There were mukwa trees and mlala palms in other parts of the country where there were no elephants. The elephants in Hwange were surely much more important than a few miserable trees? Visitors came to Hwange to see animals. They particularly came to see elephants. They didn't come to look at trees!*

My emotions were in conflict. I loved hunting. A huge passion raged within my soul to one day become a great elephant hunter! But for some deep-seated reason I could not accept the notion that we should shoot elephants *inside* the national park. It was something that was apparently indelibly imprinted on my psyche. National Parks were the elephants' *only* places of sanctuary! I instinctively believed we could not and should not violate that principle.

I was yet to learn the huge impact that excessive elephant populations have on plant and other animal species in their habitats. I had not yet comprehended the primary importance of maintaining the integrity of a national park's overall biological diversity.

Nevertheless, these were my honest thoughts at the time. I mention them here to emphasise just how little I knew about wildlife management in those days and just how generally naive I really was. I now know that I had understood very little about what was discussed during that important watershed meeting. Most of it was far beyond my comprehension. Nevertheless, I was pleased at the compromise everybody agreed upon.

Hwange National Park had been a haven for wild animals since the park's inception in 1928, 32 years before. Its sanctity should be maintained.

It was agreed that no wild animals would be killed inside the park for management reasons except that wild dogs should continue to be shot on sight. Killing wild dogs had been a practice since the park first came into being. Ted Davison shot them because they killed large numbers of antelopes and they scattered all wild animals far and wide when the dogs were hunting. Mr. D. still wanted to build up the park's game numbers in the interests of providing bigger and better wildlife spectacles for tourism. Bruce was silent on this issue.

All elephants and *all* buffaloes found outside the park boundaries were to be eliminated. It was felt that it was better to kill these animals *outside* the park, where their flesh could be eaten by the local native peoples, than that they be culled inside the park thus violating the park's sanctuary status. The more elephants and the more buffaloes that we could shoot *outside* the park boundaries, it was said, the less necessary would it be to even *think* about culling these animals *inside* the park. The presence of Les Stewart and Bob Smith, and of Sir Hugh Beadle, at this meeting rubberstamped these decisions and conclusions.

During that meeting Ted Davison said that if elephant culling was *ever* to be instituted *inside* the national park it would be his wish that the carcasses be left to rot in the veld. It was his belief that the nutrients contained in those carcasses would thus be returned to the park to enrich its ecosystems. This seemed to me a very strange way of looking at things.

In retrospect I now know that there was a lot of merit in what Ted Davison had said but on the day that he said it I didn't *really* understand his motives. Today, as a freethinking person, I would disagree with him because other considerations have since complicated the equation. Nevertheless, I was left confused and bewildered after the management meeting. I was confused not *just* about Mister D's comments about nutrient flow but by a whole range of other management and socio-economic considerations that I did not understand.

When that management meeting ended I was left with one major and very clear impression. I had an awful lot to learn!

* * *

The afternoon after the meeting Ted Davison invited me out on a drive. The purpose, he said, was to find an elephant outside the park boundary that I could shoot. He knew he was going to leave Hwange within the next few months in preparation for his retirement and he wanted to be the first person

to show me how to shoot an elephant. I was, he told me, the last game ranger that would ever be appointed under his command!

I took a .375 Magnum from the station armoury. He brought along a .470 double-barrelled rifle. We drove over the railway line, the park boundary, into the Sekumi Forest Reserve. We travelled down the Dett Vlei road towards the Gwaai River Hotel. From there we rode up the main Victoria Falls road which, in those days, was still just two strips of tarmac. There were elephant tracks everywhere but we saw no elephants. We returned late in the day empty handed. We had a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon, however, talking wildlife, talking birds and talking bird's eggs. It was an afternoon that I will remember forever.

* * *

Mister D. never invited me out again. This was probably because the day after he tried to find an elephant for me to shoot, Tim and I went back to the Dett Vlei to look for an elephant that was breaking cattle fences and chasing the herd boys all over Dahlia Ranch.

It was an easy hunt. We had been told roughly where to find the troublesome animal and by simply driving up the cattle fence through the teak forest we located him standing quietly amongst the trees fifty yards off the track. The elephant heard the vehicle approaching and when we cut the engine it quietly ambled off deeper into the forest. The undergrowth quickly swallowed him up.

I was surprised at how thick the forest underbrush was. It was tall and very heavy thicket. The Bushmen called it *sinanga*. This was a new word for me. It was a word, however, that was to slip off my tongue nearly every day during the next twenty-five years. Using the word *sinanga* was inescapable for those of us who hunted the big game animals of the Kalahari sands with the Msili Bushmen. Sinanga was everywhere. It was widespread and abundant and the wild animals of Hwange well knew how to use it.

I was astounded at how effortlessly the elephant had simply dissolved into the sinanga. But we had seen him. We knew exactly where he had gone.

Although he had wandered off he did not seem to be unduly perturbed. There was no sign of fear or panic in his movements. Tim told me that he was probably standing quietly just out of our view listening for the Land Rover to depart.

Tim and I were both armed with .375 Magnum rifles. We each had a

cartridge belt about our waists carrying twenty-five rounds of extra ammunition. Tim's tracker, Japan, took up the spoor. Mbuyotsi was again my tracker for the hunt.

Very soon we had our quarry in view. A deep carpet of dry leaves under foot made our approach far from silent. The sounds of our feet shuffling through the dead leaves sent the elephant loping off. By then we had closed the gap to fifty yards.

Tim raised his rifle and fired. I fired, too, aiming for the lungs. I distinctly heard the two bullets thump home. The elephant moved into top gear. He began to run. We raced after him. He was never out of our sight.

Tim and I both emptied our magazines into the fleeing animal firing as fast as we could pull the triggers and reload. This fusillade brought the elephant to a shuddering halt inside thirty yards.

This time I saw the whole process of death by lung shot start to finish. I saw its effectiveness and its horror for the animal must have gone through all the agonies of hell and of pain and of panic. It obviously could not breathe. It knew that death was knocking at its door.

Gallons of frothy pink blood gushed from the elephant's trunk. The gore came out in deluges with each exhalation of its breath. Its flailing trunk sprayed the blood over the bushes all around.

Its front legs splayed. Its whole body quivered and shook with incredibly heavy spasms. It raised its trunk above its head and let out a blood-curdling scream of anguish and of rage and from head to toe it hosed its body down with frothy pink blood.

Tim ran to within ten yards range and put a merciful bullet through the old bull's brain.

The elephant hit the ground heavily on its chest, its tusks digging into the soft sand of the forest floor. Its big plank-like ears banged against its shoulders with a loud and hollow sound. A cloud of dry brown dust erupted from the grooves and heavy granulations on its skin. Ever so slowly the carcass leaned over and flopped onto its side. The top back leg lifted into the air and began kicking violently. I could hear its hip joint articulating with every forceful movement. The kicking leg made the whole body jostle violently.

Nothing I had ever witnessed prepared me for this experience. I had seen it all at close first hand. It left a deep impression that I will never forget. I felt

both exhilarated and horrified.

Tim's clinical acceptance of what transpired was impressive. He appeared totally unmoved. He showed no emotion. No excitement! He accepted it all as a matter of fact and his efficient c*oup de grace* was an apt lesson in the alternative.

I was amazed at how he had run right up next to the stricken beast to fire that final bullet. He had clearly not given any thought at all to the fact that he had been within easy reach of the animal's flailing trunk. There had been no fear in his approach. No hesitation! He had simply run right up to it, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

Stepping gingerly about the profusion of blood that surrounded and covered the carcass, Tim then meticulously explained to me all the vital shots that were used to kill an elephant. Equally important, he explained to me those shots that can be taken to incapacitate a wounded elephant that is running away.

Amidst the gore and the rank smell of fresh blood, the most important and first lesson Tim taught me that day was the position of the elephant's relatively small brain in its huge head.

This was something that I wished I had known when I had shot at my Macaha elephant. Had I known what Tim told me that day I would most likely have killed my Macaha elephant with a single clean brain shot. I would also have most certainly approached much closer to my target before firing my shot. I was already beginning to realise that elephants are not as precipitously dangerous as my vivid imagination had once impressed upon me.

"*The brain,*" Tim said, "*should always be your preferred* first *target*." He then carefully explained to me just *how* to get a bullet into that most vital of all organs. "*It is the* best *shot,*" he said, "*because it drops the elephant dead in its tracks*".

We moved to a position just behind the now lax top front leg.

"*The heart and the lungs,*" he said, indicating the location of both organs by tracing his spread fingers over the elephant's coarse-grained skin, "*are second-option targets. You normally go for the heart or lungs* only *when an attempted brain shot has failed to bring the elephant down. Shooting for the heart and lungs are the* next best *targets when you have botched a brain shot.*"

Tim then carefully explained other options that I had not even thought

about.

"*Putting a bullet into one of the hip joints when a wounded elephant is running away,*" he explained, "*smashes the ball and socket joint and immediately renders the animal immobile.*

"*The next time you see an elephant walking along or running,*" Tim said, "*pay attention to how many feet it has on the ground at any one time. You will find that it* never *has more than one foot off the ground.*

"*There is one exception. When an elephant is standing still and reaching for a fruit high in the branches of a big tree, it will sometimes stand on its back legs, raise its front feet off the ground, and stretch its trunk to the limit to reach the desired titbit.*

"*At all other times an elephant* never *has less than three of its feet on the ground at any one time. An elephant cannot move on three legs!*"

I learned that day that the hip shot should be taken when a wounded elephant is running away, when the lungs are not exposed, and when only the animal's rear end is available at an oblique angle. The hip joints are located on neither side of the animal's anus. You can see them articulating as the elephant runs along.

Finally Tim discussed the spine shot. This was another target that I had never thought was even remotely possible. Who would want to shoot an elephant in the spine?

"*A wounded elephant that is running directly away from you presents you with three target options,*" Tim explained, "*one of the two hip joints and the spine! Either one will anchor the animal. The best of these three options, when the elephant is running* directly *away from you, is the spine.*"

From the rear the position of the spine is obvious. The target appears as a four-foot long and nine-inch wide ridge of bone running straight up the animal's back. It starts at the root of the tail and rises between the two flat pelvic bones on the lower back. The vulnerable part of the spine, however, is only four inches wide right in the middle of the column. If your bullet does not hit that vital four-inch wide target it will not do the job expected of it.

A bullet that hits the animal's spine centrally will break its back. This renders both its back legs inoperable. The back legs collapse and splay out behind it. A *coup de grace*, a bullet delivered at close quarters into the brain, then finishes the animal off.

Tim told me in no uncertain terms that taking one of these secondary shots at a wounded elephant is not an option. It is an imperative. You have no

choice in the matter. When you have wounded an elephant, if you are still within rifle range and you can still see it, you *have* to take whatever measures are necessary to pull it down. A wounded elephant is wounded no matter how many bullets are in its body.

"Just remember," Tim told me emphatically, *"coming back to Main Camp without tracking down and killing an elephant that you have wounded is unthinkable. Wounding elephants at Hwange is* not *acceptable. It is something that we game rangers just* do not do! *If you ever have the misfortune to wound an elephant, and you lose it, be assured of one thing, when you report the matter to Bruce he will* 'have your guts for garters'."

I heard that statement again and again throughout the next three and a half years. If I did anything outside the strict boundaries of Bruce Austen's acceptability, *Malindela would have my guts for garters.*

"You must learn to use all *the shots that I have explained to you and you must become an expert at their use."* Tim concluded. It was sound advice.

* * *

On the drive back to Main Camp we discussed the hunt. Tim told me he had chosen the lung shot as a first option when the elephant had started to run away because he believed it would save us many miles and many hours of tracking. The brain shot, under the circumstances, would have been a dicey option. Yet he had just finished telling me, and emphatically so, that the brain shot should be my *first* option. His choice of the lung shot, therefore, was contrary to his own advice. Even so, I understood. I accepted that his taking the lung shot instead of the brain, was an especial exception and his reasoning was sound.

I did, however, smile quietly to myself. How many times have I heard bosses say to their juniors: *Don't do as I do, do as I say?*

That was the first of many elephants that Tim and I hunted together. His meticulous instruction that day was also the first of many hunting lessons that he taught me.

Over the next several months Tim Braybrooke laid for me as solid a foundation for my elephant-hunting career as I could ever have wished for. He put me through a multitude of diverse training experiences and I absorbed everything that he taught me. It is all even now stored deep down inside my hunter's soul.

* * *

Two days later Tim was sent out to a native village called Juapi 8 miles

northeast of Dett. I again accompanied him. An elephant bull had been raiding the local people's vegetable crops. When we arrived at the village the headman told us the elephant had left his gardens sometime around midnight.

We picked up fresh spoor in the trampled gardens and, with Japan and Mbuyotsi tracking, we followed the elephant out of the village environs. During the night he wandered far and wide inside the *gusu* (teak forest) that surrounded the village in every direction.

Sometime during the night the elephant slept. It chose a termite mound against which to lie down, flat on its side, on the sloping ground. The granulated patterns of its tough hide were clear to see on the bare ground, as was the smooth groove mark left by its lower tusk.

I had given no thought with regards to how elephants sleep. Since coming to Hwange I had seen them dosing on their feet several times and I had assumed that that was how they slept. Not so! I was to learn over the next several months that *every* night of their lives elephants lie down on their sides and they go into a very deep sleep.

The hunt that day was the first time I saw evidence that elephants actually lie down at night and go to sleep. It was also my first experience of tracking an elephant along the route of its nocturnal perambulations.

Throughout the morning I became totally absorbed in watching how Japan and Mbuyotsi unravelled the tracks. I began asking them questions. They enjoyed my interest in their work and they showed me, item by item, exactly *what* they were following.

They were not just following footprints! They walked through the forest quickly picking up all kinds of different signs along the way.

Much of the time they seemed to be following nothing at all. I was to learn much later in my career that on these occasions they were simply drifting through the bush. They moved in the general direction the elephant was travelling, taking the line of least resistance through the bush, whilst all the time looking for confirmatory signs that told them they were still on the tracks.

They pointed out to me scrape marks on the bark of tree trunks up to nine feet above the ground. There were occasional discarded green leaves and miniscule pieces of chewed twigs lying on the ground. Every now and again we came across more obvious signs. We found branches, as thick as my arm, from which all the bark had been chewed off. There were abundant tear signs on bushes from where the elephant had pulled off a twig or a small branch.

We passed several clumps of fine grass the tops of which had been ripped off. Scuff marks on the ground were sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. Only occasionally did we see a full footprint in the sand.

Every now and again we came across a pile of fresh elephant dung heavily impregnated with the seeds of sorghum, pumpkins, watermelons and bitter cucumbers. The seeds confirmed we were still following the culprit crop raider. The trackers would kick open each pile of fresh dung and place the backs of their fingers onto the opened mess, feeling for signs of warmth.

Cold dung informed the trackers the elephant had passed by before the chill of the dawn. Just a vestige of warmth told them the elephant was within contact distance. Distinctly warm dung forced our ears wide open and kept our eyes probing the bush ahead.

Soon I was pushing the backs of my hands into the dung, too.

There were occasional patches of wet ground where the elephant had urinated.

The ever-present scent of the elephant's pungent musth surrounded us all along its route.

Altogether these signs and sensations told the trackers what they needed to know about the circumstances of the elephant's passage.
Slowly they built up a picture in their minds that told them also, *when* the elephant had passed by at every location along the way.

These signs, collectively, are referred to as *spoor*. The elephant's *tracks!* They are divided up into *ground spoor* and *aerial spoor*!

My conversations with the Bushmen amused Tim and it wasn't long before he joined the advisory committee.

"Its one thing being able to follow *spoor,"* Tim told me sagely, *"and quite another to tell just* how old *the spoor is. Most of our trackers can follow spoor quite well. The best of them are those who can tell you precisely* when *the spoor was made. A really good tracker will be able to tell you a whole lot more even after he has been following an animal's tracks for just a little while.*

"A good tracker is quickly able to absorb the nature of the beast *that he is following"*.

I looked at Tim puzzled. He laughed softly.

"You'll start to understand what I mean after we have done a few more hunts," he told me with understanding.

"*I have used trackers in the past*," he continued, "*who actually had us*

following yesterday's spoor!"

"*Yesterday's spoor*!" I exclaimed, surprised. "*How does that happen*?"

"*Easy*," Tim affirmed. "*When the weather is cold and overcast or when it is raining, the green leaves elephants leave behind them on the ground don't dry out. They don't wither*! *It is then difficult to tell just how old that kind of sign is. Under cool and damp conditions even three-day old elephant footprints look fresh in the sand.*

"*I have used trackers who started off on fresh spoor in the morning. Then at midday, after the new spoor had mingled with the same elephants' tracks of the previous day, the trackers drifted off following yesterday's spoor. They couldn't tell the difference between yesterday's tracks and today's tracks. They only realised their mistake an hour later when we came across some of yesterday's obviously much older dung.*

"*It happens*! *You can waste days and days following tracks that are far too old to follow, tracks so old you will never catch up with your quarry*". Tim raised his eyebrows expressively.

"*So it pays*," he continued seriously, "*to find yourself a good tracker. Really good trackers are as scarce as hen's teeth but they are worth their weight in gold*."

We found the elephant that day standing in the shade of a big teak tree deep inside the forest. The time was just after midday. There was very little cover. The local people's cows, sheep and goats, over many years, had significantly thinned out the sinanga. There was enough bushy growth, however, to obscure our approach.

Tim withdrew a small linen tobacco pouch from one of the breast pockets of his bush shirt. It was a fat little bag no bigger than the size of his forefinger and middle finger combined. A drawstring held it closed at the top. That morning Japan had filled the tiny bag with fresh, dry, white wood ash from his cooking fire of the night before. This was Tim's regular *ash bag*.

I had never seen nor heard of an *ash bag* in my life before. I wondered just what Tim was doing with what appeared to be a tiny cloth purse in his hands. It was only later that he told me its name.

I watched with growing fascination as he held the little bag out at arm's length and tweaked it with a flick of his wrist. A small cloud of white dust puffed out through the porous material. It drifted off on what appeared to be absolutely still air. The moving cloud of white dust told us, visually and immediately, that the air was *not* still at all. It was moving imperceptibly but

consistently in one direction.

I immediately understood the purpose of Tim's ash bag. I was hooked on ash bags, then, for life!

We quietly moved into a down-wind position.

Tim used the wind and what cover there was available to good effect. I followed religiously, tiptoeing quietly through the sparse carpet of dry leaves. We were able to stalk the elephant quite easily to within 15 paces.

This was the closest I had ever been to a living elephant on my two flat feet. It was a heart-thumping nerve-racking experience that set my body aquiver. My hands were sweating profusely. I repeatedly wiped them, one at a time, on the fronts of my short trousers.

Tim showed no emotion. I drew confidence from his self-assurance. It was a strange experience being so close to such a huge animal yet feeling all the while *in total control*. What I felt at that moment was in stark contrast to the humiliating funk I had suffered with my Macaha elephant. My newfound strength came entirely from Tim. I knew that whatever happened he would pull us out of whatever hole we might create for ourselves. It was a good feeling.

My big game hunting maturity, all thanks to Tim, was starting to happen.

"As long as he stands still we'll give him a double-engine,*"* Tim had told me quietly when we began our final approach. *"We both aim at the brain. You shoot immediately after I shoot."* I nodded.

I now knew where to find the brain. Tim's instruction of just two days before stuck in my mind. *To put a bullet into an elephant's brain*, he had told me, *you draw a line between his eye and his ear hole and you place your bullet one-third forward, along that line, in front of the ear hole.* This was the same advice I had read in my big game hunting books.

"Come up alongside me before you fire," Tim's whispered instruction broke my reverie. *"I don't want your bloody muzzle blast blowing my ear off."*

He looked at me very seriously. *"You'll do that just once,"* he added. *"You won't ever get another chance!"*

I looked Tim in the eye, bit my bottom lip softly, and nodded. It was a quiet warning that I was not going to forget. My elephant hunting future depended on my getting along with Tim Braybrooke. I was determined to be the best ever of however many students he would ever have.

The heat was oppressive the humidity high. Rivulets of sweat ran off my

forehead and formed a puddle above my eyebrows. From there it continuously dripped off, one drop after the other, right in front of my eyes. There was a stream running down my spine between the dorsal muscles of my back. My body glowed all over with running perspiration.

I wiped the sweat from my face with my bare right hand and dried it on my shirtfront. But no sooner was my face clean than a new puddle built up on the ridge above my eyebrows.

I looked at the elephant in front of me. The big bull was my most important consideration. And I was so close to it. So *very* close! I was letting my sweaty discomforts distract me from the task at hand.

I let the dribbles run.

The elephant stood dosing on his feet. His eyes were shut. His eyelids fluttered softly. The temporal gland on the side of his face was oozing musth copiously. The fluid ran down the side of his face and dripped onto the ground. He, too, was feeling the heat! The pungent scent of his musth was everywhere around us.

His huge body swayed, ever so gently, from side to side and both forwards and backwards. His head hung from his shoulders. The relaxed front part of his trunk lay flat on the ground in front of him, the double fingered tip facing backwards. He was completely at ease. He was totally oblivious to our presence.

Tim had brought us into a close side-on position. Our location was perfect. He silently made a gesture that told me he wanted me to move up alongside him. I moved into position. We now faced the elephant together in parallel tandem. Slowly Tim raised his rifle. I raised mine.

I drew an imaginary line between the elephant's ear hole and its eye. I selected the point of impact for my bullet one third forward along that line, in front of the ear hole. I aimed at the exact spot I had chosen.

"Badummmm… Badummmm" The two shots were a mere fraction of a second apart.

I ejected the empty shell and rammed a fresh round into the chamber. Tim did the same. We stood now ready for any contingency.

The elephant's hindquarters collapsed instantly. This threw its head up high. Its trunk flicked up even higher.

"NKOSIIIIiiiii…" Tim yelled out loudly as the elephant's trunk flew skywards. It was a salute. '*You are the big chief*', the words implied, but the elephant had just succumbed to a power greater than its own.

In the instant of its death the elephant's front legs were stiff. They held the front part of its torso erect for a few moments one last time. Then it tumbled sideways towards us, its huge body thundering into the ground. As it hit the deck a cloud of light brown dust erupted off its skin.

The elephant's top back leg began kicking in the air and I heard, recognising it as something that was familiar, the repetitive liquid sound of its hip joint articulating. It was a squelching, grinding sound that happened each time its leg kicked at the vacant air. It was a sound I now remembered hearing just two days before when we had shot the elephant on Dahlia Ranch. *That* was why it sounded familiar. It was a sound that I was to hear many, many times in the years ahead. It was one of the signs that told me my quarry was dead.

I was impressed. *This* was the effect of the brain shot. It was a clean shot. A clean kill. Instant death! It was a shot that I was soon to perfect but not by drawing imaginary lines over elephants' faces. I was to develop my own technique for finding an elephant's brain. It was a method that I worked out all by myself and it never let me down. But during those early stages of my training all I had to go on were Tim's instructions.

Tim's instructions were based upon his own experiences which, I was soon to understand, were really relatively limited at that time. Tim was himself then still perfecting his own elephant hunting expertise. Whatever the limitations of Tim's experience at that time, however, it was *his* instruction that laid the foundation of my elephant hunting career. I never allowed myself to forget that!

We walked over to the elephant and examined its carcass from close quarters. Because it had fallen towards us the side of the head at which we had aimed was underneath. That meant we could not examine the impact placements of our respective bullets.

I was surprised to see that both projectiles had passed right through the elephant's head. The exit wounds on the topside surface of its head were plain to see. This impressed me. I immediately gained a deep respect for the .375 Magnum.

Japan took out his penknife and cut off the elephant's tail just above the tassels.

He immediately tied a knot in the long stiff hairs. The loop thus formed served as a handle making the tail easy to carry on the long walk back to the Land Rover.

Going back home with elephant tails was a regular ritual. It was *proof* to substantiate, amongst the trackers, the number of elephants that the hunting party had killed.

"Now tell me where the brain is located," Tim asked me after we had run out of our mental *awes* and *aahhs.* He stood alongside the carcass and waited. *"Tell me as if I am your pupil and you are my teacher."*

I did as he instructed. I explained to him everything that I could remember about his instruction on the bloody carcass of the Dahlia elephant just two days before. First and foremost I answered his question. I explained how to find an elephant's brain. Then I told him about the heart and lung shots. I told him about the hip shot and the spine shot. And I told him under what circumstances all these different shots should be taken.

When I had finished he looked at me and smiled, nodding his head. *"Good"* was his sole remark.

Tim then resumed his mentoring role. He explained a number of different circumstances when the various shots should and could be taken. If nothing else he was very thorough.

At the time of my arrival at Main Camp Tim had shot 35 elephants. All bulls. Mostly crop raiders. At that time I could not imagine myself at the stage where I would be able to say I had shot 35 elephants.

In those far off halcyon days Tim was my guru. In my eyes he was God. He could do no wrong. I lapped up everything that he told me like a hungry puppy. I ate every morsel that he put on my plate.

I would not have believed you had you told me then that I would soon and very greatly surpass Tim Braybrooke in terms of our respective elephant hunting scores.

Our hunting experiences grew in tandem. After the October1960 game count and the management decisions made immediately thereafter, our respective elephant and buffalo hunting opportunities expanded hugely. As the new boy on the block, however, I was shunted around at every turn. Soon I was doing most of the greatly increased hunting chores that had once been Tim's almost exclusive prerogative.

The numbers on my score card soon reached and then surpassed Tim's score. Then, six months into 1961, out of the blue, Tim was transferred to Victoria Falls and I replaced him as the most experienced and most available young game ranger at Main Camp.

* * *

The rains came that year on the night of the 5th of November. I had predicted the date. Everyone was intrigued by my insistence that *that* was the date when the rains would begin. Harry, particularly, kept questioning me on my prediction. He had another idea. But he wanted to know: *Why did I insist so vehemently that the rains would break on Guy Fawkes Day?* I think, in absolute good humour, he wanted to prove me wrong. When I was proved right he graciously accepted defeat and I was not required to explain my apparent clairvoyance. It had been a lucky guess!

That night lightning lit up the clouds for hours and hours on end. Thunder continuously hammered across the dark skies. It rained and it rained and it rained. This, the first tropical storm of the season, did not stop until well after midnight. I lay in my bed that night and revelled in the all-encompassing ambience of the storm.

I woke up suddenly at one o'clock. The storm had passed. It was the silence following the robust cacophony of the tempest that had awakened me. I lay in bed listening to the sound of water dripping off the bare branches of the teak trees outside my bedroom window. I luxuriated in the cool dampness of the air. It was a huge and welcome change from the intense dry heat that had been a signature of every day and every night since my arrival at Main Camp.

I then submerged into a deep and restful sleep.

I was wakened at the dawn by the loud and liquid song of a whitebrowed sparrow weaver. It was singing from the branches of the small camel thorn tree at the garden gate. In the distance I could hear the wildebeest *gnu-ing* out on the vlei. There were the intermittent laughing calls of zebra. Red-billed francolins were chattering away on the distant edge of the teak forest. All the sounds I was hearing were no longer muffled. They were ringing as clear as bells.

A new day had dawned. A new season had begun.

The atmosphere at Main Camp changed totally after that first storm. The morning air was much cooler than it had been since my arrival. It was crisp and fragrant with new vegetative life. Deserts don't take long to respond to a good shower of rain and seven eighths of Hwange is Kalahari desert sand.

Every day since my arrival at Main Camp, from dawn to dusk and from dusk to dawn, there had been the tang of dust in the air. Dust from the Kalahari sand substrate on which the teak forests grew. Dust from the white calcrete gravels that had been put on the tourist roads. Dust from the

hundreds of vehicles that plied those roads every day. Dust that lifted from the game animals' backs when they hurried down to the pans to drink every evening. Dust that rose up from the earth with the passing of every animal hoof. Dust that climbed in tall columns into the sky, twisting and rushing to get higher and higher, when the many daily whirlwinds raced over the hot dry Main Camp Vlei.

We called the whirlwinds *dust-devils*. The Bushmen called them *chimpumpurus.*

The evening skies of the late dry season were thick with dust. It rose for thousands of feet into the air. The dust was so thick you could look directly at the huge red orb of the sun from three o'clock in the afternoon onwards. You could watch the sun throughout the late afternoon, without hurting your eyes, as it descended to the western horizon. It completely disappeared from view in the dusty haze long before it actually set.

On the morning of the 6th of November all that had changed. There was no smell of dust. It had all gone. It had been washed out of the air by the rain. The air was now crisp and clean and clear.

Throughout the long hot dry season a heavy layer of dust had accumulated on the leaves of the vegetation everywhere. The storm had washed the leaves clean. The morning after the storm the colours of the bush were brilliant and vibrant. It was as though the artist, the storm, had removed the tarnish from nature's old masterpiece.

The dust would be absent for the next six months. It would not come back until the rains had stopped. The air would only begin to dust-up again when April brought back the beginning of the cold dry season in the autumn.

The sun that day burnt into the exposed skin on our bare arms and legs, and on our faces. It had a surprising sharpness. This was a new daily pain that hadn't been there before. It was something to which we all had to readjust. From that first post-storm day, for the next six months, everyone wore their broad-brimmed bush hats with a much greater purpose.

The biggest change after that first storm of the season was in the disposition of the game animals. Except for the wildebeest and the zebra that remained on the Main Camp vlei, everything else disappeared. That afternoon there were no elephants or buffaloes or kudus on the circular ten mile tourist drive out of Main Camp. The ten-mile drive was the principal game viewing road serving Main Camp's tourists.

Nyamandhlovu pan was ghostly. The platform stood proudly erect a hundred yards back from the water's edge but there were no visitors sitting in deck chairs on its floor. There were no animals to be seen.

Only the blacksmith plovers were active. That very morning they began their nuptial displays of the new breeding season. Elsewhere blacksmith plovers breed on the ground near to water in August and September. That was not possible in Hwange because at that time of the year big game animals saturated the waterholes in the evenings. So the plovers had to await the coming of the rains which left the pan surrounds vacant for the plovers' especial use for nesting.

On the last day of October the tourist rest camps closed. For the next six months there would be no tourists in Hwange. It was strange to drive along the normally busy tourist routes and see no tourist vehicles at all. It was *different* not to have to battle through the clouds of white dust that the visitors' cars kicked up every time they travelled the roads. It was unusual and exhilarating not to choke on the heat and the dust and to see everything in vibrant colour.

November to April was a great time for the game rangers. For six whole months we had the game reserve to ourselves!

* * *

Lions become very active during the rains. This was when we received most telephone calls from local farmers asking for assistance to deal with vagrant stock killers.

At this time of the year young lions are evicted from their parental prides inside the national park. For several months before they reach the age of two years the big territorial males put ever-greater pressure on them to leave. If they fail to go they are killed and often eaten by their own families. Cannibalism is not uncommon in lion society. This eviction process is a natural mechanism that achieves and maintains stable and optimum numbers in resident lion prides. It keeps the numbers of lions in balance with their food resource.

When young lions are evicted they become vagrants. They take to a nomadic way of life because they hold down no permanent territory. *All* lion territories in the national park are taken up by resident prides dominated by big adult males. The homeless and wandering youngsters, therefore, are pushed from pillar to post. Everywhere they go they encounter one established pride after another and they are constantly sent packing by the big

pride males.

The constant quest of these young lions is to find a home range of their own. And, in the case of the males, to *also* seek a territory!

A home range is an area where an *individual* lion can settle down and where there are enough prey animals to sustain it. Home ranges can be and normally are shared with other lions that all contribute to making kills. It is not uncommon to have two or three young males living in a group and occupying the same home range without conflict. Young females often accompany them. This happens, particularly, when nomads find a place to settle down even if such settlement may only be temporary.

Home ranges are concerned with survival. They are not defended against other lions.

A territory is something different. A territory is an area over which a dominant male lion proclaims itself 'king'. Sometimes two lions, often once brother-nomads, share the kingdom. When this happens one is dominant. Territorial boundaries are marked with sprays of the king's urine. The king then gathers around him a harem of females; one, two, three or four. They thus establish a pride and they begin to breed. *Territories are concerned with breeding*. The dominant males in a pride, *and* the lionesses, defend their territory against all other lions. Fights to the death in defense of territorial rights often occur.

Few nomads find a home range to settle into within the game reserve. Fewer still ever find a territory. Most gravitate to places outside the boundaries of the park. There, on the private cattle ranches and in the tribal communal lands, they find a place to live where there are *no* resident lions. There they also find prey animals in great abundance, domestic cattle!

A dominant male lion *never* leaves its territory. It *never*, therefore, wanders outside the boundaries of the park. To do *that* would be to tempt fate. The strongest of a group of nomadic male lions, in the absence of the king, would quickly take over whatever territory a pride male might thus temporarily vacate. This means that, upon his return from a casual perambulation outside his territory, the old king would have to fight the usurper, sometimes more than one, to regain his kingdom. The pretender may also, by then, have killed all the king's cubs in the old man's absence.

The conqueror then acquires the old king's harem.

There are abundant and proven reports that new pride males set about killing the cubs of their predecessors. Whether this happens every *time a*

dominant male is defeated, however, has not yet been proven.

Given all these circumstances it is highly unlikely that territorial male lions *ever* become stock killers outside the national park.

When the king gets old his regal position is challenged ever more seriously by mature younger males. The pretenders are normally strong nomads who have managed to survive the rigours of vagrancy for four or five years. If a younger male deposes the king and does not kill him, the old king is forced into a state of vagrancy himself. He, too, has to then seek a new place to live outside the boundaries of his old territory.

When a fully mature male lion starts to kill cattle outside the game reserve, therefore, you can rest assured he is a recently deposed king who has lost everything he once owned to a younger and stronger rival. When he loses his kingdom, if he is to survive, a deposed male lion *has* to then function as a nomad. And as a *new* nomad the old king wanders from pillar to post avoiding conflict with the still reigning and stronger pride males. His quest is then to find a new home range where he can settle down to live out the rest of his life in peace.

Considering all these facts it can be said with total confidence that *all* the stock killing lions that I killed *outside* the boundaries of the country's national parks were nomads. As such they were all *surplus* to the resident lion populations that lived *inside* the national parks.

* * *

During the week following the storm of Guy Fawkes' night Main Camp received its first lion stock-killer report of the new wet season. It came from the Native Commissioner in Hwange colliery town.

A lion had killed a cow in a tribal area just off the Victoria Falls Road, he told us. *Would we please deal with it?* He gave us the name of the kraal headman and the rough location of the man's village.

Native Commissioners headed the offices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in every district in the country. They were called 'the N.C.'. Their main purpose was to look after the interests of the native peoples in their districts and to administer good governance in the communal tribal areas.

They were also Commissioners of Oaths and they presided as magistrates in the local criminal courts. Although they had no power to dictate to other government departments, they were still considered to be the most senior government officials in each district's civil servant community. They represented government throughout the entire district.

Tim and Harry had left early that morning to bring in the first of the Lister diesel engines that ran the game water supply bore hole pumps during the dry season. The engines were stopped just as soon as the rains began and they were one by one brought into Main Camp for a complete overhaul.

Harry was Main Camp's chief mechanic. It fell on his shoulders to complete whatever mechanical work was necessary to make the engines serviceable before the next dry season commenced. Harry had, in fact, been recruited principally because he had a good mechanical background and the game reserve required someone to keep the game water supplies working. Harry did normal game ranging work, too, but his main responsibility was maintaining the pumps and engines.

Tim and I were trained by Harry to service the engines and pumps in the field and to effect basic repairs when they broke down. But when a pump or engine required major repair work, or when it was due for its annual overhaul, we brought it back to Main Camp for Harry's expert attention.

Because Tim and Harry were both absent when the N.C.'s call came in that morning I was the only ranger available to respond to the lion report. Although I had never hunted a lion in my life before Bruce gave me a peremptory order to go and deal with the stock-killer.

Bruce's only stipulation was that I take along with me the Bushmen trackers, Sumbe and Mbuyotsi. Both these men knew the ropes and he was confident they would be able to extricate me from whatever trouble I might get myself into.

In effect Malindela tasked the two Bushmen to chaperone and to guide the new baby game ranger through his first encounter with a lion.

Bruce was well aware that I had considerable experience with leopards. This must have given him confidence that I would be able to handle the leopard's bigger cousin. Nevertheless, Sumbe and Mbuyotsi were the Warden's second string insurance policy.

The local native headman walked us four miles to where his dead cow was located. Two of his young men carried the five gin traps and heavy treks chains we had brought along with us. Another carried the pick and shovel. This was menial donkey-work the trackers insisted the local natives should do.

This attitude was one of the Bushmen's more lovable traits. They regularly made the local people do all the heavy work. It was a part of their

personalities that I found both enchanting and endearing. They persuaded the locals to carry out their instructions with such authority and panache!

This was the Bushmen's way of impressing upon the local natives that, for a brief period of time at least, *they* were the superior beings. Regrettably, in all other situations the local natives of the region held the Bushmen in total and utter contempt.

The dead cow was lying in heavy underbrush beneath a clump of big msasa trees. The ground was hard basalt gravel into which it was difficulty to pick holes. It took us until five 0'clock to set all five of Main Camp's large gin traps and to secure them with trek chains to the drag-poles. All five drag-poles were left standing upside down against three nearby tree trunks.

The trackers tried to tell me what to do when setting the traps but I would have none of it. When I set the first trap in Jurie Grobler's nonconventional manner Sumbe and I had a serious altercation.

"That is not *the way to set a gin trap"*, he protested. *"You must set it* across *the path,"* he insisted. He showed me how.

In the end I won the day. I got my way! I got my way because I was a white man and leader of the team and because even in their own eyes, they were *mere* Bushmen. R.H.I.P! Rank Has Its Privileges!

The trackers spoke volumes to each other in their own peculiar click language.

I picked up only one word that I understood. '*Malindela'*. So I knew they were discussing just how they were going to tell Bruce about my pig-headedness. I knew, then, they had been given specific instructions from Bruce. They had been told to guide me with regards, among other things, how to set the traps to catch a lion.

We walked back to the Land Rover. Then we drove back to within half a mile of the trap site. The journey was rough and tough. We selected a campsite and set up a rudimentary camp. There was no sign of rain so we placed our katoonda on top of our two 6-foot x 8-foot tarpaulins.

The tarpaulins would have been used as tents had there been any threat of rain.

After a supper that came out of tins I settled round the campfire with the two Bushmen. We then discussed my trapping methods at length. I tried to

get them to understand that the Jurie Grobler method of setting a gin trap was better than the conventional manner. I did not convince them.

An hour after supper I lay down on my camp bed and became immediately absorbed in the bright starlit sky.

The stars sparkled. They were so bright. It was idyllic. A Scops Owlet burped from a tree top nearby. A Giant Eagle Owl called from a place way down the valley. Three Fiery-necked Nightjars repeated their monotonous litany from various places around us: *Good Lord deliverrrr us… Good Lord deliverrrrr us.*

Suddenly the silence of the night was rent asunder by a terrible roar. I looked at my wristwatch. It was just after nine o'clock. The roaring continued for perhaps half a minute. It stopped abruptly and was replaced with intermittent growls and snarls. The sounds cut like a knife through the night's orchestrations. The air all around vibrated with the force of the lion's voice. The hackles on the back of my neck stood instantly erect. I listened intently. I could hear the faint but distinct sound of chain links clinking even at that great distance.

All other night sounds were extinguished. The king had commanded silence. Everybody obeyed!

We had a lion in one of the traps!

Sumbe was making his bed up next to the fire. Mbuyotsi was still sitting on his haunches next to the fire. He was chewing on a piece of bone. It was all that was left of a huge chunk of smoked buffalo meat he had brought along with him from Main Camp. It was meat from one of the four buffalo bulls that Tim and I had shot on the Dett Vlei not so long ago, preserved with salt, smoke and the heat from an open wood fire.

The Bushmen stopped what they were doing. They looked silently in the direction of the clamour. No matter who you are, or what you are doing, when a lion roars he commands your respect.

Sumbe turned to me and said matter-of-factly, *"We've got ourselves a lion."*

"So it seems," I replied. The truth was obvious.

"Are we going to go down and shoot him?"

I had a small headlamp with me. I also had a big spotlight that we could connect to the Land Rover battery with crocodile clips but it would have been foolhardy to try to hunt a trapped lion in the night. We had no idea how well

its foot had been caught and I had no wish to be charged down in the night by a lion that might be able to pull its trapped foot free. It was also probable that the trek chain had not yet secured the lion to some immovable object in the veld.

I shook my head. *"No Sumbe"* I said. *"We will wait until morning!"*

Sumbe looked down into the glowing embers of the fire. He nodded sagely. Seemingly he approved. He had been testing me!

I lay in my camp bed that night and tossed and turned the night away.

The roaring stopped soon after it had started but the lion grunted and growled, periodically, right throughout the night. I occasionally heard the faint sound of steel chain links clinking far away in the darkness.

In the early hours of the predawn there wasn't a sound from the lion. It seemed to have settled down and accepted its fate or it had managed to get its paw out of the trap and made good its escape!

Mbuyotsi made coffee at first light and brought a mug to my bed. I sat up and swung my legs free of the blankets. Sitting on the low bed I sipped contently at the sweet black beverage.

Mbuyotsi lifted my rifle from the groundsheet next to my bed. He brushed it free of dew and dust and laid it on the metal camp table. Next to the rifle he placed my cartridge belt with its 25 spare rounds of shining brass shells.

The pale light of dawn grew brighter as the sun rose in a roseate eastern sky. A covey of crested francolins began to chant somewhere far away in the woodland behind us. The cool crispness of the early morning air was otherwise silent. It was also fresh and invigorating. It was time to go.

I got up, dressed, pulled on my hunting boots and wiped the sleep from my eyes with the knuckles of my fists.

"Let's go," I said to the trackers.

I could feel the excitement rising up through my body from the soles of my feet. I had never killed a lion before. I did not know what to expect. My body was quivering with a heavy adrenaline rush. It was exhilarating. I was afraid but I had my fear under control. It was a sensation I was getting used to.

As we approached the trap site the lion growled. This was something I had not expected. It was an immensely loud, deep, and guttural sound.

It surprised me. The two trapped leopards I had experienced in the

Matopos hadn’t uttered a sound. They were absolutely silent. Lions were clearly different.

I stopped and focussed my attention on the place from where the growls were coming. I stood still for some time, silent, looking. The growling stopped. I could see nothing. I understood then that, whatever their differences, lions and leopards had one thing in common. They both had the ability to hide behind a single blade of grass.

Mbuyotsi stood one pace away behind my right shoulder. He had spare cartridges in both his fists. We looked at each other. Our faces were blank and stoic. We both knew the nature of the danger. I was strangely comforted by his close presence. Nevertheless, I felt I should tell him to stand back. There was no need for him to come in so close to the lion with me. He was unarmed and could render me no help should things get tight. But I said nothing and he stayed by my side.

Sumbe was standing next to a tree some distance behind us. Unlike Mbuyotsi he had chosen not come up to the lion with us. The contest of wills, therefore, was between Mbuyotsi and me, and the lion.

I moved closer. The growling started up again. More intense! The chains clinked. There was a new urgency in the metallic sound.

The lion was getting ready to charge! I could feel it in my bones. I knew it immediately I heard those agitated, rattling chain links.

The lion launched its attack with a loud roaring challenge. It burst like an exploding bomb out of the bushes not thirty yards in front of me. Every branch, every twig and every leaf shook with the intensity of its noisy eruption. As it raced at me it grunted heavily with every bound.

Its big yellow eyes bored into mine. They were dripping with malice. I was swamped with a sudden panic and had to forcibly steel my nerves. Never before had I felt such a huge urge to run. My very soul was telling me to run, run, run. It was a compulsive and enormous temptation.

The animal was huge. I was not prepared for its colossal size. Its giant size alone was immensely intimidating.

Time stood still. Every second dragged itself out to the limit. Every movement the lion made worked its way into my conscience in slow motion. My reactions clicked into automatic mode. No longer was my fear an issue. It had evaporated in the desperation of the moment.

I raised my rifle. It came to my shoulder with exasperating slowness. I searched for the foresight but could not find it. The early morning light was

not strong. There was a confusion of pale and dark shapes and all the while I was trying to take in the details of the lion's frightening charge.

The big cat advanced 10 yards then it came to a sudden wrenching stop. The chain was fastened around the base of a small bush and the lion had come to the end of its steel tether. Down went the lion's nose. Its trapped front foot disappeared beneath its chest. It tumbled upside down onto the ground but it bounced immediately back onto its feet. It turned to face me its ears laid back, growling, hissing, baring its teeth. It tried to rush me again and again but every time the chain brought it up short.

The immediate danger was over. The chain had stopped the lion dead in its tracks. Time kicked back to normal.

The lion fought the restricting chain but to no avail. It was secured firmly to the bush it was wrapped around. The big tawny cat roared and bellowed its rage, rushing back and forth in front of me, trying with all its power to get at me. Its malevolent bright yellow eyes never faltered.
They bored directly into mine. It was a chilling experience.

My nerves were in a turbulent state but I stood my ground, immobile, silent, stoic. And I waited. I waited for the lion to stop its agitated struggling. I needed a solid immobile target at which to aim.

With a strange agitated urgency the lion suddenly dropped to its belly and it lay there in full view facing me. Its head snuggled flat onto the ground. Its tail swished behind it, slowly, menacingly, from side to side. Its staring hate-filled yellow eyes never wavered. They looked directly into mine, challenging, watching, waiting for me to make a move.
The big cat was helpless but still altogether defiant.

The lion's dangerous posturing was a toothless bluster. It was securely tied to its position. It could do me no harm.

The butt of my rifle was still up against my shoulder. Slowly and methodically now I snuggled into it, the wooden stock pressed tightly up against my cheek. I found and placed the bead of the foresight between the lion's eyes and I wrapped the rear vee-sight around it. I squeezed the trigger.

The report was loud and resonant in the crisp early morning air. The recoil kicked me backwards. The stock hit up against my cheek. The bullet struck the lion right where I had aimed, punching its head hard into the gravel beneath. It immediately began kicking and jumping about in its death throes.

After all the effort we had expended laying the traps the previous day, and after all the excitement of the last few minutes, the lion's sudden demise

came as an anti-climax. For a few moments we had been surrounded by incredible danger. Raw fear had been raking at our nerves and raging through our hearts. Then, in an instant, it was all over. Relief swamped through my soul. My whole body was aquiver with exhilaration but the tension was leaching away fast.

The rifle I used that morning, a Cogswell and Harrison .375 Magnum, did not fit me well. It was the same rifle I had used when Tim and I had shot the four buffaloes on the Dett Vlei. I had used it also on our two recent elephant hunts. I had experienced some cheek bruising from its recoil after all those hunts. I felt it again now after only one shot.

I waited out the lion's death throes before approaching closer.

Sumbe ran in to tell me to be careful. He guided me round to the rear of the lion and, taking up a long stick from the ground, he poked at its anus. There was no reaction.

"It is dead," he pronounced the obvious.

Sumbe's action was a test the Bushmen used all the time. It was a practice that I was myself to apply in the years ahead especially when I had shot a buffalo. When I poked the muzzle of my rifle into an apparently dead buffalo's anus and it puckered with the touch that was my cue to place another bullet into its brain.

I examined the trap on the lion's right front foot and was well satisfied to see that the jaws were secured around its wrist. I pointed that fact out to the trackers with a silent but eloquent forefinger. They got the message.

The lion was a three year old male with a scruffy mane. It was a nomad, a vagrant, which had been evicted from the national park. I was to shoot many such lions outside the park boundaries over the next several years.

The manner in which I had set the gin traps created a furore back at Main Camp. It was an issue that surpassed by far the complete and easy success of my first lion-killing task. The trackers were clearly taken by the way I had set the traps and they had reported every detail to *Malindela.* Bruce put me through an intense interrogation and seemed much pleased with what I told him.

"We live and we learn," he said finally. *"Well done. And you got your first lion!"*

Well done! Praise from the great Malindela! I experienced a huge feeling of pride and inner contentment. It was a feeling that was becoming very

familiar to me at Main Camp.

There seemed to be no end to the big game hunting opportunities I was getting. Hwange was coming up to all my expectations.

* * *

There had been horses, pack mules and pack donkeys at Main Camp since 1928. They were the patrol vehicles that Ted Davison had used to get around Hwange. In those very early days there were no roads in the park at all.

In 1960 there were *still* no roads in the greater hinterland of Hwange. So horses, pack mules and pack donkeys were *still* the only means of getting into the more remote parts of the national park. Horse patrolling out of Main Camp and out of Robin's Camp, therefore, remained an important duty for the game rangers.

Game rangers had many tasks to complete on a horse patrol. Their very presence in the game reserve deterred poaching and wherever they ventured they checked for signs of illegal human activity. When human tracks were discovered they were followed right back to the poachers' homes outside the park. In those days the local people poached game animals in the park solely for meat.

Many of the park's native neighbours came into the park looking for honey. Stopping people from raiding beehives was a major problem. Honey hunters used burning sheaves of dry grass to ward off the stinging bees and this often set the game reserve ablaze.

Every day the rangers checked on the condition of the veld. They recorded every animal that they saw. They made notes on the state of surface waters. Anything and everything about things natural were important observations.

On their return to Main Camp after a horse patrol the rangers reported their discoveries and their activities to Bruce. This was how Bruce Austen and Ted Davison learned about what was happening in those remote areas of the park that could not be visited by Land Rover.

Horse patrols, generally, gave Hwange's young game rangers an excellent opportunity to get to know the national park intimately.

They served another function, too, not openly mentioned. They quickly identified those young rangers who got bored with their own company. Horse

patrols sifted the wheat from the chaff. Many a young man left the park's employ because he could not stand the tedious solitude of wandering the park on horseback for weeks on end *all on his own*.

No Hwange game ranger was ever *all on his own*. They were always in the company of Bushmen trackers. Patrols, whether they were on horseback or in a Land Rover, gave young rangers the opportunity to become one with the park's Bushman community. And if they bother to communicate with their trackers they will learn more about nature than they could ever do from a university textbook.

Horse patrols in Hwange can only be conducted during the rains. The wet or rainy season stretched from mid-November until April the following year.

One year I went on a horse patrol in July. Survival, and the need to get back to Main Camp intact, ultimately became my sole objective on that patrol.

Patrol animals need water. The game ranger and the Bushmen need water. When on horse patrol we camped next to a water supply every night. Water, however, was available in the greater part of the park *only* when the natural pans were full.

Most of the smaller pans were dry by the end of April. The park's wild animals were then visiting, on a daily basis, all the bigger pans where water was still available. The beginning of May saw the bore hole pumps working again. From May to early November the bore hole supplied pans provided the *only* water in the Kalahari sand areas of the park and by the end of May the grazing animals had cropped all the grass short for a mile or two around every waterhole.

The patrol animals needed grazing just as much as they needed water. So, whereas the availability of water regulated where we could go on a horse patrol at *any* time of the year, after the rains were over the lack of grazing *near* water made horse patrols impossible.

By mid-November 1960 the grass was sprouting green all over the park. It was the earliest opportunity Bruce had had to put me to the horse patrol test. I was given my instructions. My mettle was to be tested.

The normal horse patrol compliment comprised one riding horse (for the ranger), two pack mules and five pack donkeys. The patrol team included one white game ranger and five Bushmen trackers.

On patrol the lead tracker walked in front of the caravan carrying a bull-

barrelled Winchester .375 Magnum over his shoulder. His hand gripped the barrel near the muzzle. The butt faced backwards. It was always loaded. The old weapon's thick barrel had been worn silver smooth after years and years of such abuse.

Sitting on his horse the ranger followed immediately behind the lead Bushman. He was always within quick and easy reach of the rifle. Behind the ranger came two more trackers each one leading a pack mule by the reins of its bridle. The mules walked one behind the other immediately to the rear of the horse.

Behind the mules walked another Bushman. He was the leader of the donkey herd. He walked at a pace that the donkeys could maintain, which was slower than that of the horse and mules. It was *his* job to follow the mules. When he lost visual contact he followed the fresh tracks the bigger animals left behind.

It was the fifth Bushman's job to walk behind the heavily laden donkeys. He was required to constantly chivvy them along with a light stick and a cajoling tongue. The donkeys, walking free, followed the tracker who preceded them.

The tail-end man was normally a tracker in training. He was the camp skivvy. A major part of his job was to carry out the menial camp tasks that were beneath the dignity of the more senior trackers.

Sometimes, on a long trek, the donkeys ended up being an hour or more behind the lead animals. We had often selected a place to camp, had out spanned and knee-haltered the horse and the mules and sent them out to graze, long before the donkeys arrived. The donkey unit, however, never failed to find us!

The horse was equipped with a saddle blanket, a British military saddle and a very ordinary bridle with a snaffle bit.

The pack mules each had a saddle blanket and a sturdy packsaddle with two broad girth straps. The forward strap was tightened about the animal's body just behind the front legs. The second strap, which was attached to the rear end of the packsaddle, ran around beneath the animal's body behind its heavy belly. A leather strap with a padded loop fed back from the top rear centre of the packsaddle. The loop fitted round the root of the animal's tail.
There was a pair of large and strong steel hooks located on both sides of the packsaddles. These carried pack-boxes on either side of the mule's body. The boxes were equipped with heavy leather straps and two steel D-rings. The D-

rings were located near the inside corners of the pack boxes. They hooked onto the saddle hooks.

The pack boxes were of local Main Camp design. They were elongated wooden boxes that had been reinforced with dry raw kudu hide. Those who are old enough to remember them will know what I am talking about when I say the wooden boxes were Laurel paraffin boxes that once contained two square five gallon tins of paraffin.

The kudu hide was drawn over the boxes when it was fresh. It was sewn tight at the front and rear ends of the boxes with strips of raw kudu hide lacing. The two heavy leather straps were inserted through slits cut into the fresh-hide. One strap was located towards the front of the box the other towards its rear. The boxes were then left out in the sun to enable the raw hide to dry. The sun shrink-wrapped the raw hide over the boxes. This made them extremely strong.

The one mule carried all my food and personal accoutrements in its two pack boxes. A two week long horse patrol was short enough to enable me to fill my two boxes with everything that I could possibly need. My valise and rolled up stretcher was loaded on top of and across the two pack boxes.

All this equipment was tied on top of the packsaddle with strong buffalo hide riems. A sheet of waterproof tarpaulin 6 feet by 8 feet in size was arranged over the whole pack and tied on with buffalo hide riems.
The whole pack, therefore, was secure and completely waterproof.

We never took camp chairs on these patrols. Only the bare necessities! My biggest luxury was my camp stretcher and bedding valise. Maybe I was soft but I never relished sleeping on the hard ground.

I was to discover, later, that patrols which covered periods longer than two weeks were problematical. The pack boxes were too small to carry enough food for longer periods. It then became necessary that we live *off the veld*. That did *not* mean we lived *off the rifle*. On the contrary! Over the three and half years that I conducted horse patrols in Hwange I can count the number of times I shot an animal to feed ourselves on the fingers of one hand.

When we ran out of food we lived in a manner that the Bushmen dictated. This meant eating all sorts of unimaginable things that the trackers extracted from the bush.

The second mule carried crushed maize in its two pack boxes. This was a

food supplement for the horse and the two mules in the evenings. The second mule also carried extra tentage and other camp katoonda like pots and pans, a four-pound hammer, a shovel, a felling axe, several knobkerrie axes and some heavy bush knives. This was all wrapped up in waterproof tar-paulins in case it rained.

The donkey packsaddles were altogether smaller and lighter. Instead of pack boxes the donkeys carried heavy leather bags which were also hung on the saddle hooks by large steel D-rings. The donkeys carried the Bushmen's food and tentage. Their packs were also covered in waterproof tarpaulins tied down with riems.

Although we took five or six donkeys on these horse patrols only four were ever laden. The spare animals were used to replace any donkey that became weary, sick or injured. They were also brought along to replace any animal that might be killed by lions. We carried spare donkey packsaddles for other contingencies.

On my first patrol my horse was an old campaigner called Turk. He was a silver gray gelding that Ted Davison himself had used many times in the not too distant past. The mule that carried all *my* equipment was called Brandy. The other one Whisky!

The donkeys had no names. The Bushmen referred to them descriptively. They were, for example, called the black stallion, the old gray mare and the young filly with half a tail.

Despite the fact I was new to horse patrolling nobody, not even Tim, offered me much advice.

"Just pack everything that you think you will need in two of the mule pack boxes. Then give them to Mbuyotsi," Tim told me briefly. Mbuyotsi was to be the lead tracker on the patrol. *"And think of everything. You will not be able to come back to collect anything that you might have forgotten. Once you leave you don't come back. You only come back when the patrol is complete."*

I must have looked perplexed.

"You can *ride a horse can't you?"* Nobody yet had bothered to check that requirement.

"Yes… Of course."

"Then what's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said quickly. *"Only… nobody has told me what to do on this patrol"*

Tim laughed. *"Don't worry about a thing,"* he said reassuringly. *"Mbuyotsi is an old hand at horse patrolling. He knows the game reserve like the back of his hand. The trackers will tell you everything that you need to know."*

He was right. When I handed my two pack boxes over to Mbuyotsi he lifted his one hand up and tapped off a checklist on his fingers. *"Have you got your shaving kit?"* he asked first. That was a strange first item on a checklist I thought. Surely there are more important things to remember for a horse patrol than a shaving kit?

I nodded. *"Yes,"* I told the Bushman. He reminded me, at that moment, of my old housemaster at Plumtree School, Tumpty Turner. He too used to count out my boarding house chores on his stumpy little hand.

"Yes," I repeated. *"I have packed my shaving kit."*

"Toothbrush and toothpaste?"

"Yes".

"Towel and soap?"

"Yes."

So the questions ebbed and flowed. The tracker sounded just like my mother! Satisfied at last Mbuyotsi and another Bushman called Ben, carried my two patrol boxes away from single quarters.

"We will be ready to go in half-an-hour, Nkosana," Mbuyotsi said politely. *"I will bring the horses round to the workshop."*

What Mbuyotsi had just said was a quirk of the Main Camp jargon. *All* patrol animals were referred to as *horses.*

We filed out of Main Camp without ceremony. Nobody waved us goodbye. Nobody said a thing. Mbuyotsi took the lead. I followed on Turk. Ben followed me leading Brandy. A tallish Bushman called Kitso led Whisky. A Bushman called Rojas walked in front of the donkeys. A young Bushman I had never seen before was the tail end Charlie. All the Bushmen, except Mboyotsi, carried full canvas water bags. Other josaks hung from the back ends of the mule pack boxes.

We passed the newly installed bore hole pump house on the far side of the Main Camp vlei and entered the teak forest beyond. Mbuyotsi never looked back. He plodded on at a pace that the horse and the mules found easy to follow. He picked up a well-trodden elephant path and turned to the northwest. It was a major highway that the Bushman clearly knew well!

Elephant paths are just a little wider than human footpaths. They are

made by the feet, placed one after the other, of many thousands of elephants that ply them over many, many decades. Some elephant paths are said to be hundreds of years old.

We passed by Livingi Pan now showing a new puddle of muddy water in its centre. Livingi had been dry ever since I had been at Main Camp. We passed through belts of teak forest and open mopani scrub. Three hours later we arrived at Shoot Pan just one mile outside Dett village. Our destination had been given its name because it is located just behind the Dett police station rifle range. This was where we spent our first night out.

Shoot pan was on the line that separated the Kalahari sand region of the park from the basalt country. The ground here was hard and gravelly.

The choice of our first night's destination was no coincidence. Irrespective of what Tim had said, Mbuyotsi told me that if we had left anything of a serious nature behind we could go to the police station and phone Main Camp. Whatever we needed would then be brought out to us by Land Rover. If we had simply forgotten some item of food we could walk into Dett and buy it from one of the town's two general dealer stores.

Immediately upon our arrival we removed all the packs and saddles from the horse's backs and dumped them in one place. The bridles on the horse and the two mules were replaced with stout leather halters.

Turk and the two mules were then knee-haltered. This required short-tying their halters with a buffalo hide riem to one of their front legs, at the knee. This device allowed the animals to walk about freely and to graze but if they lifted their heads they had also to lift the knee to which the halter was attached. This arrangement prevented them from galloping away at speed.

After hobbling the horse and both the mules they were slapped on the buttocks and sent out to graze.

All of them immediately lay down and rolled about in the dust. They were clearly very happy to be free of their respective burdens.

The donkeys were not hobbled. They were simply unpacked, unsaddled and released. All the animals grazed together. That day two bushmen guards watched over them. One of the biggest problems about using horses in the game reserve was the fact that they could be caught at any time by lions.

There was one particular problem associated with us camping at Shoot Pan. The horses knew we were not too far away from home! That meant, if they had a mind to do so, they could have galloped off back to Main Camp at any time.

I had forgotten nothing so I spent the early hours of the afternoon resting on my camp bed. The unfamiliar horse ride had taken its toll. My body was full of aches and pains in muscles that I had forgotten I ever had. There was a numb feeling right across the entire upper breadth of my behind. This was where the back edge of the military saddle had constantly rubbed against the flesh. I felt I deserved that rest. I certainly needed it. The numb ridge across my upper bum gave me food for thought regarding what was to come in the days ahead.

At three o'clock Mbuyotsi roused me and suggested that we go on a walking tour in the 'gusu' (teak forest) close to Dett. If we were going to find any evidence of snaring, he said, that is where we would find it. The native house servants of the white railway workers in the village, he told me, often set wire snares on the outskirts of the village to catch duiker.

We spent two wonderful hours together that afternoon. There was no evidence of snaring but we got to know each other better. It was time well spent and I was feeling happy and content by the time we got back to camp just after five o'clock.

Mbuyotsi immediately set about calling in the horse and the two mules. He did this by rattling a handful of crushed mealies in an old baked bean tin brought along especially for this purpose. The three animals came rushing into camp at the sound.

Mbuyotsi, Ben and Kitso each grabbed an animal and they untied its hobbling riems. Then, using the same riems, they tethered them to the trunks of a group of young msasa trees, one horse to one tree. The animals had run in directly to those trees and they had stood at their posts waiting. That told me they been tethered there many times before. When they were tied up Mbuyotsi fed each of them a tin full of crushed mealies pouring the grain in a heap at their feet on the ground.

The donkeys were herded in together and they were secured, one by one, to other tree trunks within the same coppice. They did not get any grain.

Whilst I had been away with Mbuyotsi Ben had prepared a bath for me. My camp bath was a shallow hollow of sewn canvas sheeting some three feet square and six inches deep. It was held in position by a wood and steel frame that was folded up when not in use. The water came from the nearby muddy puddle in Shoot Pan. It had been laboriously carried from the pan to the bath, cooking pot by cooking pot, by the camp skivvy. The water was not hot but it was warm, the last potful having been boiled on the camp's kitchen fire.

My splash-bath in the evenings was a luxury that I learned to relish. It washed my body and revived my spirits and it left me feeling fresh and clean during those wonderful moments when day turned to night.

After my bath and after I had re-donned my old clothes, the camp was completely rearranged. The skies were open with no sign of rain so Mbuyotsi decided that we would construct the camp for an expected dry night. No tents were erected. Instead the tarpaulins were used as groundsheets and everything we owned was stacked on top of them.

The Bushmen arranged a pile of dead logs at three strategic positions around the horses, each five paces away from the tethered animals. They prepared but did not light fires at each position. One such fire was arranged not too far from my own bed that the Bushmen had set up in precisely the correct position earlier in the day.

The trackers, on the other hand, had to move *their* daytime positions closer in to the horses. They had spent the afternoon in the shade of a msasa tree some distance away from where the horses had been tethered. Now, as night began to fall, they moved their sleeping sites out into the open. They re-located themselves into positions that would primarily enable them to protect the horses should lions visit us in the middle of the night.

The re-arranged camp was set out in three sectors. Two of the Bushmen would be sleeping next to one fire. Two would be sleeping next to a second fire about twenty metres away. Mbuyotsi brought his bedding over and laid his blankets out next to my bed on the same tarpaulin. I knew, then, he intended sleeping next to me. All three fires were equidistant from each other. That meant, between us, we had the horses pretty well surrounded.

Only one of the new fires was lit at dusk. It became the camp kitchen. The old kitchen fire, which had been positioned under the Bushman's daytime shady tree, was extinguished with water from the pan.

Although *my* daytime site was not changed, Mbutosi and Ben *did* rearrange all my equipment. The mules' four pack boxes were set up in a row on the *inside* of my stretcher nearest to the tethered horses. Turk's saddle, the two mule packsaddles and all the bridles tucked in between were placed on top of the pack boxes. I, in my camp stretcher, therefore, became the buffer between the most important camp equipment and any itinerant hyena that might pass us by in the night. Hyenas eat *any* leather object they can get their teeth into!

Ben dug a small deep hole in the ground at the head of my bed. In it he

secured a tall sapling the upper tip of which he positioned directly over my head. He then tied my mosquito net to the top of the pole and arranged the net over my bed tucking it in all round.

"When you go to bed to sleep, Nkosana," Mbuyotsi explained in Chilapalapa – the common *lingua franca, "You take your rifle with you* and *the torch. They must sleep with you all night long. You must know exactly where they are in case lions come to take the horses."*

"And if they do?"

"You fire a shot in the air," Mbuyotso said matter of factly. *"Maybe, if they get too close, you will have to shoot one."*

"Tell me, Mbuyotsi," I said somewhat apprehensively. *"Has anybody ever had occasion to shoot a lion to protect the horses?"*

"No," Mbuyotsi said with a deadpan expression. *"And if* you *shoot one tonight Malindela will kill you."* Then he added, talking with a grin and in pidgin English, *"If you shoot a lion Malindela will* 'have your guts for garters'." I am sure Mbuyotsi did not understand exactly what he had just said but he enjoyed saying it anyway. I got the message loud and clear.

When Mbuyotsi had finished talking Ben asked me politely. *"What are you going to have for supper, Nkosana?"*

I hadn't thought about supper but now the thought of food started my tummy rumbling. I shifted some of the saddlery on my patrol box and rummaged inside. I extracted three fresh potatoes, a tin of baked beans and a tin of bully beef. Ben picked each item off the ground sheet and started to make off with them.

"What are you going to do with the food Ben?"

"I am going to cook it, Nkosana." Ben replied, surprised by the question.

"Are you a cook?"

"Yes, Nkosana. I am a cook. I am your cook on horse patrol."

"Just don't cook the bully beef," I instructed him. *"I will eat it cold."*

"Yebo, Nkosana!"

I watched Ben walk off sprightly towards the fire. I smiled to myself. These horse patrols are going to be great stuff. *I even have my own camp cook!*

Sometime later Ben brought me my meal on a tin plate. The potatoes had been peeled and boiled - with a pinch of salt no less! The baked beans were hot. The cold bully beef had been laid out in slices. *Even the presentation*

was great!

I settled down, sitting on the horse's saddle on top of a pack box, and I ate my first meal on horse patrol in the Hwange bush. It was superb.

Ben watched me all the while. When I had finished he quickly recovered my plate and took it to the cooking fire. There the other Bushmen were settling down in a group to eat *their* main meal of the day. Ben washed my plate and the knife and fork immediately and he set them down next to the fire to dry. Only then did he join the others at their meal.

The evening light slowly faded into darkness. The red blush on the western sky turned to a gray-white wash. Then that too grew dark. In a remarkably short period of time the bush all around was engulfed in a single black mass. The only light came from the one fire.

There were no paraffin lamps. In case of emergency, only, I had a battery-charged hand torch. Darkness ruled.

When their meal was over the Bushmen carefully washed their hands, one by one, in water poured sparingly from a pot that was brought to each one of them in turn, by the skivvy.

The Bushmen's meal preparation and its eating, and the after-meal hand washing ritual, was all just the same as I had seen performed many times before by native peoples everywhere. The Bushmen appeared to be no different to other African tribes in all these respects.

After the meal the skivvy cleaned all the pots carefully and thoroughly. He then packed them away amongst the Bushmen's katoonda.

When he had finished eating Ben picked up my tin plate and eating utensils from next to the fire and brought them over to my bed. Without a word he replaced them in the pack box.

"You always put everything away at night," Ben told me solemnly. *"The hyenas eat anything and everything."*

I chuckled. Ben smiled. I tried to imagine a hyena eating a tin plate! I had many a lesson still to learn. I was to discover that Ben was absolutely right. Hyenas do eat *anything and everything.* They even chew tin plates.

That night I sat on my haunches around the campfire with the Bushmen. We spoke about many things. Most of the talk was about horse patrolling because most of the conversation was in response to my many questions. I heard about narrow escapes from lions that often, apparently, came in the night to attack the horses. Less frequently hyenas also tried to take an animal. There were tales of adventures with elephants.

The Bushmen recited stories about battles with armed poachers from Botswana. They came into the park from across the international boundary in horse and donkey caravans much like our own horse patrol. They came in search of giraffe and, when they shot one, they *'benghisa-ed'* the meat. The semi-dried and semi-smoked meat was then loaded onto the donkeys and carried back across the border into Botswana.

Mbuyotsi took delight in telling a tale about Bruce Austen, his beloved Malindela, when Bruce still did horse patrols in the park. Bruce's patrol, with Sumbe as lead tracker, had come across the two-day old spoor of Batswana hunters some ten miles inside the park. They had followed the tracks into the poachers' camp which had been abandoned that very morning. As it was by then late in the day, and because there was water nearby, Bruce and his Bushmen spent the night in the poachers' camp.

At dawn the next morning they set off in pursuit of the poachers, following their tracks and the tracks of their horses in the soft Kalahari sand. Two of the poachers had been riding horses. The trackers quickly ascertained there were seven donkeys, two poachers on horseback and five poachers on foot.

The tracks took the national park patrol deep into Botswana. Three days after leaving the poachers camp in the park they arrived at a Batswana village to find all the giraffe meat that had been brought across the border. It had been set up on newly constructed racks amongst the huts. There were new fires under the racks slowly drying, cooking and smoking the meat further.

There were two horses and seven donkeys grazing on the outskirts of the village. These were the animals that had been used by the poaching gang. The skivvy was left at the edge of the village to look after the park's tethered horses whilst Bruce surrounded the village with his other four men. They brought in all the people of the village and handcuffed the adult men together.

Bruce and his men captured all seven poachers. He took possession of both the horses *and* their saddlery; and the seven donkeys and their saddlery, too. The men were cuffed one to the other in pairs, and they were linked together with riems. All the meat was recovered, loaded onto the donkeys and transported back across the border into Hwange National Park.

Bruce Austen spoke the language of the Batswana fluently having spent many years working in Botswana before coming to Main Camp in Rhodesia. Later in my career I watched him question Batswana poachers in their own

language. He was as fluent in the Batswana language as John Hatton was fluent in Sindebele. Very little, if anything, escaped Bruce's attention.

Once they were safely back on the Rhodesian side of the border Bruce called a halt. He instructed his trackers to select what meat they wanted for themselves and for their prisoners for the long journey back to Main Camp. He also instructed that a certain amount of meat was to be retained as evidence for the court proceedings that were to follow. The rest of the meat was dumped and left for the lions and hyenas.

Only then did Bruce address himself to the poachers. He specified the charges against them and he formally arrested them for poaching three giraffe in Hwange National Park.

Now came the amusing part of Mbuyotsi's story.

"In court in Hwange town," Mbuyotsi said, a broad grin across his face, *"the poachers protested that their arrest was illegal. It was illegal, they said, because they had killed the giraffe inside Botswana* and *because they had been arrested inside Botswana where Malindela had no jurisdiction".*

The magistrate turned to Bruce and he asked: *"Is this true Mr. Austen? Were the giraffe killed in Botswana and did you arrest these men in Botswana?"*

"'No, your worship, that is not true', Malindela said," said Mbuyotsi with a mischievous deadpan expression. *"'They killed the giraffe inside Hwange National Park and I arrested them inside Rhodesia about ten miles east of Nemtungu Pan'."*

"Hah!… AGH!… Hgh!….", the Bushmen exclaimed in unison. They had heard this story many times before but they clearly still enjoyed hearing Mbuyotsi recite it again. Smiles rippled over all their faces.

"That was true," Mbuyotsi continued more seriously. *"He* did *formally arrest them inside Rhodesia…. But hey! Malindela!!!!! Yena loh skellum, loh baas". He is a rascal that boss. "And he said it with such a poker-face!"* Mbuyotsi continued not wanting to stop his recital.

In telling the story Mbuyotsi tried to mimic what he considered to be a likeness of Bruce's impassive court demeanor but he had trouble keeping his face straight. In the end everybody burst out laughing, their mirth reflecting the happy nature of their simple souls.

"And the poachers. What happened to them?" I asked.

"Six months gaol," Mbuyotsi said.

"And the horses and saddles and things?"

"Confiscated," Mbuyotsi replied succinctly. *"We used some of it on our own patrols for many years."*

I lay on the top of the blankets under my mosquito net that night and I thought of all the years and the months, and the days and nights on end, that the old staff of Hwange National Park had spent roaming the park on horseback. And here I was carrying on the tradition. It was something I had not expected. Something I had never thought about. Something I had not known about. It was a bonus. Still there were things that I would have to get used to, like going to bed with a torch and a rifle. The rifle was hard, awkward and unfamiliar but it was necessary. I understood that lions could be a big menace on a horse patrol but with the rifle next to me I felt strangely secure.

That night the fiery-necked nightjars called all around the camp all night long.

I remember hearing Mbuyotsi crawling under his blanket on the groundsheet next to my stretcher. I was by then half asleep. He brought a burning log from the cook fire with him and with that he lit the pile of dry logs next to our beds. It did not take long for the fire to crackle into life.

Mbuyotsi slept directly on the groundsheet under a single blanket. He had no fancy camp stretcher or valise like I had. To ward off the myriad mosquitoes that had come with rains all he did was to pull the blanket over his head.

The Bushmen camped rough. They were used to it. They did not complain.

A leopard coughed near the shooting range. One of the horses snorted. It was a contented but as yet unfamiliar sound. There was the soft clunk of a hoof stamping the ground. Then I was gone….

* * *

I was awakened in the predawn by the sound of horses stamping the ground. They snorted comfortably. For a brief moment I was disorientated. I did not remember where I was. Then it all came back to me. I was on a horse patrol in Hwange National Park and I was waking up on my first morning out!

The Bushmen were already up and about. The cooking fire was burning brightly in the pale light of the coming dawn. I watched the trackers' figures, warmed by the amber light of the flames, as they moved about. It was not really cold but they all had blankets wrapped around their shoulders.

Ben brought me a mug of hot sweet tea. He placed it next to my bed

within my reach. *"We are leaving in fifteen minutes,"* he told me without further ado. Then he was gone back to the cooking fire.

I lifted myself onto an elbow and looked around. Mbuyotsi's bedding was gone. Our fire of the night was just a pile of smouldering white ashes. I pulled the mosquito net out from the edge of my bed and, stretching over the rifle, I reached for the mug of tea. It's hotness and sweetness was wonderful.

Mbuyotsi came over. He told me that I was now required to get dressed and to visit the nearby Shoot Pan. There I was to wash my face, to brush my teeth and to have a shave in the muddy puddle. He busied himself laying out the tools that I would need to perform all those functions.

"Have a shave?" I inquired of the tracker. *"Why do I have to have a shave?"* I ran my fingers over the baby bristles on my chin.

"Heyyyyiii…." Mbuyotsi exclaimed, his wide open smiling eyes staring into mine. *"If Malindela visits us in his Land Rover and if he finds that you have not shaved,* you *will be in* big trouble. *So will I. You will shave every day, Nkosana, every day.* That *is what Malindela demands and* that *is what you must do."*

Tim had said Mbuyotsi would teach me what to do. I had not reckoned on the Bushman being my baby sitter. Then I smiled. I suddenly realised that Tim, too, had been through this whole rigmarole. It was a ritual that all baby game rangers were put through and had to endure.

I returned from the pan with my face cool, clean and stripped of its juvenile bristles. I had brushed my teeth and dragged a comb through my hair. My towel was hanging round my neck.

The camp had been transformed. All the bedding had been packed away. The groundsheets had been folded. The horses had been saddled up and the saddle packs were standing alongside the mules. The fires had been extinguished with water from the pan.

The dawn was breaking. There was a new crispness in the air that had not been there before. Everybody was waiting for me. Ben took my toiletry materials from my hands and secreted them away in one of my pack boxes. He put my bush hat in my hands. I slapped it on my head.

"Come," said Mbuyotsi without further ado. *"Now you must check the girths with me. Then we must gauge the weight of the saddle packs."*

We went to Turk first. The old gray gelding stood waiting for me one back foot resting lazily on the tip of its hoof. *"Turk is cleverer than the other horses,"* Mbuyotsi told me looking affectionately at the old soldier. *"He*

hates to have his girth too tight so he puffs out his belly to make it more difficult to tighten the cinches."

Mbuyotsi stood alongside my trusty steed and he slipped his hand inside the girth strap. He showed me that the girth was seemingly as tight as it could get. He smiled wickedly. *"You've got to punch you knee into his belly and pull the cinches tight quickly. Like this…."* Suddenly and expertly he kneed the horse hard in the ribs. Turk coughed. A huge volume of air gushed out of the animal's lungs. Mbuyotsi yanked on the cinches. The buckle notched up another two inches.

With a triumphant smile on his face the Bushman remarked to himself: *"That should do it."*

"Come," he said. We moved over to the mules.

The mules had their girths tightened in a similar fashion. *"Now we have to check the pack boxes,"* he said, showing me how. One after the other Mbuyotsi lifted each of the two pairs of boxes assessing their weights against their partners'. *"Each box of each pair must be exactly the same weight,"* the tracker explained.

When one box proved to be heavier than the other, articles were transferred from the heavier box to the lighter one until their weights equalised. I never had to do this. The Bushmen always did what was necessary whilst I was away tending to my ablutions. All I did was to check Mbuyotsi's final balance.

Tightening the girths, checking the weights of the mule pack boxes and of the donkey's heavy leather saddlebags was an important task that Mbuyotsi and I performed together every morning. Except for that job there was very little for me to do. The Bushmen did everything else.

The pack boxes and the pack bags were then lifted in pairs one on either side of the pack animals. Their steel D-rings were fitted over the packsaddle hooks and the weights were released, simultaneously and slowly, on either side. When they were all securely in place the other camp paraphernalia was stacked on top of the saddles and across the pack boxes or bags. The canvass ground sheets were then arranged on top. Finally, everything was roped into place with pliable rawhide buffalo riems.

Mbuyotsi held Turk by the bridle as I climbed into the saddle. He passed me the reins. Without another word, with the rifle over his shoulder, he turned and walked across the open grassy depression that surrounded Shoot Pan. Turk followed him obediently. I sat on the horse's back and did nothing.

I just sat. I held the reins loosely in my hands. This allowed me to marvel at the wonder and the beauty of the awakening dawn without interruption.

We travelled that day in a convoluted fashion to Inyantue dam. It was a twenty-mile ride from Shoot Pan. I was happy to climb out of the saddle when we arrived at our destination. The developing callous of hard flesh across the top of my behind had made its presence felt all morning. It was uncomfortable and marginally sore, sore enough to make me constantly aware of the growing ridge of hard flesh. It took a week for the callous to properly establish itself. Thereafter there was no more pain.
I had then earned my stripes!

The ride that morning was a fabulous experience. We covered ground that I had never seen before and we passed through a variety of miombo woodland habitats. There were msasa trees and other *brachystegias* that I recognised but had never realised even occurred in Hwange. This was basalt country. There was no Kalahari sand or teak trees here. Big mopani trees occurred in all the drainage lines. Miombo trees covered the higher ground. The soil was laced with hard rocks and gravels. We saw little game. A few kudu! A herd of zebra! Two tssessebe, the first I had ever seen. The Bushman called them *nkolomi*. What I saw and experienced I wrote down religiously in my official diary of the day's events.

There were cathedral mopanis at Inyantue, tall giant trees that were many hundreds of years old. The manmade dam had an earthen wall. At the time of this my first visit the dam was only half full of muddy water. Elephants came down to drink at dusk. I heard them splashing in the water. I could hear the water dribbling back onto the surface of the dam from their mouths. I could hear the deep, resonant, hollow sounding sighing of their giant breaths. I never saw them. Indeed, after the hundreds of elephants that I had seen every day in October there was surprising little evidence of them anywhere now in late November. Even their spoor was sporadic. Shortly after dusk that night I heard them pushing down trees all around our camp.

There was a high walled concrete dam at Inyantue four miles away below the earth dam. It was located on the boundary of the park just off the railway line northwest of Dett. Mbuyotsi and I walked to the second dam on our afternoon foot patrol.

Every afternoon Mbuyotsi and I visited places of interest near where we camped. Our main purpose was to check for poaching activities but these walks also gave me the opportunity to see and to experience the nature of the

countryside in the remote parts of the park we were able to visit only on horseback. Many of these places were difficult, sometimes impossible to reach by Land Rover.

The concrete dam at Inyantue had been constructed by the Rhodesia Railways to provide water to the railway ganger's staff, and for the steam engines that stopped at the nearby Inyantue siding. It had been long ago abandoned because it had silted to the brim with golden yellow sand. Over the years a crack had developed in the concrete wall which now leaked a constant trickle of water into a large pool below the dam. The leak was a persistent issue of the water that was stored beneath the sand. The pool below the dam wall provided a lot of animals with beautiful crystal clear water.

The concrete dam wall was located in a beautiful place. It was set amidst low rocky hillocks and beneath giant *Acacia galpinii* trees. I asked Mbuyotsi why we had not camped here instead of next to the muddy waters of the earth dam higher up the same drainage line.

"There is no place here for the horses to graze," Mbuyotsi replied succinctly.

I nodded my head. His reply shut me up! Grazing was something I had not thought about.

It was amongst the tall mopani and acacia trees at the site of the concrete dam that I heard an unfamiliar sound. It was a loud birdcall but I had never heard it before. It called repetitively*: HUH-HOOoooh…. HUH-HOOoooh*. It sounded like a red-eyed dove but it wasn't. I shushed Mboyutsi to silence and quietly approached the calling bird. The sound was coming from high up in one of the big mopani trees.

As I approached the calling stopped. The bird flew off.

It was quite a big bird, the size of a dove, but it had a much longer tail and longer wings. It flew more like a flycatcher than a dove. It had a distinct and glossy emerald green head and back. Its shoulders were gray, its beak bright yellow. There was a flash of brilliant crimson from its belly.

I had never seen this bird before but I recognised it immediately. I had seen several paintings depicting it. I had also examined its picture many, many times in the Robert's Bird Book. It was a Narina trogon, southern Africa's distant relative of the famous quetzel from the jungles of Central America. This, so it turned out, was the first sighting of a Narina trogon in Hwange National Park.

I followed the trogon for perhaps half an hour trying to get a better view.

It kept returning to the same group of big trees where, eventually, it sat still high up in the canopy with its green back turned towards me. In that position it was almost invisible. It began growling at me like a dog. This was a call that had never been recorded. I listened carefully. That evening I wrote a description of the trogon's various calls in my diary.

In those days the Narina trogon was thought to be a very rare bird. Very little was known about it except the fact of its striking beauty. It had only been recorded from a handful of places around the country. I was soon to discover that its secretive behaviour and its cryptic green colouration were the two reasons why so few people had seen it. After I had heard and learnt its call, however, another of nature's Pandora's boxes opened wide for my thorough inspection.

I had wanted to sit and watch that trogon until I had found its nest. I just *knew* its nest would be in a hole in one of the big mopani trees it kept coming back to. I had a vision of its eggs displayed in my collection! But I could not linger for long. *Tempus fugit. W*e still had a long walk back to our camp.

Storm clouds had gathered in the late afternoon and they had not dissipated by nightfall. Rain was a possibility in the night. When we made camp around the horses that evening my 6 foot by 8 foot tarpaulin groundsheet became my tent.

To make my tent the Bushmen cut two forked sticks from the surrounding bush and set them in holes they dug in the ground, nine feet apart. The notches of the forks were just two and a half feet above the ground. The trackers had clearly done this many times before because they had everything, including the specific dimensions of the structure, down to a fine art. Across the forks they laid a robust mopani pole to support the weight of the tarpaulin.

The tarpaulin had large brass eyelets positioned at one-foot intervals all around its edges. Three-foot lengths of buffalo riem had been permanently tied into every one. The tarp was laid over the long pole, lengthwise, and the riems were tied to wooden stakes that the trackers hammered into the ground on either side. The fabric of the tarpaulin was then pulled as stiff as the Bushmen could make it.

Ben and Mbuyotsi manoeuvred my camp stretcher into one side of the tent. Then they rolled my bedroll out over the stretcher. My mosquito net was fastened to the ridgepole and tucked into the bed all round. The two trackers did everything. I stood and watched.

On the other side of the tent, alongside my bed, they constructed a floor of rough bush poles and onto this platform they placed the four pack boxes. On top of the pack boxes went the mule packsaddles, Turk's saddle and all the bridles. All this equipment pressed the tent sheet upwards. There was so little room in the small canvas shelter that my bed pressed up against the pack boxes on the one side and up against the lower tent roof on the other side. The *only* way I could get into bed was by opening the mosquito net at the bottom of the bed, crawling inside and tucking the net in behind me.

I had my splash bath as I had done the previous evening, prepared and arranged again by Ben. Ben also prepared my simple meal after the bath. This time it was rice, baked beans and a tin of herring fish in tomato sauce. Ben was really no cook at all but he did know how to prepare a rudimentary meal and to heat up food taken from a tin can.

That evening I again sat around the campfire with the Bushmen. They again regaled me with yet more stories about past horse patrols. They also told me about big game hunts conducted by the senior members of the Hwange Game Reserve team. They loved talking about Bruce.

We listened to the elephants drinking just after dark. We listened to a lion roaring far way down the river line from somewhere near the concrete dam. The lion was a topic of some discussion. The Bushmen were very conscious of the danger that lions posed to the horses in the night.
Nevertheless, they quickly closed the discussion about the lion and they returned to our happy conversation about other things.

I asked questions about horse patrolling. I asked questions about hunting. The trackers answered as best they could.

I learned a lot conversing with the trackers. I was learning all the time with everything that I did. I soaked it all in like a sponge. The Bushmen were a mine of information. They knew all about nature and things natural. I was made to realise again and again that I still had an awful lot to learn.

The Bushmen asked me questions about myself. Where had I come from? Why did I want to work in Hwange when my parents had farms at Karoi? This was something they really could not understand. If my family had *two* farms at Karoi, farming tobacco, maize and cattle, why on earth was I wasting my time being a game ranger in Hwange?

The evening wore on. All the time the weather threatened. Huge flashes of lightning followed by deep rumblings amongst the clouds constantly interrupted our conversations. Every moment the threatening storm drew

closer. It soon became clear we were in for a pasting.

Just after eight o'clock the rain began. The first droplets were sporadic, huge. The Bushmen stoked up their fires. Mbuyotsi and Ben lit my fire early and they stoked it up too. Their expectations were pious. Sparkles of the fire percolated upwards through the raindrops. The rain soon became too much. When the raindrops came down in a regular and steady pattern we gave up trying to keep the fires going.

We were forced to retire to our beds in our three tented bivouacs around the horses. On this night Mbuyotsi crawled into one of the two tents the Bushmen had erected for themselves. I was left alone on one side of the tethered horses.

The lightening intensified repeatedly illuminating the bush all around us with huge flashes of white light. The thunder crashed incessantly, frighteningly close. The eye of the storm enveloped us.

The horses were stolid. Standing still with their heads held low, they simply let the rain pour down out of the skies and over their bodies. They had no option. They were tied to the tree trunk in front of them. They were silent. The rain pelted down. They had experienced such storms many times before. They were inured to such natural phenomena.

I was engorged with feelings of utter contentment. My tent was a snug little cocoon. The rain beat a steady thrumming rhythm on the canvas. Cold damp air blew in over my face but my body was warm under the sheets and blankets. The rifle lay on top of the blankets. The torch lay in a pocket of hanging mosquito net just off the side of the bed. It was within easy reach.

My senses were drenched by the flashing light spasms and the cracking strikes of lightening; by the crashing thunder; by the roaring sound of the raindrops beating on the canvas mere inches above my face; and by the sound of a wild wind blowing in the branches of the giant mopani trees high above our heads.

There was the fresh bouquet that rain brings out from the bush. There was the haunting smell of burning logs, of sizzling hot coals and of white wood-ash being dampened by the wet.

Intermittently, when there was a gap between the claps of thunder, I could hear water trickling through the tent between the logs underneath the pack boxes. It ran under my camp stretcher between its metal legs. Everything outside was sopping wet. The ground all around was awash but under my tarpaulin anything and everything that mattered was dry and safe.

Lying in bed that night all alone absorbed by the sounds, the smells and the sensations of the storm all around me, I realised that for the first time in my life I was happy. I was *really* and *truly* happy. Utterly content! This was *my* kind of life. There was nothing more that I wanted in this whole big wide world. I had every possible opportunity to do my big game hunting. I believed it just could not get any better! I was surrounded by *my* kind of people. My white colleagues understood me. They understood my passion for hunting. I sensed that they also appreciated my budding talent for general game-ranging work, too. The mSili Bushmen with whom I now worked day and night were also *my* kind of people. And I had the privilege of living in one of nature's supreme paradises, Hwange National Park, in the middle of wild and darkest Africa. What more could a young man want?

Nature's stormy overtures quickly lulled me into a deep and contented sleep. That night I slept like the dead hardly moving a muscle.

* * *

Sometime in the early hours of the morning I was shocked into wakefulness by the sudden screaming of the horses. It was a frightening, eerie sound that I never thought possible from a horse. But the horses were standing right next to my tent so I *knew* it was them.

I sat up in bed and grabbed the rifle. I made ready to flick off the safety catch. There was a round already up the spout so I had no need to work the bolt. Before reacting further I needed to know what was happening. I sat still and listened. My head inside the mosquito net was squashed against the canvas. Apart from the noise the horses were making all I could hear and feel was the drumming of steady rain on the canvas.

Had a lion got one of the horses? The squealing continued.

I heard Mbuyotsi's voice. He was amongst the horses. Talking to them. Calming them down.

I moved to the bottom of my bed and started to pull at the confining mosquito net.

Suddenly the whole tent shook. My heart, already working double shift, leapt into top gear. I could see nothing. I could hear nothing except the squealing of the horses and the solid beat of the rain. I flicked off the rifle's safety catch.

What the hell was happening?

"*NKOSANA… NKOSANA….*" It was Kitso. I was happy to hear his voice. I had damn near pulled off a shot!

The Bushman had his head inside the bottom end of my tent.
"COME QUICKLY," he urged. *"A LION IS IN THE CAMP."*

It was only at that moment, when I was confronted by the fact that I was going to have to go out into the rain, that I realised I had not brought along any kind of personal protection. I had no raincoat. I had no waterproof jacket. Both were still back in single quarters at Main Camp.

I scrambled out into the rain. I had the rifle in one hand, the torch in the other and I was stark bollock naked. I switched the torch on and swung the beam towards the horses. All I could see was a glistening silver curtain of falling raindrops. The raindrops acted like a mirror reflecting the light back at me from no more than three or four feet range.

Mbuyotsi's voice shouted at me above the squealing of the horses. *"SHOOT THE LION, NKOSANA… SHOOT IT."*
"IT'S OVER HERE…." Kitso shouted into my ear, pulling at my arm.
He *had* to shout to make himself heard above the cascading rain.

"HOW DO YOU KNOW IT'S OVER HERE?" I shouted back.

Kitso's firm right hand gripped my upper arm and he pulled me along through the wall of silver raindrops. The rain was beating down heavily on the top of my head and onto my bare back. Each strike hit and bit like a bee sting.

"I CAN HEAR IT," Kitso shouted back. *"I CAN HEAR IT BREATHING…. HURRRGH… HURRRGH… HURRRGH…."*

Despite our dire circumstances I had to smile at his rendition of a lion breathing. I was then quite sure he *had* heard a lion in the camp. When we got to the place in the darkness where he said he had heard the lion I could hear nothing. We both stood still. We both listened. Nothing!
All I could hear was the falling rain. The torch was worse than useless.

I felt very vulnerable. What the hell was I doing? A puny, naked white man standing in the pouring rain with a torch in one hand and a rifle in the other. I had no means at all of knowing just where the hungry lion was! Fear ran rife through my whole being.

I fired a shot into the darkness and immediately reloaded. The noise of the rifle-shot was muffled by the rain. I thought it might just give the lion something to think about.

The rifle in my hands was a comfort but I still felt totally inadequate. I stood and I listened. The horses stopped their squealing. I listened harder. I could hear nothing but the falling rain. I could see nothing but the falling

rain.

"LETS GET BACK TO THE HORSES," I shouted at Kitso.

Without a word, with his hand still firmly grasping my upper arm, Kitso guided me back to the horses. This time we went right in amongst them.

The animals were calmer now. They were no longer screaming. Mbuyotsi, Ben and Rojas, even the camp skivvy, were standing alongside them, stroking their faces, fondling their muzzles, talking to them, reassuring them they would be all right.

I guessed the shot had chased the lion off.

The beam of my torch was shining at the ground but I could see in its reflected light that the animals were still agitated and very alert. Their heads were up, their ears were erect, their eyes were wild. They were staring into the darkness directing their gaze first this way then that way. They were eagerly looking and listening for the danger that they *knew* was wandering about in the wet black night.

"WHAT NOW?" I shouted at Mbuyotsi. He was leader of the pack. I looked to him to tell me what we should do.

"WE WAIT," he shouted back. *"WE WAIT FOR THE DAWN. JUST KEEP YOUR RIFLE READY."*

We wait for the dawn! I was already freezing cold and the beat of each raindrop on my naked body was purgatory. I was shivering uncontrollably. My body quaked and ached with the cold. This, I thought, is going to be a night that I am going to remember forever *if* I survive it!

I switched the torch off to save the batteries. It was not doing much good in the rain anyway. Total darkness enveloped us. I stood on the periphery of the horses, walking from one position to another, listening for the lion.

The Bushmen continued to talk to the animals. I understood not one word of what they said. My focus was to the outside of our little laager. I was listening for the heavy breathing sounds that Kitso told me he had heard. I had no idea what time it was. I had no idea how long I was going to have to endure the torture of the rain and the icy hand of the cold.

An hour or more, later Mbuyotsi alerted me. I had for some time ceased my roaming. I had been standing still ostensibly listening. In reality my mind had switched off. I was virtually asleep on my feet fighting off the cold. My back and my shoulders and the top of my head were on fire with the pain of the persistent beat of heavy raindrop strikes.

"HAH!" Mbuyotsi's suddenly exclaimed. His loud bellow rekindled my

senses. The rain had become much softer but it was still a steady deluge.

"THE LION IS BACK," Mbuyotsi shouted out the warning from the darkness behind me.

I became instantly alert.

I switched on the torch and cast its beam about. I could still see nothing, just silver raindrops falling more softly now through the narrow channel of light. I began moving around the horses again.

Then I heard it. It was the sound of the lion breathing. It was right in front of me. My heart skipped a beat.

I remembered the huge size and the ferocity of the young lion I had recently trapped and shot. In the darkness and in the rain I was no match for such a potent adversary. An all-powerful fear gripped me. What chance did I have against such a ferocious animal under these conditions? In the darkness and in the rain I was completely at the lion's mercy. My hand gripped the rifle hard.

HURRRGH… HURRRGH… HURRRGH…. The sound came at me out of the darkness, out of the rain. It was exactly as Kitso had described it.

I pointed the rifle at the sound and pulled the trigger. The report of the shot was much louder in the more gentle rain. The bullet hit a rock and ricocheted off into the darkness, whining into eternity.

The sound of the breathing stopped. I had missed the lion. There had been no thump of the bullet hitting meat.

We resumed our vigil. Sometime later the rain petered out. A soft wind replaced it. I then truly believed I was going to freeze to death. My wet body was aching and shuddering with the cold. My bottom jaw was quaking uncontrollably. An ache ran through my skull from ear to ear. The constant rattling of my teeth was loud enough to wake the devil himself.

I switched on the torch and cast its beam all around. The beam flickered moving in sympathy with the wild shivering of my body.

I was now able to see the nearby bushes in the torchlight. No eyes shone back at me. There was no sign of the lion. I switched the torch off.

Kitso went to my tent and pulled one of the blankets off my bed. He brought it to me and without a word he wrapped it around my shoulders. For the first time in I don't know how many hours I began to feel warm again.

I could not feel my feet. They were blocks of ice.

Kitso brought blankets for the other Bushmen. One by one they each wrapped the blanket they had received around their shoulders. Nobody made

a move to go back to the tents. The danger was not yet over.

The trackers stood stoically and silently by the horses. They were *feeling* for the animals' sixth sense of survival. They were trying to detect, to understand and to interpret what the horses were picking up from the darkness all around them. The horses were able to recognise danger through extra sensory powers which they, the Bushmen, did not have. The trackers, therefore, used the animals as detectors for the things that they could not themselves see, feel, smell or hear.

The dawn was a long time coming. I knew it had arrived when I saw a gray paleness pervading the eastern skyline. Slowly the murky pale smudge turned to yellow then red. And as the red stain haemorrhaged across the rim of the horizon the red-billed francolins began to chatter below the dam's earthen wall.

Very soon I was able to see the bush all around me without the aid of the torch. I did a final tour around the horses looking seriously into the bush, looking for the lion. There was nothing to see. The lion had gone!

Ground Hornbills began *brummming* in the far distance. Only yesterday Ben had told me what the Bushmen said they talked about.

'*Come here'*, the one hornbill booms. '*I have found a tortoise. Come here and help me eat it.*'

The second hornbill then intones: *'We're coming. Don't eat it all…not before we get there.'*

Cold as I was I had to smile at the Bushman's interpretation. Ben's words ran through my mind as I matched them to the birds' booming hoots.

I went back to Mbuyotsi amidst all the animals. He was standing holding Turk's halter stroking the horse's face with his free hand. His clothes were sopping wet. His body was shaking with the cold.

"I can't see anything," I told the Bushman. *"I think the lion has gone."*

I looked around at the men. There was a starkness and a paleness in their faces. They were all, like me, immobilised by the cold. None of them had faired any better than me during the night. We had all had a gruelling experience. It was a story that the Bushmen would talk about for many years to come. It was another tale to tell around future campfires.

Mbuyotsi nodded. He spoke to the other Bushmen standing all around him. He used the Bushman click language so I had no idea what he said.

I guess he told them they could stand down for every one of them immediately left their night's vigil amongst the horses and they made their

way to where last night's cooking campfire had been located. There, much to my astonishment, they hauled a hammer-flattened piece of what had once been a sheet of corrugated iron off the fire. There were smouldering hardwood mopani logs and bright red coals beneath. The trackers had saved one of the fires despite the heavy downpour. It did not take them very long to have the fire roaring again.

One by one we retired to our tents and dragged on dry clothes. Then we returned to the glowing warmth and welcoming flames of the fire. Ben, without asking, took the coffee tin from my pack box and prepared steaming mugs of hot coffee for everyone. I did not complain. For the next hour we all sat around the camp fire on our haunches, drinking steaming hot coffee from tin mugs, letting the heat permeate our frigid souls and thaw out our frozen bodies and aching bones. Inevitably, we discussed the night's adventure.

At first talk was scarce. Everybody was more concerned about getting warm. Then, slowly, the chatter began. Grimaces turned to grins. The silence was replaced with laughter. I had to endure considerable banter about my totally naked state throughout the night. One comic mooted that *that* was the reason why the lion was scared away. It was a comment that elicited a huge roar of laughter to which everybody contributed.

"Where did you get the sheet of corrugated iron… the malata?" I asked Mbuyotsi once we had become settled.

He smiled conspiratorially. *"Sumbe and I brought it here last year,"* he said, *"when Makwehlela came here on a Land Rover patrol. We hid it in the mopani scrub over there…"* he said, pointing vaguely into the bush across the faint dirt track next to the fire. Makwehlela was Tim Braybrooke's African name!

"We brought it here to help us get through a night such as last night."

"And where else have you left malatas?" I asked him laconically. I felt sure he had done so in other places, too.

Mbuyotsi smiled. *"All over the game reserve,"* he said without hesitation but with some degree of pretension. I could sense that he actually liked the idea of telling me about his pre-planning endeavours. And why not! It was a good idea that we were benefiting from right now. *"Wherever we camp often…."* he continued. *"There are very few regular camping sites where we don't have an old sheet of malata hidden away in the bush nearby."*

"Why do you hide them?"

"Heyyyyyiiii…." Mbuyotsi looked at me askance. He pretended surprise, surprise that I should not already know the answer to my question. *"If Malindela goes into the bush and finds what he calls* rubbish *lying about in full view there will be hell to pay."*

"Doesn't he know that it is helpful for you to have these sheets of corrugated iron at your campsites?"

"Yes," replied Mbuyotsi, *"But he doesn't want to* see *them.* That *is why we hide them away."*

* * *

Later that morning, as I was sitting astride Turk's saddle with the horse walking obediently behind Mbuyotsi, my thoughts turned to the Bushmen.

I looked at the man walking along in front of me holding the old .375 Winchester balanced across his one shoulder. I liked Mbuyotsi immensely. The more I got to know him the more I liked him. There was no pretence about this man. There was no master/servant or obsequious servility. He treated me as an equal whilst still acknowledging my senior white officer status. He was straight down the line. He was solid gold. The other four Bushmen, even the camp skivvy, were cast in the same mould.

I looked into the woodland all around me. Sitting high up in the saddle I could see things that my Bushman companions could not. The horse just walked along following Mbuyotsi. The lead Bushman looked neither to the left nor to the right, just straight ahead. I sat in the saddle enjoying the ride. My mind was free to wander amidst all kinds of unimaginable fantasies.

Behind me I could hear the two mule bridles jingling. I turned in the saddle and looked down at Ben. He was walking along just behind me quietly leading his mule. As I turned he looked up and smiled briefly into my eyes. He had a deep cleft in his skull above his left eye. It ran from his eyebrow to his hairline now obscured by a floppy khaki hat. I had seen that scar before. Seeing it now again I wondered how he had got it. He must have been smacked with something pretty hard and heavy because the blow had bitten deep into the very fabric of his skull.

Ben was quite unlike Mbuyotsi. He was taciturn and introversive. He kept his thoughts to himself. He seldom spoke. He volunteered little. When he was asked a question he briefly came out of his shell, answered the question, then immediately retreated back inside. Ben was not shy. He was just not talkative. I was to learn much more about Ben in the years ahead and we were to become very close, very close indeed. But in those early days I

found his personality strange and aloof. I looked upon him then as just another Bushman.

Kitso, leading the second mule, was far more outgoing. Like Mbuyotsi and Ben Kitso came with me on all my horse patrols. He was likeable but not very bright. Consequently I spoke to him very little. I regarded him as just another member of the team.

Looking further back I watched Rojas walking along in front of the herd of pack donkeys. He and I never ever clicked. He was not much of a tracker and within one year I judged myself to be a much better tracker than Rojas ever was. Nevertheless, he knew his place. He knew his duties. He never balked at any task he was given to perform.

Twenty years later I was to pursue Rojas because he had become a well-known elephant poacher who operated into Hwange National Park out of the Zibannini Bushman settlement across the border in Botswana.

The skivvy was a young Bushman whose name I cannot remember. This was because, perhaps, he became of no real consequence in my life.

The success of the patrol was directly attributable to Mbuyotsi's leadership. Mbuyotsi impressed me greatly on that patrol. Our mutual experiences and the respect we generated for each other forged a companionship that was to last the next twenty years and more.

My mind came back again and again to our experience with the lion the night before. There was no doubt in my mind that the Bushmen's immediate response to the challenge of the lion's interest in the horses had saved the horses' lives. Standing amongst the horses in the pouring rain, talking to them, holding their halters, calming them down, was probably the only way the Bushmen could have stopped the lion from making a kill.

I knew there was much more to last night's experience than met the eye. It was only now, when I had nothing else to do but sit in Turk's saddle that I was able to properly probe my memory of what had transpired. One thing puzzled me. How had Mbuyotsi *known* that the lion had come back? He had announced its return long before anybody had heard it! Long before the horses had begun to squeal again. And he had been right.

I pondered that question for a long time. It wandered away and returned several times as I sat in the saddle my body swaying in unison with Turk's ambling gait.

I became distracted. The ridge of calloused flesh across the top of my bum was getting more and more numb. I tried to ignore it. I moved my

position in the saddle. The discomfort wouldn't go away.

Despite the nagging malaise of my numb bum my mind continued to play games with the question.

I *knew* that the Bushmen's extraordinary bush sense, what seemed to be an extrasensory capability, was unique. Anybody who has had anything to do with rural Bushmen knows that. Few understand why.

Slowly the answer began to take shape in my mind. Then in a flash of inspiration my mind suddenly opened up and the truth came flooding in.

The Bushmen were exceptional bush people, I realised, because they had learned to *read* nature with almost absolute accuracy. They had *taught* themselves to look for and to pick up the messages that come to them from every facet and every corner of the natural world. Mother Nature constantly leaves a myriad of signs lying around for man to find and to interpret. The fact that the Bushmen had developed the ability to pick up these signs is a unique peculiarity of their race. They had developed the capability during a time, way back in history, when it was vital for their survival. It had become part of their racial psyche. It was now second nature to them. And what they didn't know for sure they guessed using past experiences as their guide.

Last night Mbuyotsi and the others had *known* the horses would transmit to them invisible and intangible vibes about the lion's presence. The horses had much more acute senses in this regard than they had themselves. Mbuyotsi had just stood next to Turk and he had opened his mind to receiving the signals that the horse imparted to him. Somewhere back in my subconscious I had already worked that out. I had known it but without understanding the whys and the wherefores.

That was the *only* answer to the question*: How had Mbuyotsi known the lion was back?* He could only have known that by picking up and correctly interpreting subconscious sensations from the horse.

That kind of ability is what made the Bushmen special. *That* is what made them unique. But that was not all. The most important of my deductions was the fact that I suddenly understood their very special attributes were the result of something the Bushmen had *learned*. It was *not* something they had been *born* with. It was not a gift from God! It was not instinctive. They had *learned* it, dammit! They had passed on that skill to their children and every next generation honed it to ever-greater perfection.

I began to comprehend another truth. Because the Bushmen had *taught* themselves *how* to pick up nature's many discarded messages that same

capability was available for development by anybody and everybody. We could *all* be like the Bushmen *if* we were prepared to teach ourselves, or to be taught, the Bushmen's tricks of their trade. All I had to do to be like the Bushmen was to condition my mind into believing that nature's signs were there to be found, to look for them and to find them, to recognise them for what they are and, finally, to interpret them properly.

Sitting astride old Turk that morning, ambling along at Mbuyotsi's walking pace, and letting my mind wander into the realm of the Bushman's psyche, allowed me to comprehend this secret truth. All of a sudden I just *knew* I had found the key to understanding just what it was that made the Bushmen tick.

I was never the same again. From that moment on I tried to emulate my friends the Bushmen in everything I did. I enlisted their support. I accepted them as my teachers. They became my willing mentors. I began to allow the bush to *talk to me* just as it did to them. Once I had mastered that technique, all the time with my trackers' staunch advice and support, it became a major contributing factor in my success as a hunter. I forced myself to see and to hear and to sense the messages that nature left all around me.

I suddenly understood just what and how I had to learn. My voyage into maturity had begun. And what better people could I have to teach me than my own Bushmen trackers?

I never ever ignored their advice throughout my life thereafter. I tapped into their knowledge and their special abilities all the time. Although I did not always *take* their advice I weighed it heavily and earnestly in everything that I did. It saved my life many times during the Rhodesian Bush War that was soon to come.

The height of the ladder I had now challenged myself to climb was daunting. When I stood back and looked at it honestly I realised that what I had chosen to do was a long and arduous journey. The ladder extended right out of my sight way up into the clouds.

* * *

We arrived at Shumba Camp, *Lion Camp*, in the early afternoon.

Mbuyotsi had seemingly found Shumba simply by pointing his nose in the right direction. From Inyantue dam he had walked through the woodlands and open grassy vleis *directly* onto a destination that was twenty-odd miles away from our place of departure. There were no roads to follow. No signposts along the way! Or so I thought. Mbuyotsi just seemed to *know*

where Shumba was located. He seemed to have a map of Hwange indelibly imprinted in his brain.

I did not know it then but I was later to find out, that every major permanent waterhole in the park had well-used elephant paths and major game trails leading directly to it. These paths radiated out from the waterhole like the spokes of a wheel. The closer you got to the water the more distinct the paths became.

There was a focus of many game trails, therefore, that started about five miles out from the water and which got evermore obvious the closer you got to it. Every path led directly to the water! That meant you had a ten-mile wide target to aim at. To find such a waterhole from twenty miles away, all you had to know was the fact that the waterhole existed, the rough direction you had to travel to get to it, and how far away it was from your point of departure. When you hit the first major elephant path of the game trail matrix it would lead you *directly* to where you wanted to go. These were the kinds of Bushman *secrets* that my trackers taught me over the years.

Shumba was principally a tourist picnic site on the main tourist road between Main Camp and Robins. It is approximately fifty miles distant from both of these destinations.

The camp comprised four thatched square rooms. There were several brick barbeque stands under a big spreading fig tree. An ablution block served the camp with hot and cold running water. During the tourist season visitors used Shumba as a daytime picnic site. They were allowed to stay here over night only with special permission.

A six-foot high pig mesh fence surrounded the camp so at night the horses would be relatively safe from lions. At the time of our visit tourism had been shut down so we had the camp to ourselves.

The skies were clear. Only a few fluffy white shrouds hung in the blue. Mbuyotsi had changed the patrol programme because he had deemed it necessary that we all, including the horses, should have a good night’s rest. We all certainly needed a proper rest after the rigours we had endured the previous night.

Shumba, for that one night at least, had become a kind of holiday camp in Mbuyotsi’s mind.

The horses were hobbled and sent outside the camp to graze. The grassland outside was open and covered in short green grass. There was little

danger from lions. Today the skivvy was their sole protector and after last night's experience the horses did not wander very far from the camp.

Shumba pan was within sight of the camp. It was full of water and the bird life was both prolific and noisy.

There was a windmill pump *and* a diesel pump serving the pan. Both bore holes fed the pan with water during the dry season. The diesel pump also supplied water to the high-level storage tanks in the camp. The squeaky old windmill was active. The diesel engine was silent.

Mbuyotsi and Ben started the diesel engine and kept it going until water spilled out of the tank overflow pipes. Then they shut it down.

Kitso and Rojas got roaring log fires going under the bundu boilers, fires which heated the water in 44 gallon steel petrol drums that served as hot water geysers for the ablution block.

Ben placed my katoonda in one of the rest huts. Each hut was equipped with two beds. There were mattresses but no bedding. He simply unrolled my valise on top of one of the mattresses. The Bushmen selected other huts for themselves.

We settled down for a day of rest and relaxation. I slept until four o'clock in the afternoon. Then Mbuyotsi, Ben and I did a long encircling walk about one-mile out around the Shumba camp.

Shumba Pan attracted large numbers of game animals during the dry season. During the rains it supported large numbers of water birds.

The pan was full to the brim and there was a variety of migrant waders running around the water's edge. Others flew about overhead. There were knob-billed ducks, red-billed teal and pochards floating on the water's surface.

There were green shanks, red shanks and European ruffs all in their plain winter plumage. I was able to identify them from the pictures in my Robert's Bird Book that was always an important part of my camp equipment. There were many small waders that I was unable to positively identify. Whiskered terns cavorted about in the air above the pan. I had seen few of these species before.

During the rains Hwange is a paradise for migrant birds and tens of thousands of Africa's wild ducks flocked into the game reserve to breed on the myriad pans that are then full of water.

That night the horses were tethered to the aerial roots that festooned the trunk of the big fig tree inside the fenced enclosure. We enjoyed a relaxed

and lazy evening in the lap of comparative luxury. I couldn't get enough of the hot shower that I enjoyed just before dusk.

There were metal chairs in the camp. After supper we sat on them in a ring around a single big campfire and we conversed in comfort. And, as had been the case during the two previous nights, the Bushmen regaled me with many tales of the game reserve's history.

That night the skivvy was tasked to sleep on the ground next to the horses. He accepted Mbuyotsi's instruction without complaint. He was settling down next to a roaring campfire when I retired to bed. The four more senior trackers slept on beds in two of the other huts.

I knew nothing about anything that happened, or didn't happen, during the night.

Mr. Sandman caught me that night and put me away for good until the chuckle of red-billed francolins woke me up at dawn the next morning.

* * *

The next day we moved on to Tchakabika. It was a long day's trek to the northwest of Shumba. The route took us back into true basalt country. This time we passed through a lot more mopani woodland than we had done before.

Tchakabika is a hot spring of some renown to the game rangers and to the Bushmen of Hwange. The piping hot water bubbles out of the ground in a round cauldron some fifteen feet across and two feet deep. Several small eyes bubble a continuous mixture if gas and hot water into the middle of the pool.

The spring is located in the centre of a large flat basin of black soil on which the short-cropped grass was starting to regenerate. This provided the horses with ample sweet grazing. All around were low broken rocky hills covered in short scrubby vegetation.

A dry sandy stream worked its way around the periphery of the basin. The waters of the hot spring ran into the stream via a narrow channel. We obtained our drinking water from the stream by digging a hole in the sand above the place where the hot water ran into it. At that point the water was fresh, clean and sweet. Downstream the water was brak. It tasted and stank of sulphur.

We made camp under the only big tree on the edge of the basin. It was a lone mopani that gave us scant shade during the day. My camp stretcher and mule packs were laid out on top of the spread out tarpaulin. There was again no sign of rain.

Turk and the two mules were knee-hobbled and turned out to graze. The donkeys followed them onto the open green grass. That day Kitso was appointed the first horse guard.

Shortly after our arrival Mbuyotsi, Ben and I visited the spring. Ben, I noticed, had started to act as the second most senior member of the Bushman group.

> *The Bushmen had an established but unspoken rank structure that saw individual's rise and fall in seniority for reasons that we white men did not altogether understand. Neither did we ask. We only noticed how one man would slowly climb the ladder whilst another slid down the other side. A lot depended, it seemed, on who was tracking for who. The trackers seemed to assume their rank from the status of the white ranger hunters to whom they were each, respectively, attached. The issue did not really affect us whites so we did not interfere.*

There was a dark gray puddle of what looked like powdery mud lying on the bottom of the cauldron pool. Crystal clear water covered it. Water and gases bubbled up through the mud blanket that reacted with the viscous motility of mercury. The mud looked like gray-black porridge cooking in a huge round pot.

I knelt down and took a handful of the water in my cupped hand. It was hot but not *too* hot to handle. It tasted like sour salt and it reeked of sulphur.

The channel that took the water spillage into the stream was only about one foot wide where it left the cauldron. No sooner had we arrived at the spring than Ben picked up some big rocks that were standing nearby and he blocked the exit. I knew immediately those rocks had been left there by the Bushmen for this very purpose and that they had been used for that purpose many, many times.

"Why are you blocking the water?" I asked Ben puzzled.

He smiled and said. *"This is your bath today, Nkosana. We block the passage to make the water deeper. By this evening the whole cauldron will be full."*

I smiled at the thought. What a good idea! I began to look forward to my bath.

We walked back through the grazing horses and I retired to my stretcher under the mopani tree. The rifle was leaning up against the tree trunk. It was within easy reach from the head of my bed.

I lay down and removed a soft cover novel from under my pillow. It was

something that I had brought along, *just in case*, to keep me occupied should I ever become bored! I never became bored! I used the novel that day as a means to induce a quick sleepiness. I was discovering that I *still* had need of some very serious sleep. It was only when we got to Tchakabika that I really understood just how much that long night with the lion at Inyantue had taken out of me.

Mbuyotsi and Ben busied themselves repairing broken saddlery. They had brought an awl and some heavy needles with them and a roll of thin waxed nylon cord. I watched them obliquely as they secured a flap that was detaching from one of the leather donkey packs. The Bushmen never balked at doing even minor repairs to the saddlery. They had learned, by trial and error, that it paid to keep the leather equipment in tiptop condition. *A stitch in time saved nine!*

I rolled onto my back. For a brief moment I watched Kitso. He was sitting on a rock not far from the end of my bed paring a small stick with his penknife. The stick was as thick as my forefinger. It had four small branches coming out at right angles to each other at the same place on its stem. The Bushmen stuck those sticks into the ground near their campfires and they hung their washed tin mugs to dry on the four trimmed branchlets.

Every now and again Kitso looked up. When he did so he cast his eyes over the horses and around the surrounding countryside. He was making sure there were no lions or hyenas about that might be a danger to the grazing horses. Every time he looked up everything seemed to be quiet. When he looked down he returned to his stick-paring work with his penknife.

I started to read my book but, as I knew it would, drowsiness overwhelmed me. The silent camp atmosphere was soporific.

Every Bushman had a chore. They carried them out silently. Ben and Mbuyotsi were at work repairing the damaged leather donkey pack bag. Kitso was guarding the horses. Rojas and the skivvy moved repeatedly between the camp and the nearby mopani scrub. They collected and delivered load after load of dry wood. Gathering firewood for the coming night was an essential daily camp chore.

Nobody spoke a word.

A black-throated canary was singing quietly from the branches of the tree above my head. I dosed off dropping the book onto my chest.

Everything was not as it seemed. A huge black-maned lion watched us

from one of the nearby rocky ridges. It had seen the horses and noted the quietness that pervaded our camp.

The lion slipped quietly off the hillside and sneaked into the dry riverbed beyond the hot spring cauldron. The stream bank here was three feet high which hid its slinking form adequately. Looking over the rim of the bank every now and again, the big cat made its way downstream to a point that marked the shortest distance to the nearest of the horses. The nearest animal happened to be one of the donkeys.

All the horses had their heads down grazing.

Biding its time the lion waited for its donkey target to turn its whole body towards the camp. When the donkey was facing directly away from it the lion sprang silently onto the tableland on the top of the riverbank. It quick shuffled itself, half-crawling, half-running, stalking fast and silently over the exposed flat ground towards its unsuspecting prey.

Kitso looked up and saw the lion. In a flash he took in the whole scene. He leapt to his feet and, screaming like a banshee, he raced off over the short green grass towards the lion. In his right hand he carried his penknife. In his left hand he carried the small stick he had been trimming. Other than his blind courage those were the only weapons he had.

Kitso's screaming departure shattered the somnolent silence.

I woke up with a start lifting my head and shoulders off the bed. What I saw chilled me to the bone. I saw the lion. I saw the startled donkey. I saw Kitso racing towards them both, screaming at the top of his voice.

Mbuyotsi and Ben dropped their tools and raced off to give Kitso support. They too started to shout at the tops of their voices. Mbuyotsi and Ben, however, were both out of the picture because they were approaching the central stage from the distant side.

All the horses looked up. The focus of their attention was on the running, screaming, seemingly demented Bushman. They all looked directly away from the lion. None of them saw the danger. The donkey, the centre of attraction, stomped his feet. Then, realising that Kitso was running directly towards *him*, it turned to gallop away. Then it saw the lion now racing towards it full tilt

I leapt off my bed and grabbed the rifle ramming a round into the breech. I stood my ground. I half lifted the rifle to my shoulder but I had no target. In one straight line in front of me I had Kitso's broad shoulders. Directly behind

him was the donkey. The lion was hidden behind the donkey.

The donkey, having recognised the danger posed by the lion, now running in a gathering charge towards it, tried to turn *right* around. Its intention now was to run the other way, back towards Kitso, but its momentum towards the lion was just too great a force. Its feet did a wheel spin and the donkey fell onto its side. Scrabbling to regain its feet the donkey panicked. This made it rotate round and round on the ground, like a spinning top, its body pivoting on its bottom shoulder.

The lion was now in a full-blown charge. The gap between the lion and the donkey shortened with every passing moment.

Kitso made good ground. He reached the donkey just before the lion did and he leapt over the fallen animal like a circus clown. Hitting the ground with two flat feet he stopped and spread his legs. He continued to scream at the lion, challenging it physically and vocally. All the while he brandished his weapons threatening the lion with his little stick and his puny penknife.

I still could not shoot for Kitso's body now completely covered the fast approaching lion. The lion put on brakes. Its front legs shot out straight in front of its body, its paws skidding along the ground to halt its forward rush. Kitso's and the lion's bodies were then far too close together to risk a shot. I did not want to waste a wild shot to distract the lion because I knew I might soon have need of an immediate bullet to save the Bushman's life. If the lion got Kitso down my first shot would have to be quick and accurate.

Mbuyotsi and Ben were fast approaching the scene but they were still too far away to make any difference.

The lion stopped within touching distance of the shrieking herdsman who stood his ground stoically.

The donkey scrambled to its feet and galloped back towards the camp. For a short time the donkey was positioned directly between me and Kitso, and Kitso was still between me and the lion.

Things were just not going my way!

Kitso continued to shout at the top of his voice. All the while he danced about in front of the lion like a whirling dervish. He leant forward and beat the lion across the nose with his little stick. The lion snarled and lashed out at him.

The Bushman jumped backwards. I was amazed at the man's agility. The lion's raking paw missed his stomach by mere inches.

The lion backed off. It cast a hesitant glance towards Mbuyotsi and Ben who were now approaching fast. It looked back at Kitso and snarled again. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour the big cat suddenly turned and ran off in great bounds back towards the river.

Kitso took off after it waving his little stick and flashing his penknife. He continued to scream obscenities at the fast disappearing predator.

The lion reached the stream bank and leapt down onto the sand. It did not look back. It did not stop. It raced over the sand and up the little kopje beyond. Kitso crashed down onto the sand and pursued the lion up the side of the hillock. Mbuyotsi and Ben stopped at the riverbank. Only when the lion disappeared over the hill did Kitso stop running.

Kitso turned then and made his way slowly back to the river. I could hear Mbuyotsi and Ben laughing together as they shouted ridicules at their comrade. Kitso walked disconsolately across the sand to the riverbank. Mbuyotsi and Ben leant down and, each taking one of Kitso's hands, they hauled him onto the level ground beside them.

The three of them walked back to camp laughing and joking amongst themselves. They were still laughing when they reached me.

"*Why did you chase the lion away like that, Kitso?*" I asked the Bushman, remonstrating. I was amused and relieved. My body was still shaking all over with anxiety. Kitso's brief encounter with the lion had covered a very tense and very electrifying few moments. I was happy that he was safe but I felt I had to demonstrate that I was angry with him, too. "*It could have killed you.*"

"*Haaiiieeee… Nkosana,*" Kitso shook his head. "*I was in charge of the horses. It was my job to see that the lion did not kill the donkey.*" "*It was* only *a donkey….*"

"No, *Nkosana!*" Kitso interjected adamantly. "*It was not* just *a donkey. It was one of the horses that you had entrusted me to look after this afternoon.*" Kitso was clearly prepared to argue the point. He was not going to accept what I had to say. I decided to let the matter rest.

Then the truth emerged! "*If we had gone back to Main Camp and reported to Malindela that one of the donkeys had been killed by a lion when I was in charge of them,*" he continued, "*he would have killed me.*"

"*So you did it because you sabah Malindela?*" I saw the light. *Sabah* in Bushman language meant both fear and respect.

"*Yes, Nkosana,*" Kitso admitted honestly. "*I did it because I sabah*

Nkosi Malindela.”

Kitso’s fear of and his respect for Bruce Austen had been much greater than his fear of the lion. Very clearly I did not feature at all in Kitso’s sabah stakes. I was then just the local baby game ranger.

That afternoon Mbuyotsi and I conducted our now customary walkabout in the vicinity of Tchakabika. We saw no sign of the lion.

Back in camp I picked up my towel and a bar of soap, and my rifle, and I walked across the open ground to the hot spring. I stripped down to my nothings and laid my loaded rifle on top of my clothes. Then I sank my weary saddle sore bones into the hot water. The water was so hot it was barely tolerable.

The loose mud blanket on the bottom of the cauldron covered my legs when I sat down and the pool’s then artificially high level brought the water surface up to my neck.

The mud was not mud. It was something else. It did not cling to my flesh like mud would have done. It rolled off my legs when I raised them off the bottom. When I stood up it slipped off my body like silk, sinking immediately back to the bottom of the pool. It behaved exactly like quick silver, like mercury. I accepted it for whatever it was. It was something else! I just soaked-in the wonderful experience and I enjoyed the sensation of the bubbles of hot water and sulphurous gas that ran all over my body from underneath.

Sitting in Tchakabika’s hot spring cauldron was like sitting in a filthy, smelly, piping hot jacuzzi. I loved it. I wallowed in it for about twenty minutes. When I finally emerged my hands and feet were all crinkled and white.

The Bushmen later had a bath in the hot spring, too. Ben was the last one to leave the water. After he dried himself he removed the stones that he had earlier placed in the channel. This enabled the hot spring to return to its natural level during the night.

All night long my body reeked of sulphur. The sensation was not unpleasant, just different. I got used to it. The hot, hot bath I had enjoyed was worth it all.

The skies were clear that night. There was no vestige of any kind of cloud. After supper, and after our campfire chat, I lay in bed and looked up into the universe above me. The stars were sparkling bright in the heaven’s clear air. Here in the game reserve the atmosphere during the rains was

clouded neither by city pollution nor by the all-pervading bush dust of the dry season.

I thought about Kitso and the lion. Today had been our fourth day out and we had already had two nasty experiences with lions. I did not believe this was *the norm*. Had lions been *such* a danger to the horses, and to ourselves, I felt sure *someone* would have warned me. I surmised that we had just been unlucky. I was right. Lion attacks were *not* so frequent an occurrence on horse patrols. We *had* been unlucky.

My thoughts of Kitso left me with a smile on my face. I had not expected such heroic conduct from someone who was normally uninspiring. It taught me not to be so judgmental of my Bushmen companions. They were *all* special people. Each one was a precious jewel in his own special way.

A spotted eagle owl hooted intermittently from the nearby rocky hillside. Once in a while a freckled nightjar *whup-whupped*. A blackbacked jackal gave vent to its eerie, wailing, call. There was not a squeak from the lions.

I did not hear Mbuyotsi come with his blanket to my groundsheet that night. I did not hear him stoking up the fire. I did not rouse when he repeatedly restoked the fire with logs during the night. That night I slept like the dead.

* * *

The next night we camped on the banks of the Lukosi River on the northern boundary of the park. We were here not far from Hwange colliery town. There was a railway bridge just below our campsite. The river was dry. The 50-yard wide watercourse was just an expanse of golden yellow sand fringed by a narrow belt of beautiful riverine forest.

We camped under a huge Natal Mahogany tree. The site was in total shade for the whole afternoon. There was a thick swathe of rich P*anicum maximum* growing on the riverbank so the horses stayed close to camp all afternoon stuffing themselves with the tall sweet grass.

Two feet below the surface of the river sand we found lots of water. Using our one shovel, and our hands as spades, we all helped to dig one well for ourselves and one large hole for the horses.

We were entertained by a host of different sounds during the night. I lay awake for hours listening to the soft growling calls of barred owlets, the melodious whistles of pearl-spotted owlets, and the deeper grunting calls of giant eagle owls. It was another night for owls. We heard the hootings of spotted eagle owls in the hills across the river and the screeching calls of barn

owls.

Periodically, we heard the raucous screams of the greater bushbaby. Leopards grunted and hyenas howled. In the far away distance lions roared. The whole night long the denizens of the darkness were never still.

The next day we began wending our way back into the central regions of the park. Day six found us at Mandavu dam the biggest man made water impoundment in the whole of the Park. Mandavu lay thirty miles east of Robins Camp.

We set up camp in a grove of giant *Acacia galpinii* trees, *Apiesdorings*, which were growing along the stream behind the earthen dam wall. That afternoon Mbuyotsi took me to Sinamatella hill about four miles away to the northwest. This was where, he told me, it was planned to build a new tourist rest camp. The top of the hill was flat like Table Mountain. Naturally we climbed to the top. There I looked over the site and in my mind's eye visualised a line of thatched cottages running along the rim of the plateau. The vista overlooked wide mopani woodlands far below. The dry stream below the hill was part of the middle reaches of the Lukosi River catchment.

At one point, when I was standing on the edge of the hilltop looking down over the splendid view that tourists were to see in the years ahead, I heard the same haunting call that I had heard at Inyantue. I recognised it immediately. It was another Narina trogon. The bird was calling from amongst the mopani trees on the steep hillside just below me. Then I heard another. Then another! I walked along the rim of the hill from one end to the other and I counted ten different birds calling. Ten male Narina trogons on one small hillside! So much for the species' so-called rarity!

I was to learn in later years that Narina trogons call only during the months of November and December. This was their breeding season. And *that* fact, just as much as their green colouration and their secretive behaviour, was probably a major reason why they were so completely overlooked.

* * *

We had no more serious adventures with lions on that my first horse patrol. We had visitations from them on two separate nights over the next week. Both were of no significance. One night a spotted hyena tried to haul away one of the leather donkey packs but the trackers chased it off before any serious damage was done.

We returned to Main Camp via the central Kalahari sand regions of the park. This was a revelation. The Kalahari sand areas are so very different to the northern basalt country. We traversed several of the game reserve's fossil sand dunes.

Here I was able to actually *see* the nature of the topography. The ancient sand dunes repeated themselves one after the other in long lines. Some were eighty miles long. Most were at least five miles wide. They were created in a bygone geological time when the park was part of the greater Kalahari Desert, now confined to Botswana. When the weather patterns changed and more rainfall occurred, the long sandy ridges stabilised and teak forest became established on the imperceptibly sloping tops of the dune ridges. The ridge tops, in fact, appeared to be flat.

There were long lines of narrow, open and heavily grassed depressions running between the dunes. They were equal to the length of the dunes behind which they occurred. And there were rows upon rows of natural pans in these depressions which, after the recent rains, were starting to hold water.

Throughout the Kalahari regions of the park, hundreds of thousands of these pans fill with water during the rains. When they are full they are covered in water lilies and other aquatic vegetation. From November to April these natural pans become the breeding grounds for millions upon millions of wild ducks and other waterfowl. The change from bleak and wholly dry desert to an aquatic paradise every year never ceased to amaze me.

We camped at Nehimba Spring and at Shakwanki, two of Hwange's *seeps*.

The third of the game reserve's three perennial seeps is at Lebuti far away to the southeast.

I imagined these seeps to be very large pans that had filled up long ago with shifting Kalahari sands. Their mud water seals beneath the sand are still intact. There was water in these pans beneath the surface sand and the elephants had learnt to dig down to the shallow captured water beneath. Water *seeped* through the fine-grained sand into the holes that the elephants dug. This is why they are called *seeps*.

We passed Mtswiri Pan another major landmark in the game reserve.

These were all places of heavy significance during the development of Hwange. Shakwanki was named after Ted Davison. It was Mister D's African honour name. It meant, simply, *The Old Man of Hwange*.

We rode into Main Camp exactly fourteen days after we had departed.

We were all weary, tired and thankful to be home. The callous on my upper backside was by then well established and for the next three years it became a normal part of my anatomy. That first horse patrol had been an experience I would never forget. It was an experience that I would not have missed for anything in the world.

I guess I passed muster with Malindela because a week later he congratulated me on my conduct with the lion at Inyantue. The story had been passed onto him as usual by the Bushmen.

Looking back on that first horse patrol adventure I realise that my experiences with the lions was a major part of my *conditioning*. As lions and leopards can be *conditioned* by repeatedly being exposed to inept hunting practices by man, so too, was I progressively and ever more greatly *conditioned* by my every lion encounter. No experience is ever wasted. The more I had to do with lions the greater became my capacity to handle myself in their dangerous company. I learned to respect them more and to fear them less. This all made me ultimately totally confident within myself, no matter what the circumstances, when I was required to hunt lions in the years and decades ahead.

The greatest of all the rewards I obtained from my many horse patrols in Hwange was that I learned *how to handle myself*. Horse patrols were truly and altogether a toughening process. They made me tougher mentally, tougher physically and tougher emotionally.

Bruce was unmoved by my stories of Narina trogons. Neither he nor Harry nor Tim had anything like my passion for birds. Not so Mister D! He had been living in Hwange then for 32 years and he had never even known that Narina trogons occurred in the park. He never doubted my word but he questioned me minutely about that I had heard, what I had seen and what I had experienced with regards to the birds.

The very next day Mister D drove up to Sinamatella. It was over a hundred miles away to the northwest of Main Camp. He camped on the river behind the Mandavu dam wall as we had done with the horses. He spent a whole day on the Sinamatella hilltop easily identifying the trogons' calls from my description. He took with him a .410 shotgun to collect a specimen for the national museum but he never managed to get close enough to fire a shot. Nevertheless, when he returned to Main Camp the following day he was elated. As I had told him he would, he had seen several trogons on the

Sinamatella hillside. They were for him, like they were for me, his first sightings of the species in his life.

* * *

Except for the calloused ridge of hard numb flesh across my upper behind, which was a constant reminder, I quickly forgot my adventures on horseback. I *had* to put the horse patrol quickly behind me because when I got back I was immediately thrown into the mill of Main Camp's busy schedule.

Early in December1960 Tim was instructed by Bruce to deal with a build-up of elephant and buffalo in the Ngamo area of the Tjolotjo Tribal Trust Lands. In those days the TTLs were still called *native reserves*. I accompanied him.

Tjolotjo comprises a thousand square miles of Ndebele communal farming land that runs along the entire south-eastern boundary of the game reserve. Ngamo in the TTL was just across the boundary from the Ngamo plains in the game reserve where we had caught the animals for the Matopos at the beginning of the year.

A seven-foot high steel wired game fence, with msusu and mopani bush pole standards, was being erected along Hwange's entire south-eastern boundary. Construction had started on the railway line at Ngamo. It meandered from Ngamo, in a south-westerly direction, along the Sehumi fossil drainage line to Makona Pan. From Makona it went southwards in a straight line to the Nata River on the border between Botswana and Rhodesia. When it was finished the fence covered a distance of 150 miles.

The purpose of the fence was to protect Matabeleland's cattle from corridor fever and foot and mouth disease infection supposedly transmitted by the national park's ever expanding game herds.

The Department of National Parks had nothing to do with the erection of the fence. Thank goodness! This was a programme undertaken by the Veterinary Department. It was *our* task to remove the elephants and buffaloes that were being *fenced out* of the park.

The fence was never a deterrent to the park's big bull elephants. They were able to step over it with comparative ease. In doing so they often broke the steel wire strands and it was the Veterinary Department's constant and unenviable task to repair these breakages. So not only did the veterinary officials have to construct the fence they had to constantly repair it behind them as they went along.

In the beginning, before the elephants learnt how to negotiate the fence,

we shot several elephant bulls in the Tjolotjo area with horrific suppurating cuts across the bridges of their trunks. These wounds were incurred when the animals hit the fence hard and the thin, immensely strong wires broke. The stretched wires then zipped furiously across the elephants' faces and the razor sharp broken ends cut deeply into their flesh.

Finding elephants with these kinds of injuries did not last long. The wily old bulls soon learnt they could push over the pole standards and, using their immense weight, they held the poles down on the ground by walking directly on top of them. In doing this they laid the whole fence structure, over 50 yards at a time, flat on the ground. The wires stretched like elastic bands but rarely broke. They sprang back to something near their former positions when the elephants had passed across the structure. Nevertheless, this regular occurrence still required that the distorted fence line be continuously repaired. There was no respite for the fence construction team!

The fence *did* prove a deterrent for the elephant cow herds because, although the big cows could get across the fence in the same fashion as the bulls did, their calves were unable to follow them. This anchored most of the cowherds inside the game reserve. The cowherds soon learnt, however, to seek out the major wire breakages caused by the bulls to negotiate the barrier.

The fence *did* prove to be a barrier for buffalo and for most other game animals. It was lethal for giraffe whose long legs became badly entangled in the wires.

We often found dead kudu in the fence, hanging by their back legs from the top strands. The kudu would jump, clearing the top strand of the fence with their front legs, but their back feet would pass through and between the two top strands. Their heels would then lift the second strand up and over the top strand, twisting these two wires together whilst their back feet were still in between. The animals then hung from the fence upside down with their front feet on the ground until they died.

It took several years before the wild animals of the park accepted the presence of the fence and learnt how to live with it. Only then were game deaths on the fence reduced to a tolerable level.

Whatever the rights or the wrongs of the exercise it was government policy to eradicate all elephant and all buffalo outside the fence in the Tjolotjo district. Mister D's and Bruce's desire to shoot elephants and buffaloes *outside* the park in order to reduce population numbers *inside* the park, had helped government to support their eradication programme

decision.

The whole idea of game elimination outside the game reserve boundary was very new and strange to everyone, especially to those of us who lived and worked in Hwange National Park. But we were available! We were capable of doing the job! We were equipped to do the job! And we set about doing it with vigour and enthusiasm.

Tim Braybrooke and I were the first rangers to conduct an elephant and buffalo elimination exercise in the history of Hwange.

Our trip to Ngamo on that occasion was the first time that Tim and I went on an overnight patrol together. We camped at Ngamo outside the park boundary not far from the village of a headman called Mazai.

The Tjolotjo TTL was, in those days, occupied by just a smattering of Ndebele subsistence farmers. Today it carries a much more dense human population.

We began our work by tackling elephant bulls that were not only living outside the park, they were also raiding the local people's vegetable gardens.

This was an exciting and vital period of my life. I was just starting the kind of work that I had dreamed about. What Tim and I had been tasked to do was beyond even my wildest dreams.

Again I found myself feeling like a pig wallowing in *the proverbial*. I was smug. I was content. I was over the moon. I could not believe that what was happening was actually happening. Not only could I not believe that it was really happening but that it was actually happening *to me*!

Our camp was under a huge camel thorn tree on the edge of a wide, flat, short-cropped grassy plain. Although we carried proper government tents we preferred not to use them. Our stretchers and other camp equipment, including camp tables and camp chairs, were laid out on top of a very large tarpaulin groundsheet. Tilley paraffin pressure lamps lit up the campsite until after supper.

Tim then got out his guitar. For an hour he plucked away expertly at the strings and he softly sang one campfire ditty after another. This was a part of his persona that I did not know. He had a surprisingly pleasant voice. The Bushmen with us sat quietly listening and watching his performance. Alongside us burned a single large campfire.

Our three Bushman trackers kept the fire stoked throughout the night. Tim's and my stretchers stood side by side three or four paces apart. The Bushmen arranged their bedding, together, on one smaller tarpaulin that was

located on the far side of the fire.

I lay for hours in my bed that first night listening to the nocturnal sounds. I watched the stars move across the heavens on their blue-black tapestry. This was the essence of life for me. I revelled in every moment. How I *ever* slept on those early nights in the *real* African bush I shall never know. I just could not get enough of the wilderness ambience and every moment that I slept denied me some sound, some smell, some experience that I did not want to miss.

All night long there were intermittent '*gnu*' grunts from the several herds of blue wildebeest that lived out on the open plains in front of our camp. There were the haunting calls of owls and the goulish yapping of black-backed jackals. Every now and again, in the far distance, a spotted hyena whooped. In the early hours of the morning I was awakened by the loud roaring of lions. They were not too far away in the dense bush behind our camp.

Ngamo in those days, even outside the game reserve boundary, was a wild and wonderful place. There were few people and lots of game and the teak forests were pristine.

* * *

During the night a small group of elephant bulls drank at the pan in front of our camp. We took up their tracks shortly after dawn. Tim's tracker on that patrol was, again, Japan. He was Tim's right hand man and was rarely out of Tim's company. Sumbe, Bruce's personal tracker, had been allocated to me. This was not an unusual event because Bruce rarely undertook tracking and hunting duties at that time. In the three and a half years that I spent at Main Camp in the early nineteen sixties, I have more than enough fingers on one hand to count the number of times that Bruce Austen worked in the field. His job had become almost exclusively administrative.

The third Bushman in our group was Mbuyotsi. He stayed back that morning to look after the camp. That was why we had brought three trackers along with us.

We were not in those days concerned about local village people pillaging our camp should we leave it unmanned. Robberies in the bush rarely happened. Tribal people respected everybody else's property and incidents of theft were uncommon.

Our camps had to be manned at all times because monkeys and baboons were the villains and they were common everywhere. In some places

scavenging hyenas were troublesome. It was Mbuyotsi's duty that day to protect the camp from all these wild brigands of the veld.

I had got to know Mbuyotsi well on my recent horse patrol but I had only seen him tracking on that one occasion when Tim and I had shot the elephant at Juapi. At that stage I had too little experience to tell whether he was a good or a bad tracker. I was to learn that he was reasonably good. He was also pleasant to work with and he was totally reliable.

Sumbe was not a bad tracker either. He was no better nor was he any worse than Mbuyotsi. Compared to some of the *very* good trackers that I later worked with, however, they were both of only average ability.

Sumbe was *very* conscious of the fact that he was Malindela's personal tracker and personal assistant in the bush. As a consequence he had a somewhat obnoxiously superior and arrogant streak. As was the case with all the Bushmen trackers, however, there were good points and there were bad points to Sumbe's personality. On *that* patrol he and I struck up the beginnings of a solid friendship that was to last until his death from cancer of the throat twenty-three years later.

Japan was altogether a different kettle of fish. He was flambouyant and overly confident in my humble opinion but he served Tim well and faithfully for many years and *that* is really all that mattered. He was also the best tracker I had yet seen working in the field. I learned to respect him but I could never have worked with him in a close relationship. Our *haloes* just did not merge!

I was beginning to understand that the relationship between a hunter game ranger and his tracker is a very delicate, personal and unwritten contract. I picked this up very early on as a consequence of my working with Tim and Japan! The hunter game ranger and his personal tracker *have* to have a *very* special rapport. Their relationship *has* to be of the highest possible order!

A good relationship between a ranger and his tracker has many mutual benefits.

A tracker needs a personal game ranger boss that will hold him up and keep him up in the eyes of the tracker community. Their special relationship must hold him perpetually above the level of the tracker's less fortunate colleagues.

A hunter game ranger, on the other hand, is an absolute nobody without a tracker whose tracking ability is of the highest order.

The tracker must have absolute confidence in his master's killing and hunting abilities. The two of them must also be prepared to hold each other's lives in their respective hands. I was soon to find out they are required to do this more frequently than most people think!

The hunting success that a game ranger hunter achieves is a direct reflection of his tracker's ability to follow and to properly interpret spoor. It has a great deal to do with how the two of them interact with each other. Indeed, the ranger's reputation as a hunter is more often than not *entirely* dependent upon how good his tracker is. Nowhere is the concept of *team spirit* better reflected than in this partnership.

Fulfilling the responsibility of keeping each other's lives safe and comfortable on a day to day basis whilst getting their respective jobs done, demands a game ranger/tracker relationship that is above mere friendship. It is above *love*. It goes far beyond what a husband and a wife experience in their marriage. The relationship is wholly profound. As time wore on I began to understand this better and better. During the sixteen year long Bush War in Rhodesia, when my trackers and I were required to track down and to engage Joshua Nkomo's and Robert Mugabe's freedom fighter thugs, I was left in no doubt about this reality.

I had started to look upon Mbuyotsi as becoming, perhaps one day soon, my personal tracker. My selection of Mbuyotsi was beginning to gel. He was not then attached to any other game ranger so he was *available*. I also liked the man and I believe he liked me.

I was to learn, however, that one did not just *choose* a tracker and a tracker does not *choose* his hunter game ranger. The selection process is much more complex and infinitely more subtle than that. It is a condition of partnership that evolves into a state of perfection over time. The magnetism that eventually binds the two together is an enigmatic *something* that happens or it doesn't. This may not always happen with the formation of other game ranger/tracker teams but it certainly happened like that for me.

* * *

We set off after the elephants that morning dependent on Tim and Japan. Japan took up the tracks and Sumbe, working alongside him, played second fiddle. Despite Sumbe's higher status in the order of Main Camp's complicated tracker society - because he was closely associated with Malindela - I soon worked out that Japan was by far the superior tracker. This made the connection between Tim and Japan much more understandable.

Both the trackers carried a full canvas josak. The water in the bags was kept cool as a result of the slight but constant evaporation of water from the wet surface of the canvas. The trackers set off carrying our rifles so they were also our gun bearers.

Tim followed immediately behind the two trackers. I took up a position at the rear.

I had experienced only one *real* big game hunt since I had been at Hwange. *That* was the hunt when Tim and I had killed the Juapi elephant with what Tim had called a *double-engined* brain shot. We had followed Japan and Mbuyotsi that day as they tracked the elephant along its entire nocturnal perambulations. We had killed the elephant cleanly at the end of the day. It had been a proper hunt in every sense but it had been relatively *tame*. It had begun, evolved and terminated like clockwork. It had been too easy. The experience at the end of the day had left me feeling emotionally flat.

The first elephant Tim and I had killed together, the lung shot elephant on Dahlia Ranch, was not really a *hunt* at all. It was *a shoot*. We had simply driven up to the animal, got out the vehicle and shot it.

The four buffalo bulls Tim and I killed together on the Dett Vlei was a similar kind of hunt. It, too, was just *a shoot*. The experience had been exciting. The shooting was informative. But the end result was the same.
Both hunts had been anti-climactic.

Today I was to find out what big game hunting was *really* all about!

The elephant tracks were fresh and they led us into some dense teak forest that was heavily invaded by spiky sickle bush and hook thorn scrub. The infamous s*inanga!* The going was slow because we had trouble following the elephants through the heavy under story that our quarry had simply pushed straight through. The wet season had by then set in and everything in the forest was lush and heavy in leaf. There were a few open glades but generally visibility was down to almost zero.

It was exciting hunting. The tracks were obvious in the damp Kalahari sand. We walked along constantly in an atmosphere permeated with the cloying scent of musth exuded from the elephants' sweating temple glands. The oily discharge was smeared over the leaves and the twigs of every bush that the elephants passed.

I was in seventh heaven. All the while my body tingled with suppressed fear and glowing anticipation.

Both Japan and Sumbe agreed there were seven big bulls in the bachelor herd we were following. Their early assessment proved to be right.

We found them feeding in the teak forest just after nine o'clock. They gave their position away long before we actually saw them by the sounds of their feeding and because of the deep resonant growls that came up from somewhere deep down inside their throats. The olden day hunters called this sound a *tummy rumble* but it was nothing of the kind. It is a vocal emission that elephants use to communicate with each other all the time.

Tim brought us in close from a downwind direction. Then out of the blue he told me to take the first shot.

My training was limited, my experience rudimentary and doubts I had aplenty. But I was not going to give up this unexpected opportunity.

My friend and mentor was standing just behind me and to one side. He was ready to back me up should I make a mess of my shot. He knew I *needed* this opportunity. He knew I *needed* the confidence. He knew that I would *never* develop the capacity to become a competent elephant hunter until I understood that I was capable of killing an elephant with a single bullet through its brain.

We approached *very* close. That morning we moved in much closer to my target than I had ever previously been to a live wild elephant. And there was not just *one* elephant there were *seven* of them all standing relatively close to each other. Within seconds any one of them could have me pancaked on the ground.

They were *all* bulls and they were all *big* bulls. Their tusks were not long but they were thick.

My body crawled with nervous tension. My whole being quivered in anticipation. At such close range the only thing that stood between me living, and me dying, was my ability to place a tiny 300-grained bullet *in the right place*.

The sinanga was very thick. It helped mask our approach. The forest's thick carpet of discarded dead leaves was damp under foot. That made our approach relatively silent. Everything was in our favour.

To say that I felt fear that morning was an understatement. To say that I held my fear on a very tight rein may have been true but that does not describe the state of affairs that raged within my heart and in my soul. My intestines churned. I cannot adequately describe the wild and woolly notions that ran rife through my head.

Tim oozed confidence. It was catching. At about ten yards range he brought me up to the closest elephant's left flank. It was broadside on to me. I could not have been better positioned. I lifted my rifle, aimed, and quickly punched a bullet into its temple. It hit the animal one third forward of the ear hole along an imaginary line that I drew between the ear hole and the eye.

The elephant dropped as if pole axed. As had occurred with the Juapi elephant its hindquarters collapsed first. Its head threw up flicking its trunk skywards and its huge body crashed onto the ground with a momentous thundering impact. I could feel the reverberations through the soles of my feet. It did not roll over but remained propped up on its brisket.

The other elephants burst into action. They disappeared into the forest under-growth as fast as their long legs would carry them. One moment they were standing quietly alongside us. The next they were gone.

This, I was to discover, was the normal reaction of bulls in a bachelor herd. When the first shot is fired each animal's inclination is dominated by its individual desire to survive.

In their wake, despite the dampness of the leaf litter underfoot, the elephants left us standing in a huge pall of dust.

"*Stay with it,*" Tim shouted in my ear.

He disappeared into the forest running flat out behind the fleeing elephants. Japan raced after him. The fat josak in the Bushman's hand swung wildly.

The elephants ran fast and furiously. The two hunters were right on their heels. I could hear the rasping abrasive sound of rough skins rubbing against rough skins as the big bulls jostled in their flight. I could hear the pounding of their huge feet. There were the sounds of trees and branches splintering and the continuous scraping sounds of their heavy bodies racing through the stiff and dense sinanga.

Sumbe and I remained behind. Tim had instructed: *Stay with it.* I gathered he meant I should stay with my downed elephant. I deduced he had wanted me to make sure it was dead.

My elephant was dead all right. It lay dead in front of me propped up on its brisket. It had died instantly when my bullet turned its brain into bloody porridge.

Looking at my dead elephant left me with a feeling of incredible wonder. I was not prepared for this animal's huge size. I felt proud and humble and sad all at the same time. I had killed an elephant on my own before. My

Macaha elephant! Its size had been tiny by comparison. The hunt had also been messy and emotionally unfulfilling. *This* hunt was different. Very different! The kill had been clean and efficient. Death had come to this elephant instantaneously.

Forever thereafter I considered *this* elephant to be my first. Standing looking at it lying on it brisket, dead, I felt that I had at last passed milestone zero. From now on every elephant that I killed was added to my score as something additional to *this* one. This elephant became my Number One!

"It is dead." Sumbe announced at my side. He held out his hand and shook mine. He said nothing more but there was an infectious grin all over his face.

The Bushman drew a sharp penknife from his pocket and expertly cut off the elephant's tail just above the tassels. He tied the long thick tail hairs together to form a makeshift loop handle.

At that moment Tim began shooting. The shots came from some distance away deeper inside the forest. *Bhaaam, Bhaaam.… Bhaaam.* One, two… three! I counted them.

The reports sounded hollow. They were flat, without life. Their energy, their resonance, had been absorbed by the thick foliage of the forest. It sounded different to my more recent hunting adventures. It *was* different because I was used to hearing my shots echoing and reverberating through the hills. There were no hills here!

"Bwuya!" Come! Sumbe shouted urgently. He took off in the direction of the shooting. Rifle in hand I ran behind him. The thorns tore at my clothes and at my bare legs, bare arms and bare face. Fabric ripped. The blood flowed. I felt nothing.

Underfoot I saw the spoor of the running elephants in the soft yellow sand. We ran past broken branches and fresh green leaves on the ground. I was amazed. Sumbe was not just running. He was following the tracks. Even running at full tilt he was following the spoor.

Four hundred yards later Sumbe came to a sudden stop. We were both out of breath. Our breathing was laboured. Our throats burned. Our hearts pounded. Our pulses thumped in our ears. All around us the high trees of the forest stood dense and hostile, their canopies touching, intertwining above our heads. The silence was tangible except for the thumping sensations of our hard beating hearts. Not a sound came out of the thick bush all around.

Sumbe stood immobile. He cast his head at the ground. His eyes were

shut. He was listening. I listened, too.

All I could hear was the heavy pounding of my heart and the reciprocal pulse that thumped in my ears. We had been running hard all the way!

Unexpectedly Sumbe lifted his head and gave vent to a loud *whoooooping* call. It sounded just like the far-reaching whoop of a spotted hyena.

It was answered by Japan. Japan's return communication was, however, the quiet *where are you - here I am* whistle that is used by lone guineafowl when their flock has been disturbed and scattered.

This was something else I was going to have to learn. The Bushmen used common and familiar animal and birdcalls to communicate when they were separated. And they were good at it. Their calls sounded just like the real McCoy!

Japan and Tim were located not fifty yards away to our front left. Sumbe had found them very easily in the vast dense forest. He had gauged the distance with absolute accuracy. I was impressed. We had been running on the tracks, that I knew, but the tracker's sense of distance was incredible. He had heard the shots and he just knew how far away they were. Within a year, with a lot more experience under my belt, I found that I had unconsciously developed this same kind of capability.

We walked quietly onto Tim and Japan. They were each sitting on the shoulder of a big elephant bull carcass. The elephants lay on their sides, side by side, amidst the heavy foliage.

Tim was sucking noisily on his josak. A grin split his face from ear to ear. *"Your jumbo dead?"*

"Dead as a doornail," I confirmed trying to hide my excitement and my pride. Tim grinned and nodded his approval.

"You get two?" I asked, thinking there might just be another one lying dead in the bushes nearby. I had heard Tim fire three shots!

"Yup…." Tim replied. *"Two! That makes our score three. Four more to go! There were seven bulls in the group."* I knew then he had shot one elephant twice!

"They stopped running?"

"They nearly always do," Tim explained. *"After the first shot they run like hell for a couple of hundred yards. Then, when they feel safe, they stop and turn round to listen, to evaluate what is going on and to get their bearings. They normally stop all of them as a group. So if you run after them*

and keep on their heels you normally get another chance to kill a couple more." Tim grinned.

"The rest of them are running like hell." he continued. *"They won't stop moving now until midday."*

Sumbe cut off both the elephants' tails adding their weight to the tail of *my* elephant.

The two trackers began conversing. Tim listened to them carefully. He had picked up a smattering of the mSili language so he understood something about what the two trackers were planning. A grin spread slowly over on his face.

Whatever it was the Bushmen were saying it had something to do with me. I knew this because during their conversation they kept looking at me with sideways glances. As things turned out their purpose was benign. The trackers were not going to allow me to simply forget my first elephant with such apparent indifference.

"Bwiya," Sumbe instructed me imperiously. *"Come! Follow me."*

I looked at Tim an obvious question in my facial expression: *What's going on?*

Tim beamed knowing what was to come. He said nothing but made a gesture with the flick of an outstretched hand. He thus indicated that I should follow the trackers. Still not knowing their purpose I obediently followed the two Bushmen back into the forest. Tim slid off the shoulder of the elephant he was sitting on and he followed on behind.

The trackers took us in a straight line through the heavy teak forest directly onto the elephant I had just killed. They did not back track. They walked straight back through the forest, never wavering, until they arrived at the carcass. The teak forest was well established and the under story brush was very thick. Every tree we passed looked exactly like the one we had passed just before. But the Bushmen knew exactly where to go.

The first thing I did was to sit myself on the elephant's bent front knee and have Tim take a photograph. I still had my old camera from Macaha days. Sumbe had been carrying it all the while in a small canvas shoulder bag. Within a year it was to give up the ghost but it was still working on the day I shot this my first elephant.

After the photo session Sumbe walked around the upright carcass and

leant his puny weight against its shoulder. He pushed with all his might. The carcass rocked. He shoved some more. It rocked some more. Japan grabbed the elephant's truncated tail and pulled in the same direction. The trackers obviously wanted the carcass on its side!

I still did not know what was going on. Tim knew but he never said a word.

"Come let's help them." Tim said simply.

We leant our rifles up against a nearby tree trunk and helped Sumbe in his attempts to push the carcass over. Japan continued pulling on the tail. We pushed and pulled together. Slowly the big bull's body tilted. It fell with a crash onto its side its top ear resonating like a hollow wooden plank.

The two trackers then put me through a solemn Bushman initiation that had the purpose of transporting me into the world of the elephant hunter. The ceremony was all conducted in their own peculiar click-language.

Japan carefully sliced off the top of the elephant's temple gland with the razor sharp blade of his penknife. He delved inside the still flowing duct with the pointed tip of the blade. A pungent scent of musth permeated the air.

Slowly and carefully Japan extracted what appeared to be a thin amber coloured stick from the musth canal. I watched mesmerised. The stick was as thin as a woman's metal hairpin and about two inches long. He placed it on the palm of his hand and blew on it gently. I presumed the blowing was to remove excess musth fluid. Then he presented the wiry little stick to me, very carefully, and with mystical pomp and ceremony.

Sumbe, in the meantime, was digging around in the soft sandy ground below the elephant's mouth. He came up with a fat wriggling white worm in his fingers. It was about an inch long and quarter of an inch thick. Its rear end was flat. It looked as if its body had been cut through with a sharp knife. The flat part contained two black spots. Its front end was pointed. The point was active, wriggling around, extending itself and contracting. He placed the worm next to the stick in the palm of my hand.

Japan *and* Sumbe then both harangued me, at the same time, in their peculiar click language. Each was seemingly unprepared to let the other be the principal actor in the ritual. They openly vied with each other to conduct my sacramental baptism into the world of elephant hunting.

"They say you must keep the stick in a safe place," Tim explained the liturgy. *"If you keep the stick safe,"* he continued, *"you will have many, many successful elephant hunts without coming to any harm."*

"And the worm?"

"It's a bot," Tim explained. *"It's the larva of a fly that lays its eggs in the elephant's mouth. They live somewhere in the elephant's throat. When they are mature they drop out of the elephant's mouth and they burrow into the ground. There they pupate and a few weeks later they emerge as an adult fly.*

"When you shoot an elephant the more mature bots all leave the carcass within a few minutes of the elephant's death. If you watch you will see them dropping out of the elephant's mouth, one by one, for about half an hour."

"And what do I do with this one?"

"You take it to a place well clear of the carcass. You place it under a bush where there is some nice soft sandy soil, somewhere where the worm can burrow easily into the ground."

"And the reason for that?"

Tim shrugged his shoulders, *"I am not sure,"* he said. *"It has something to do with you saving a life that would otherwise perish. It is a Bushman symbol that has something to do with you supporting the continuance of life after a death has occurred."*

Tim was unsure about what he was telling me and I never ever found out why the worm was part of the ritual. Nevertheless, I complied with the tracker's wishes and released the wriggling worm into a sandy spot about twenty yards from the carcass.

I was deeply touched by the ceremony and somewhat overwhelmed emotionally for it was conducted in the most solemn and serious manner by the two trackers. It brought tears to my eyes. I was ashamed of my tears and wiped them away with my hand, laughing, but somewhat embarrassed. *Cowboys don't cry!* I felt very humble. When the ceremony was over I placed the still damp 'stick' in a small notebook that I carried in one of my bush-shirt breast pockets.

I later presented the temple gland twig to my mother who listened silently and intently to my recital of the Bushman ritual. She stuck it inside the front cover of the family bible under a broad piece of cellotape. There it remained throughout my elephant-hunting career that was extraordinarily successful. And I came through it all, only God knows how, relatively unscathed. Whether that was because of the safekeeping of that elephant's temporal gland stick, or whether it was due to some other beneficent providence, I shall never know. But my mother was a canny Scots lady.

When she heard the story of the Bushman rite she left nothing to chance.

* * *

We resumed the hunt. There were still four elephant bulls on the loose. We intended to find them. And to find them we had to follow their tracks. The trackers again carried the rifles. The day was still young.

An hour later, whilst tracking the still running elephants, we cut the spoor of two buffalo bulls. Sumbe immediately pointed to an extensive smear of blood on the bushes they had brushed past. Tim and the trackers examined the blood carefully.

"One of these buffalo is bleeding heavily," Tim said, turning to me, inviting me to examine the blood. What he said was obvious from the large quantities of gore the animal had left behind. *"I think we're going to have to follow this buffalo up and sort it out,"* Tim said, pondering his options.

"You think someone has shot it?" I asked, offering a possible explanation.

"Either that," Tim replied, *"or the lions we heard last night had a go at it. Either way I think we must kill it before it takes out one of Mazai's people."*

"So we leave the jumbo?"

"We'll pick them up tomorrow," Tim assured me. *"From the amount of old spoor we've seen I'd say they have been around Ngamo for some time. I don't think they'll have gone very far by tomorrow."*

We abandoned the elephant tracks and took up the buffalo spoor. Tim immediately took his rifle off Japan. He checked that he had a round in the chamber and reset the safety catch. He made a silent gesture that I should take my rifle from Sumbe.

I checked the chamber and put my own rifle on full safe. Like Tim was doing I then carried my rifle myself. My mentor obviously believed this was necessary. The change told me he considered there was an important difference between hunting elephants and hunting buffaloes in thick bush.

Tracking the buffalo was just as easy as it had been the tracking the elephants. The ground underfoot was soft Kalahari sand and it was damp from recent rains. The tracks were as fresh as a daisy.

We had not gone very far before we heard the *swoooshing* alarm snort of a buffalo up ahead. It was a sound that was soon to become very familiar to me. It was the sound of air being forcibly expelled from a buffalo's lungs through its nostrils. It was the soft-alarm that buffalo use to warn other

buffalo of danger when they are disturbed.

At the time this hunt took place everything I experienced was new. It was also sometimes frightening. I felt very uncomfortable when I heard that *blowing* confirmation of the buffaloes' presence up ahead. Had they got our scent on the whimsical wind? Had they heard us? Whatever! One way or the other they had detected us. There was no doubt about that. They now had the advantage for they knew we were present with them in the dense sinanga.

Tim extracted his ash bag and, holding it at arm's length, he gave it a quick flick shake in the air. A puff of white dust escaped and drifted off on the air current. It told us the air was moving obliquely past us.

The ash did not move in the direction of the buffalo. They therefore could not have smelt us. Neither could they have seen us for visibility was down to no more than twenty feet. We now knew the buffalo had only heard us. So they knew *something* was in the thicket with them but they could not be sure exactly what that *something* was.

Tim turned to me and to Sumbe. He put his finger vertically across his lips. They pursed in a *shushing* gesture.

Japan looked at him and Tim flicked his finger forward. It was a silent instruction to the tracker that he should keep following the spoor.

It was impossible to keep quiet in that heavy-leafed teak forest with its multiple saplings and its interlacing under-story of hook-thorn and Chinese lantern sickle-bush. We did our best but our progress was not entirely silent. Even though our movement was *relatively* quiet our advance must have been very clear to the now thoroughly alert buffalo. We hadn't moved ahead another ten yards before we heard them crashing off into the forest ahead of us.

When we came to the spot where the two big bulls had been lying up we discovered a fresh pool of blood on the sand. The wounded animal was, indeed, bleeding profusely.

We kept tracking. We followed the now deep running hoof marks in the sand without any trouble. A blind man, using his hands in the gouges, could have followed *this* spoor. But we were unable to close with our quarry. Each time they stopped the buffalo stood and waited for us, listening for our approach. Then they galloped off again. We flushed them four times before Tim called a halt.

"We're never going to catch up with them like this," Tim announced flatly. *"I've been thinking. Old Mazai has a pack of dogs at his kraal.*

Maybe he'd be prepared to lend us a hand with his dogs?"

We abandoned the tracks and walked back to camp which, surprisingly, wasn't all that far. I took advantage of the situation by changing my shirt. The entire back of the checked shirt I had started off with that morning had been ripped off from the shoulder panel down. This was something I was going to have to get used to when hunting in Hwange's sinanga. The hook thorns were barbaric. I replaced the torn shirt with a clean khaki shirt.

We drove in the Land Rover to Mazai's village.

Mazai was a grand old native man of the old school. He was respectful to his white visitors yet he was proud in his own right. He had bold white marks all over his dark brown face and hands, the scars Tim told me, of a bad accident with fire when he was child.

Without hesitation Mazai agreed to help us. He was delighted when we told him there were already three elephant's dead and that his people could have the meat. This information no doubt helped him to volunteer his support. Tim, there and then, tasked him with the job of collecting the tusks.

Within two hours of us deciding to seek help from Headman Mazai we were back in the thicket with five mangy village curs at our heels. Mazai came with us. He immediately tried to direct his dogs on the tracks but they did not seem to realise what was required of them.

The trackers took up the spoor and we set off again in pursuit of the buffalo not really sure just how much help, or hindrance, the dogs were going to be. I looked at the dogs sceptically. Inwardly I felt that Tim had downgraded the quality of the hunt. I disapproved. My icon had disappointed me. It made me realise that he was, after all, only human!

A few hundred yards later the Bushmen stopped and conversed. The two buffaloes had seemingly parted company. They told Tim of their conclusion. I stood back, said nothing and listened. I wasn't sure what the fuss was all about.

"Go look for the tracks with the blood," Tim instructed the trackers. *"We'll stay here and wait for you."*

Japan retraced our spoor back-tracking the single set of tracks we had been following. He was looking for signs of blood. Sumbe moved off to the right. He went searching in a wide arc for the other set of tracks. The thick forest quickly absorbed them both.

Tim turned to me then and he explained: *"The buffalo have split up and there seems to be no blood on the tracks we are following. I've told the*

trackers to sort it out."

Mazai, Tim and I then stood silently together in the heavy teak forest. The dogs stood around, or lay around, idly panting at our feet. We said nothing. We waited. We became a mute island of humanity in a sea of green leaves each of us lost in our own thoughts.

Tim quietly withdrew a soft pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and tapped out a single fag with an expert flick of his finger. He wrapped his lips around the end of the protruding cigarette and pulled it from the pack. He lit it with a match and drew the smoke into his lungs with obvious pleasure. Exhaling the smoke slowly he blew several smoke rings into the clear and uncontaminated air. All three of us watched the rings waft off on the breeze. They disintegrated only when they hit the first wall of twigs and leaves.

A quiet lost guineafowl whistle came to us out of the teak forest behind. Tim acknowledged with a similar call. *"Sumbe has found the right set of tracks,"* he told me obliquely.

Tim removed the half-smoked cigarette from his lips and flicked it into the bush at his side. I looked at the smouldering fag end on the ground.

"It's O.K," Tim said somewhat embarrassed. *"The bush is too damp to go up in flames."*

He smiled at me and returned the soft pack and the matches to his breast pocket. When he had completed the ritual he set off wading through the heavy foliage in Sumbe's direction. I tagged on behind him. Mazai followed me. The dogs followed Mazai.

After a few re-directing guineafowl calls we caught up with Sumbe. Japan had already arrived. Nobody said a word. Sumbe made a silent gesture towards the buffalo spoor he had found and he lifted a sprig of blood-smeared leaves for Tim to examine *"Landa." Follow the tracks!*

Tim had no need to say anything else. We set off again this time on the certified injured buffalo's spoor.

We had progressed for perhaps another half a mile through the forest when suddenly the dogs whipped off past our heels and disappeared into the undergrowth ahead. They had smelled something, or they had heard something, for they were now intent upon hunting. Presently there came the sound of bushes being thrashed. The dogs began barking furiously.

The rumpus was coming from our right front. The dogs had bayed something up in the dense undergrowth about fifty yards from our position! I heard the sound of a big animal blowing air heavily through its nostrils. This

was followed by a series of heavy grunts. The dogs had tagged onto our injured buffalo!

The next thing we heard was the sound of pounding hooves as the buffalo tore through the heavy brush. It was clearly coming in our direction. Nobody had to tell me we were being attacked. Nobody had to tell Mazai or the trackers either. One moment they were standing with us. The next they were gone.

I suddenly felt very cross. The trackers had abandoned us! Then, in the same instant, I understood. They knew they could not help us so they had dived for cover.

Sumbe was lying flat on the ground under a scrubby teak bush right at my feet. He was doing everything that he could to make himself disappear from view. I could not see Japan or Mazai.

The Bushmen's survival instincts are very strong. They have many ingenious ways of avoiding injury when big game animals attack. Evaporating into thin air seemed to be one of them!

In a flash Tim and I were standing alone. Just five yards separated us. We both turned to face the invisible but obviously charging buffalo. Neither of us was feeling very confident but we had no other choice. We *had* to stand our ground.

There is no getting away from a charging buffalo. Running doesn't help and rarely is there a suitable tree close at hand to climb. There was no time to climb a tree anyway. What was happening was happening at an incredible speed. Tim and I were, at that moment, both faced with one of only two options: to kill or to be killed. *That* is the essence of buffalo hunting. *That* is what makes buffalo hunting so exciting, so dangerous and so compelling.

I was standing on an old well-trodden elephant path. It was surrounded by heavy leafed teak scrub. On either side of the path the sickle bush grew thick. There were sprawling hook thorn bushes everywhere.

Tim was ahead of me. He was standing on the same elephant path. He was facing to our right front accepting the buffalo's challenge. My own attention was also focussed on the rapidly advancing and clearly very angry buffalo. The ambience of the moment was dripping with fear and malevolence.

The buffalo was charging us on sound alone. It had heard us coming and it was rushing at us in a speculative manner. It would see us when it had

closed the gap.

I listened to the advancing tornado. I tried to assess where and when it would come into view. I was considerably relieved when I realised that the buffalo was not coming towards me. It was charging directly at the point of our caravan! It was going straight for Tim!

Very soon the pounding of the buffalo's hooves swamped our thoughts. There were splintering sounds of bushes being snapped off. There were interrupted *shushing* sounds, the noise made by the animal's big and racing body as it forced itself through the heavy sinanga.

Then we saw the jerking, shaking bushes as the buffalo smashed its way through the last of the intervening undergrowth.

With each pounding beat of its front hoofs on the ground, the buffalo expelled loud snorts of breath from its nostrils: *pfuusss… pfuusss... pfuusss... pfuusss*.

This caused panic to rush around deep down inside my soul. I began to smell my own fear. My mind was awash with bizarre imaginations but my reaction was stoic. It took all the will and determination that I could muster to stand my ground and to await the arrival of that angry buffalo.

Tim stood like a rock. I couldn't even begin to imagine what was going through *his* mind! My own was awhirl, a wild kaleidoscope of thoughts and visions. I fantasized about all the conceivable things that *could* be happening, that I imagined *were* happening. And I was thinking about the unimaginable damage that this buffalo would do to our feeble bodies if we failed to kill it. If Tim failed to kill it!

The key to our salvation seemed to rest with Tim and with Tim alone. In my mind I was out of the equation. I was a mere spectator! It seemed, in those few short moments of time when the buffalo closed the gap, that I was not in any way part of the scene that was unfolding right in front of my eyes. I could not believe that I was a part of this scene. What was happening was all an illusion. I was in denial.

The closer it got the more obvious did it become that the buffalo was going for Tim. It was definitely *not* coming at me. This made me feel much, much better! But I was frightened for Tim. I was frightened for myself.

The big bull broke cover. There was a flash of shiny black horn tips. Its head was up high, high and bouncing. And its black eyes were blazing as it searched ahead for sight of its adversaries.

This animal was looking for trouble. There was no doubt about it. And it

was quite prepared to bring that trouble to the hunters who were pursuing it.

I saw that flash of head and horn before Tim did, if he saw it at all. I was looking at it from a different position, from a different angle. My sights moved on to target but the buffalo disappeared back into the sea of greenery before I could pull the trigger.

The seconds flashed by as though time did not exist. What happened over the next few moments are still indelibly imprinted on my soul. It all happened so fast, so quickly, yet, as is always the case with hindsight it all seemed to be happening in extreme slow motion.

Tim was waiting for the buffalo, waiting for a target that he could fire at. The butt of his rifle was on his shoulder. His cheek was pressed up against the stock.

For several long seconds all Tim could see were shaking bushes as the buffalo raced towards him. He needed a target. He needed a good head shot to kill the buffalo cleanly, instantly. It was the only way he was going to come out of this encounter alive. He knew that to place a *snap* bullet accurately into a charging buffalo's brain, under these conditions, was going to be well-nigh impossible.

Tim would have but one or two seconds to place his shot before the buffalo hit him. Its head would be bouncing up and down fully two feet at a time with each galloping stride. He had but one chance. There would be no time for a second shot. If he did not hit the brain with that first shot the impact of the bullet alone would not stop the buffalo's charge.

Tim saw a flash of horn. Then he saw the buffalo's head. Instantly the buffalo's rage-filled eyes focussed on the waiting game ranger. The contact was now fixed. It was visual, both ways, and very tangible. The buffalo's terrifying charge had become personal, very personal.

Life hung in the balance now for both Tim and the buffalo. One or the other was about to die. For both of them their moments of truth had arrived.

Tim focused his sights on the bouncing horns then, when the buffalo's huge head burst through the last of the heavy leaf cover, he targeted those menacing eyes. The buffalo's nose was high. Tim squeezed off his shot at point blank range.

The buffalo was no more than ten feet from him when Tim's bullet hit it high on the heavy boss. His aim had been true but by the time his bullet left the barrel the buffalo's head was already falling. Instead of smashing through the brain the bullet passed through the boss and continued through the

animal’s upper skull a fraction of an inch above the vital organ. The small three hundred grained solid .375 bullet passed through the buffalo’s thick neck and lodged in the heavy muscle and bone between the shoulders. The impact had absolutely no effect.

Tim leapt backwards and to one side away from the buffalo’s angle of attack. He got himself heavily entangled in a hook thorn bush. In that split second I knew he had not killed the buffalo. It was now up to me to pull off the impossible.

Tim had backed off the elephant path to my left. That gave me a clear line of fire directly along the path in front of me. I could see Tim standing backed into the hook thorn bush. He was working the bolt of his rifle furiously. I had about one foot of space between the edge of the path and Tim’s body and about two feet of space across the pathway itself. I waited for the buffalo to cross the path. I aimed down that open avenue waiting for the buffalo to come into view.

Incongruously Tim’s wide brimmed bush hat was hanging from the outer branch of the hostile tree that held him tight. The hat was poised five feet above the elephant path and it moved and it swayed with Tim’s every movement. It was a serious distraction from the grim task that I now had to perform. The hat filled my thoughts when my mind should have been concentrating on something infinitely more important.

Then I saw Japan. He was curled away inside another hook thorn bush beyond where Tim had been standing on the path. He had been in front of Tim tracking the buffalo when all the action had suddenly erupted around us. His instinctive reaction had been to run forward and he had immediately become entangled in the hook thorns. There he now stood waiting for what seemed to be the inevitable, still, silent, brave to the last moment. The Bushman had walked this kind of path many times before.

Japan was in my direct line of fire. I was actually aiming at his midrib when I saw him. If I had pulled the trigger at that moment I would have hit him in the stomach. I swung the weapon marginally to the tracker’s right, into the middle of an eighteen inch gap that existed between Japan’s body and the place where I expected the buffalo to emerge. All these impressions, sightings, evaluations, calculations and miniscule alteration of plans occurred in a flashing brief instant of time. Time had run out!

The buffalo’s nose came into view. Then its head! Its enraged eyes were focused on Tim standing helplessly now right in its path. Tim, with a new

round up the spout, was frantically trying to bring the rifle to bear on his target. It was a forlorn hope.

As the buffalo dropped its head to smash him, Tim threw himself backwards. This pushed him even deeper into the hook thorns. There was nothing more he could now do to get himself away from the racing raging embodiment of death.

I pulled the trigger.

Miraculously the buffalo's front legs collapsed the instant my bullet hit it. The big black bull did a nose dive right at Tim's feet its chest hitting the ground with a heavy thud. Its back legs careered upwards. Its huge body did a full somersault in the air smashing into the thorn bush that was tying Tim down, brushing just inches past the ranger's body. The buffalo took the bush with it ripping the hook thorns from Tim's flesh, freeing him instantly from captivity. Its heavy carcass hit the ground and came to rest twenty feet beyond where Tim was standing.

The buffalo disappeared from my view. Tim ripped himself roughly from the last of the hook thorns. He turned and he fired behind where he had been standing, into the place where the tumbling carcass of the buffalo had come to rest.

One... two... three... four shots rang out. This emptied Tim's rifle. I reloaded and as Tim was firing his salvo into the buffalo I raced towards him. I reached him just as he fired his last round. A great gouge in the soft sand at Tim's feet showed just how close the buffalo had been to him when it hit the ground. It had tumbled past him within a hair's breadth.

When I saw the buffalo next it was lying just inside a small open glade that had been at Tim's back. Its stretched out carcass was not moving. It was clearly dead.

I stood at Tim's side looking down at the dead buffalo and my whole body began to shake. I had no control over the heavy convulsions. My face flushed with heat. The next instant it felt icy cold. The danger was over but the tension in my soul hummed with a vibrancy that had a life of its own.

The charge of that buffalo was one of the most dangerous that I have ever experienced. In fact that whole buffalo hunt ranks amongst the top ten most dangerous and most exciting big game hunts with which I have ever been involved. It was pure coincidence that this hunt happened to be one of my earliest buffalo hunting experiences. It was a baptism of fire! It taught me from the very beginning to have the greatest of respect for this great beast.

Tim's nerves were shot. When he wasn't hunting he chain-smoked with a nervous intensity. He never finished a cigarette, flicking each half smoked fag away from him with expert fingers. The old butt was rarely burnt out on the ground before he had a new one in his mouth. Tim's incessant smoking caused him to develop a nervous cough. It became a repetitive part of his persona. It gave rise to his native nickname. The trackers called him *Makwethlela, The One Who Coughs!*

"Thanks Ron," Tim said simply, honestly, happily, patting me on the shoulder. *"Shit but that was close!"*

Like mine Tim's body was shaking violently. He turned away from me, coughed rackingly, and spat a wad of viscous phlegm into the bush beside him.

We moved over to the buffalo's carcass to examine the sites of the hits we had scored. Very soon the inspection became secondary to Tim's urgent need for a smoke.

He sat down on the buffalo's shoulder and took out a soft pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his bush shirt. As he had done just half an hour before, he tapped out a single cigarette with an ease born of long practice. His hands were shaking so much that when he tried to extract a matchstick from the matchbox the whole caboodle fell from his fingers. Matchsticks lay festooned at his feet on the ground. Unperturbed Tim picked up the sleeve of the box together with a single matchstick. He struck the match lighting his cigarette with frantically shaking hands. He drew the smoke into his lungs as though his life depended on it.

Japan was covered in bleeding scratches from the hook thorns. He came over and took the matchbox from Tim's hand. Without a word he picked up the matches from the ground returning each stick to the box in an orderly head first arrangement. Finally he stuffed the bit of toilet paper that had lain on the ground amongst the matches, over the matches, inside the box. The purpose of the paper was to stop the sticks rattling in the box when we were tracking. Without a word he handed the box to Tim. Tim nodded. He briefly smiled his thanks and returned the matchbox to his shirt pocket.

Tim was unembarrassed about his condition. He was just happy to be alive. He called for a josak and poured gallons of cool water down his throat. I stood watching his state of funk. It was absolute. Who could blame him? Tim Braybrooke had been a very lucky man that morning and no one knew that better than Tim Braybrooke himself.

I am in no doubt that my bullet that morning saved Tim Braybrooke's life. He knew it but he never ever acknowledged it. Neither did we discuss that hunt ever again. It became our unspoken bond. It cemented a relationship between us that I have cherished all my life.

Tim may well owe me his life but I owe him for more than I could ever repay him. Tim Braybrooke and Tim Braybrooke alone gave me the most incredible foundation for my big game hunting career. What he gave me was the greatest gift that any aspiring young hunter could ever wish for. What Tim gave me has meant more to me than any prize or trophy, any silver-tongued accolade, or any monetary reward that anybody has ever bestowed upon me.

My shot that morning was a total fluke. Not because it was a bad shot for it was not. Not because it was a difficult shot although it was most certainly that, too. It was a lucky fluke because of its nature and its circumstances. My point of aim had been dangerously close to both Tim's and Japan's bodies. I could not aim and run my rifle along with the flow of the moving target in the normal fashion. I had to aim and to fire at a fixed point and hope the buffalo would run into the bullet at precisely the correct time and place. It had been a very unconventional and tricky shot but it had worked.

My bullet passed through the forward part of the buffalo's shoulder and it smashed the spine at its junction with the neck. This was the *real* lucky part of the shot for it instantly paralysed the charging animal. That was why the buffalo had collapsed at Tim's feet. That was why it had not tried to get up again once its tumbling body had come to rest. It was one of Tim's last four bullets into the buffalo's brain that had killed the animal but by then it was really only alive from the neck up.

The buffalo had been previously wounded. A .303 bullet had entered the middle part of its left buttock and raked forwards into the animal's abdomen. It had lodged in the abdominal wall on the far side of its gut. That wound was the cause of all the blood on the spoor.

We cut the buffalo open and recovered the bullet. Mazai then made exhaustive inquiries amongst his people trying to find out who had wounded the buffalo. Two days later he came to our camp. He told us that German missionaries from Regina Munde Mission Station north of Ngamo had shot four buffaloes earlier in the week. They had used .303 rifles. The buffaloes had been shot at night because that was when they came to raid the mission station's irrigated maize crop.

The missionaries had turned the meat into German sausages. This made me wonder if their desire to make sausages was not the *real* motive for the killings. Later, when I questioned them on the telephone, they denied wounding any buffaloes.

Nobody could blame the missionaries for protecting their maize from wild animal crop raiders if, indeed, the buffaloes had been actually raiding those crops. But the hunting of buffalo with a .303 was illegal. The weapon was not considered big enough for the killing of a buffalo.

According to the country's game laws buffaloes were classified *dangerous game animals* and the law prescribed that the smallest calibrethat could be used for hunting dangerous game was the .375 Magnum.

Not reporting the wounding of a buffalo was also illegal. To prove that the missionaries had wounded our buffalo it would have been necessary for a ballistics expert to test the .303 weapons the missionaries had used, against the rifling marks on the bullet we had recovered. This could not be done unless there was a police case pending. Consequently, when we got back from our patrol, I was tasked by Bruce Austen to open a docket charging the missionaries accordingly. This I duly did at the Dett Police Station.

Within hours of me opening the case Bruce received an urgent message from the Department's Deputy Director, Bob Smith. Bruce was instructed to drop the case *"because it would look bad to have men of the cloth in court"*. I was then re-tasked to implement the docket's withdrawal.

I was incensed. What if that buffalo had killed Tim as it surely so nearly did? What would the deputy-director have thought about his *men of the cloth* then?

I have shot about 800 Cape buffaloes over the years but only fifteen or twenty gave me any serious problems. Most were easy meat, like shooting cows in a field, except that they often made you work hard to find them. I can't tell you how many tens of thousands of miles I have walked on buffalo tracks!

Besides shooting buffalo on corridor fever and on foot and mouth control work outside Hwange National Park, I have also shot many crop raiding buffaloes all over the country. Over a five-year period I shot large numbers of buffaloes in the Sebungwe Tsetse Fly Corridor in the middle Zambesi Valley. This was a game elimination campaign designed to control the spread of

tsetse fly into Rhodesia's commercial farming areas.

Most of the buffalo I have killed were shot for labour rations. I shot two buffalo bulls nearly every week when I was at Hwange in the early 1960s and again eighteen years later when I returned to Hwange as the Provincial Game Warden in charge. I shot ration buffalo when I served at Binga in the middle Zambesi Valley and again whilst stationed at Mabalauta and at Chipinda Pools in the Gonarezhou. I shot buffalo for many other reasons over the next twenty odd years.

As happens with all big game hunting, most of these hunts were relatively mundane. Every now and again, however, something happened that caused a simple ration hunt, or crop raider hunt, to become a memorable event.

Very few of my buffalo hunts were as memorable as *this* hunt. *This* one is burnt into the memory banks of my eternal soul.

*** * ***

It was a rare occasion when the game rangers of Hwange were called upon to shoot a hippo.

Just after our Ngamo elephant and buffalo hunt Bruce received a request from a local rancher. He needed help to shoot a hippo that had taken to raiding his irrigated lucerne fields every night. Tim and I were dispatched to do the job. Our destination was a ranch called Karna Block, the biggest cattle holding in the region.

Karna Block was 30 000 acres in extent. I got to know this property very well over the next several years. I hunted many stock killing lions, leopards and spotted hyenas on Karna Block and became good friends with the family who owned it.

The patriarch of the family was *Old Man van Wyk*. He was a third generation Rhodesian. He had been born and reared on the ranch. At the time of this my first visit the old man had already handed over the running of the ranch to his two sons, Andries and Dawid. Both men were in their thirties and they had divided the property's management responsibilities. Andries ran the cropping and diary sections. Dawid ran the beef cattle. So it was to Andries' request for assistance that we had responded.

Andries was a huge, lean, typical Rhodesian farmer of Afrikaans extraction. He was a lovely man with a soft-spoken voice. He told us on our arrival that he had made available to us his fully furnished cottage on the edge of the irrigation fields where the hippo was doing the damage. The

cottage was his home from home. It had all the mod cons including beds, furniture, a paraffin refrigerator and paraffin lamps.

We were told to make ourselves at home. And to make us *feel* at home Andries said he had instructed his native dairy manager to put a two-gallon churn of milk into the refrigerator. He said *he* always liked a cold glass of milk when he got back from hunting. I love a cold glass of milk myself at any time, so the idea of us having a whole two-gallon churn of cold milk in the fridge gladdened my heart!

Tim knew exactly where the cottage was situated. It was ten miles from the big family home that was located on the rim of a high escarpment. There was no need, therefore, for Andries to provide us with a guide.

As we got back into our government Land Rover Tim silently gestured with his face and eyebrows to draw my attention to the beautiful view of the ranch from the homestead garden. You could see to the edge of the bushland horizon probably forty or fifty miles away in the hazy distance.

"Quite some place for a white man to live!" Tim opined. Then he added. *"But they deserve it. The van Wyk family has lived on this ranch since 1898. Dawid and Andries are fourth generation Rhodesians. The family has worked hard for what they have got."*

We left the high escarpment with its sandveld substrate and mixed miombo-teak habitats and we wound our way down the hill into the flatland mopani veld below. This was the floor of the Shangani River valley. There were cattle fences everywhere and the trackers were forever climbing off and on the vehicle to open gates for us to pass through and to shut them again behind us.

Japan was, as usual, Tim's tracker that day. My tracker was the Bushman, Ben. Johnny Mlupeh, Harry Cantle's tracker, was our camp guard.

There were cattle everywhere. Fat, sleek, shiny, brown and gray beasts that clearly had a great deal of Brahman blood in their veins.

"You have heard about the massacre of Major Alan Wilson?" Tim asked me out of the blue. We were waiting to pass through a closed gate the trackers were busy opening.

"Yes," I replied immediately. Every Rhodesian had heard of Major Alan Wilson!

"He was killed by a Matabele Impi in the Matabele War of 1893. The old king of the Ndebele, Lobengula, was fleeing the white settler forces that were

intent on capturing or killing him."

I had recently read a book about the incident. It was called *The White Men Sang.*

"That's right," Tim agreed. *"Lobengula was moving as hard and as fast as he could go but he was only able to move as fast as his several ox wagons could travel. He was carrying away from his capital, GuBulawayo, present day Bulawayo, what amounted to the national Ndebele treasury. Gu-Bulawayo and the king's royal kraal had been gutted by fire. Wilson and his merry men caught up with the king's rear-guard regiment not far from here… just a few miles upstream, in fact, on the other side of the Shangani.*

"Wilson was surrounded and his patrol was cut to pieces. Not a man survived."

"And the king later took poison!" I said. I had heard the story many times.

"Yes," Tim confirmed. *"The old king was tired and racked with gout and malaria. There is a story that he had contracted smallpox, too. He and his faithful Nduna, Magwegwe, took poison together. They were buried in a cave near Pashu. The king's body was wrapped in the raw hide of a black ox. All his wagons and all the Ndebele nation's wealth were buried in the cave together with their bodies. The grave was walled up with rocks by the warriors of his Kumalo regiment.*

"Pashu is near Kamativi Tin Mine. It's probably no more than fifty miles from here, as the crow flies."

"So Karna Block has a scintillating history!" I remarked.

Tim smiled and nodded. *"That's why I am telling you all this."*

"And the king's treasure! What happened to that?"

"Nobody knows," Tim said. *"Rumour has it the grave was raided and robbed by the early white settlers who took out of it what was of any value. The rest was left to rot. Another rumour has it that an Ndebele impi came back to the grave the year after the king's death. It is alleged they took his body and the treasure to some other place, to a place that is now only known to the Ndebele royal clan, the Kumalos. Nobody really knows. I doubt that the truth will ever come out."*

I remained silent for a while thinking of what had transpired not so long ago in the very bush that now surrounded me. It made me feel part of the pioneer element that had made Rhodesia such a wonderful country.

"You know," Tim mewled. He was obviously thinking on the same lines.

"All that happened only *sixty seven years ago. That's not a long time in historical terms."*

The track took us directly to the banks of the Shangani. Here the river was a hundred yards wide, a broad swathe of deep pools and clear flowing water. It was rimmed with golden yellow sand and thickets of Phragmites reeds. There were pockets of big riverine forest trees on both banks.

I looked across to the far bank and tried to imagine King Lobengula and his royal regiment labouring their way downstream with their ox wagons. Their primary purpose was to get out of reach of the white Rhodesian soldiers that were relentlessly pursuing them. Their ultimate goal was to cross the great Zambesi and to find some peace in the land that lay to the north, in the land that was one day to become known as Zambia. There the old king had planned to set up a new Ndebele kingdom far from the pestering white man.

Rhodesia was one hell of a country. One hell of a country with one hell of a history!

When I think back on that my first trip to Karna Block, I came to realise that I was *myself* then making history. My first visit to Karna Block was *only* fifty years ago. Now, as I can better appreciate the time frames involved, it was really not very long before *that* when Lobengula had himself passed this way.

Lobengula's fatal journey had occurred in 1893 *only* sixty-seven years before *our* visit. As time advances it tends to concertina pushing historical stories into ever more hazy dimensions. As I write these words, Lobengula's escape from the white Rhodesian soldiers happened *only* one hundred and seventeen years ago. And one hundred and seventeen years is truly not *a long time in historical terms.*

The road from the homestead came to an abrupt end when it hit a T-junction. We turned left onto a track that ran along the southern bank of the Shangani. We passed through a forest of cathedral riverine trees. Most of them were dark leafed evergreens.

I recognised the growing grass sward. It was *Panicum maximum,* the richest and most palatable natural grass in the country. It always grew in the shade of big forest trees. The last time I had seen grass growing like this was when we were on horse patrol and had camped on the banks of the Lukosi,

Yes, I thought to myself, Tim was right. Karna block was certainly *quite a place for a white man to live!*

The cottage was set amidst tall riverine forest trees. It overlooked an expanse of lush green lucerne growing on rich black alluvial soil next to the river. There were a number of natives in the lands moving irrigation equipment about. At the far end of the field irrigation sprays were working overtime. There was a rim of big trees separating the lucerne field from a big pool in the Shangani. A large pump was located on the river's edge. It was working hard to provide the irrigation water that was needed.

We unpacked our katoonda in the cottage and immediately set about looking for signs of the hippo. Evidence of its depredations was not difficult to find. There were hippo tracks everywhere. Huge swathes of damage occurred throughout the growing crop. The game ranger in me had misgivings about just why Andries wanted the hippo killed. I could now see the reason why. Coming from farming stock I had immediate sympathy with the farmer!

I wondered why Andries had not shot the hippo himself. We were soon to find out! The hippo, Andries had said, was very elusive and he had other important farming duties to perform.

We later learned that Andries *had* tried to shoot the hippo. He had tried many times and every time he had failed. In the process he had taught the beast many lessons. The most important lesson the hippo had learnt was that it should be wary of man. It was what we might call a thoroughly *conditioned* hippo. The more Andries had hunted it the more elusive had the hippo become.

When Andries finally understood that killing the hippo was not going to be easy he called in the so-called experts.

Whether Tim and I were expert hippo hunters or not really didn't matter. Neither of us, in fact, had ever shot a hippo! What we did have was time. We had time to look for the hippo. We had time to find it. We had time to kill it.

Our natural inclination was to believe the hippo was still in the big river pool next to the lucerne field. We searched the pool high and low but found no trace of it. Neither Tim nor I knew anything about hippos and we had no idea where we should begin to look for this one.

We had brought along a small wooden boat together with a 5 horsepower Seagull outboard motor. The boat was just big enough to accommodate Tim and me so we set off downstream together. We left the trackers on the riverbank to keep watch should the hippo return to the main pool.

Tim was something of a master at negotiating the rapids and there were lots of rapids. They fed from one pool to the next along the entire five-mile length of river that we traversed downstream that morning.

Tim had learnt his trade when hunting crocodiles commercially in the rivers and swamps of Botswana. On that day he taught me my first lessons on how to negotiate river rapids in a boat.

We moved downstream for over an hour. We saw no sign of the hippo! Then we turned round and began our return journey upstream.

We quickly discovered that the small outboard motor did not have the power to take the boat through the shallow rapids upstream. At the very first hurdle I jumped overboard into the fast moving current. I fixed my feet amongst the jumble of slippery rocks and taking the bow rope in my hands I struggled to pull the boat upstream. Behind me Tim gunned the little engine. Slowly, ever so slowly, we managed to negotiate the rapids into the upper pool.

Once on the upstream pool I jumped back into the boat and we moved on easily against the then sluggish current. At the next set of rapids Tim jumped out and pulled the boat. I sat and gunned the little engine. It was well after midday when we passed the trackers on the riverbank. They gave us desultory salutes with sloppy hands. They had been happily dozing the day away in the sun awaiting our return.

"*Any sign of the hippo?"* Tim shouted to them.

"*Hapana,"* they responded lazily. *No! Nothing!*

"*Keep looking,"* Tim shouted back.

We went chugging past them looking into the waters ahead.

We travelled for more than an hour upstream. We found no sign of the elusive hippo. Exhausted and heavily sunburned we turned and headed for the main pool below. Skimming downstream over the racing rapids was a joy compared to our laborious journey upstream.

We rounded the bend in the main pool and came into view of the trackers. This time we got a different reception. Ben and Japan were both jumping up and down like jacks in boxes pointing and gesturing towards the far bank of the river.

"*The hippo is here,"* were the first words we heard. "*It is here… in the deep water under the far bank."*

Both Tim and I looked to where the trackers were pointing. We saw

nothing. I was at that stage working the motor so I beached the boat on the sandbar where the trackers were standing. Japan caught the bow rope and pulled the nose of the boat higher onto the bank. Tim and I jumped out onto terra firma.

"Where's it?" Tim demanded of Japan.

"It's under the water just over there," Japan told him. The tracker pointed to a place just opposite where we were standing. *"Just after you passed by, going upstream,"* Japan said, *"the hippo rose from the bottom of the pool and blew out some air. It's been doing that for the last hour or so. Coming up, blowing air, then going back down under. But it hasn't moved. It has stuck to the same place. Over there,"* Japan said again, pointing.

At that moment the hippo's head appeared above the surface. It blew a plume of spray out of its nostrils. It shook its head and ears noisily. Then it turned to look at us, almost forlornly, across the pool.

It was no further than a hundred yards away. Tim immediately hit the deck and with his elbows firmly on the ground and with his rifle at the shoulder, he took careful aim at the hippo's head.

Tim's sudden and aggressive movements alarmed the hippo. It had no doubt seen Andries do the same thing several times before. It knew, therefore, that the next thing it could expect was a bullet whistling past its head. Just as Tim was about to pull the trigger the hippo submerged.

I assessed the situation quickly. There was a high bank on the far side of the pool directly opposite where the hippo had risen. A colony of Carmine Bee-eaters had taken up residence in the bank that was peppered with their nesting holes. The birds, with flashes of crimson and azure blue, were cavorting in front of the bank. Their movement was a kaleidoscope of brilliant colour. Their calls were a constant cacophony of piping sounds.

I realised that the top of that bank would be a good place from which to shoot the hippo. I would be able to shoot straight down into its head from above.

"I'm going across the river," I told Tim bluntly. *"Maybe I can get a shot at it from above that high bank."*

Tim grunted. *"Not if I can get a shot at its head from here first,"* he retorted.

I left Tim lying in wait for the hippo to resurface and I ran back to the boat. I pushed it off the bank and got the motor running. It took me less than a minute to get across the pool. In next to no time I was standing on top of

the high bank above the bee-eater colony. I looked directly down into the water where I had seen the hippo submerge.

The water was crystal clear but it was dark in its depths. I could see nothing. Had the sun been higher I am sure I would have been able to see right to the very bottom. But the sun was then sinking fast towards the western skyline.

I would just have to wait.

I waited and I watched the water where I had last seen the hippo go down.

Tim waved at me and made a movement with his hands. *"What's happening?"* his gesture inquired. I shrugged my shoulders eloquently and raised a hand, palm upwards to the sky. *"I haven't a clue!"* After that we both waited.

The sound of soft voices came to me from across the river. Tim was talking quietly to the trackers. I saw him pointing and waving his hand towards the bottom end of the pool. He was obviously telling them to keep watch in that area, too.

The water in the pool was moving slowly downstream. Its movement would have been indiscernible except for the presence of leaves and dust on its glossy surface. Every bit of flotsam on the surface was drifting gently downstream. In every other respect the water appeared to be totally inert.

Directly in front of me a small riffle of tiny bubbles rose up through the dark water. They burst softly, almost imperceptibly on the water's mirror surface. The disturbance was repeated.

I waved at Tim to catch his attention. I lifted my hand and made a gesture to him telling him that something was happening directly in front of me. He looked at me, immediately understanding, and he kept his silence.

The tiny bubbles continued to rise. Presently they began to move, very slowly, downstream. They floated to the surface in spasms, in short sharp bursts. I concluded they were coming from gasses generated by the dead and decaying vegetable detritus that was lying on the bottom of the pool.

The hippo was moving!

I visualised the big fat animal walking along the bottom of the pool, slowly bouncing along like a grotesque ballet dancer from one foot to the other.

Hippos are buoyant in water. They walk and run along the bottom of

river pools like an astronaut walks and runs on the moon. Each footstep the hippo made into the carpet of decaying material on the bottom released a tiny flotilla of methane gas. That was the only explanation I could think of for the intermittent and now moving patterns of tiny bubbles.

I walked slowly along the top of the high bank keeping the bubbles directly beneath me. The hippo moved perhaps 50 yards down the pool. I kept up with its progress, step by step. The bubbles stopped. I held my position. I held my breath, waiting.

Out of the murky depths I saw the pink parts of the hippo's head rising ever so slowly from the bottom. The closer it got to the surface the clearer did its facial features materialise. I stood my ground and waited. The butt of my rifle was firm against my shoulder. My finger was on the trigger. I was aiming at the hippo's head at a downward angle of 45 degrees.

When the hippo's head broke surface it was no more than thirty feet from the muzzle of my rifle. The animal had no idea I was standing on the bank directly above it. Its focus was on Tim and the trackers who were all now standing on the far bank upstream.

The men were all quietly watching my progress. Tim had abandoned all ideas about shooting the hippo from a supine position on the far bank. He realised I was in the best possible position to do what had to be done. He had surrendered the responsibility of shooting the hippo to me.

The bullet route to the hippo's brain from my position above it was directly through its nearest ear hole. So, shortly after the hippo's head surfaced, before it could dive again, I aimed and squeezed the trigger in one fluid movement.

There was a loud report. The rifle kicked hard against my shoulder. The hippo disappeared beneath the surface of the pool sinking immediately into its dark and murky depths. All this happened in one flashing instant.

The hippo was gone. The disturbance caused by the hippo's head erupting on the surface quickly dissipated. Then once again I was looking at the empty glassy mirror surface of the slowly drifting water.

I held up my hand to Tim cautioning him to remain silent. I wanted to assess the situation properly before I told him what was going on.

The hippo's abrupt submergence was followed by an immediate eruption of tiny bubbles. In next to no time they trickled down to nothing. Tranquillity once again returned to the pool's flat surface.

Soon after that a dribble of larger bubbles came to the surface from directly beneath the place where the hippo had gone down. They were not the same as the tiny methane bubbles. These were air bubbles discharged from the hippo's mouth. They came from the hippo's lungs. And they were unmoving. They were coming from one place on the bottom of the river pool directly beneath the position where I had shot the hippo. They told me the hippo was dead.

I stood up straight, relaxing. The job was done.

"You get it?" Tim shouted from across the river.

"Jaaah!"

"Are you sure?" he asked, wanting confirmation.

"Yes," I responded. *"There are air bubbles coming from the body on the bottom."*

"Well done," Tim replied. *"You had better come and get me in the boat."*

Tim held the boat static over the place where I thought I had shot the hippo. There was now no sign of any bubbles. I began to wonder if I had killed the animal. The little motor trickled away quietly holding the boat still against the soft current.

I lay over the front end of the boat and peered down into the water. I could see nothing. The water was crystal clear but the depths were black. Without any bubbles to guide me I couldn't be sure exactly where the hippo had gone down.

"Are you sure you got it?" Tim asked me again.

"Jaaah," I confirmed again. *"I got it!"*

Despite my confident assertion I must admit to harbouring the same question at the back of my own mind. I had hit it, yes, definitely. Of that I was sure. How could I have missed it at that short range! But had I killed it? Had I perhaps just wounded it?

There was one way to find out. I stopped looking into the water and took off my shirt. My feet were already bare.

"What are you doing?" Tim inquired.

"I'm going down to have a look."

"You sure about that?" Tim cautioned.

"Yes," I said adamantly. *"I am sure."*

I gently slipped off the side of the boat, feet first, and settled myself in

the water. I dived down to the bottom.

The water was deliciously cool on my hot sunburned skin. The momentum of my first kick and arm stroke took me straight down to the bottom. The pool wasn't very deep, about eight to ten feet!

I began swimming about just above the bottom. It was then late in the afternoon and very little light penetrated to the bottom. Nevertheless, I could see quite well. There was no hippo. I swam around and around searching.

I came up for a breath of air and immediately went down again.

Then I saw him! He was lying on his side, his fat tubby body holding his upper legs high. He was obviously dead. I caught hold of his top back leg to anchor myself on the bottom. To my surprise the hippo's whole body shifted with the light pressure of my hand. His body may have been lying on the bottom but it was still very buoyant! A curtain of tiny bubbles rose up all around us when his body shifted over the thin layer of detritus on the river bottom.

It immediately occurred to me that I might be able to raise the carcass from the bottom all by myself.

Positioning myself alongside the hippo's upper back leg I placed its foot under my armpit and I wrapped my arms around and under its leg. Bracing my feet on the bottom I exerted pressure under the leg. Slowly and easily the big carcass lifted off the bottom. Like a huge bloated faerie it rose higher and higher in the water above me.

Concentric rings of ripples on the water above told me the carcass had broken surface. I just stood there on the bottom and held the hippo in position. I knew that Tim would try to do something about securing the animal to the boat.

The motor revved. I watched as the shape of the boat moved across the surface of the water above me. The propeller was spinning like a silver dollar creating a whole mass of white bubbles just below the surface. Then it stopped. The boat had moved to a position directly above me. I felt another force holding the hippo. I knew then that Tim had hold of it.

I let the hippo go and kicked off the bottom bursting to the surface next to the boat. Tim looked at me and grinned. He had hold of the hippo by one front foot. He was leaning as far backwards as he could, trying to keep the boat from capsizing.

"You'd better get into the boat on the other side and help me hold this

guy," Tim told me sharply. *"If you don't we'll soon both be in the water."*

I swam round to the far side of the boat and gingerly climbed on board. I immediately saw what Tim meant. In comparison to the bulk of the hippo the boat was puny. It was tipped over dangerously to the side on which Tim was holding on to the hippo's one front foot. The gunnels were almost awash. The inclusion of my weight in the boat on the opposite side stabilised the craft somewhat but our situation remained precarious.

I grabbed the towrope that was fastened to the boat's sharp prow and tossed its free end to Tim. He tried to tie it round the hippo's wrist but it had no purchase. The hippo's slack foot was smaller than its more robust foreleg and the rope kept slipping off.

"Look…." Tim thought the problem through. *"I think I can hold onto the leg with my hands if you can work the engine. If you go slowly I should be able to hold the hippo next to the boat."*

Gingerly I moved to the back of the boat keeping my weight as much as I could on the side opposite Tim. The motor was ticking over so I sat down alongside it and slowly opened the throttle. The boat began to ease forward.

"Take it easy," Tim warned me quickly. *"This thing weighs a ton."*

We were moving. I did as Tim suggested. I took it easy. Imperceptibly we drifted across the pool to the sloping opposite bank. There the trackers watched us silently. They could not help us so they stood, they waited and they watched. They made ready to help when the boat beached.

The hippo grounded first and Tim released the carcass. He took a deep breath.

"Heough…" he exclaimed. *"Man… but that thing is heavy."* He stretched his fingers leisurely and spread his hands wide. It had been a tough haul.

Released from the hippo's great weight the boat became immediately buoyant again. I gunned the engine and pushed the nose of the boat onto the riverbank. Japan grabbed to bow rope and pulled the nose of the boat up onto the bank.

We had a hand winch in the Land Rover. Johnny Mlupeh ran to fetch it. This didn't take him long. We were located only a few hundred yards from the cottage.

Attaching the winch to a nearby tree we fastened the end of the cable around the hippo's neck. The winch enabled us to pull the hippo's carcass

into shallower water but once it had properly grounded that was as far as we got. When the body locked onto the mud in the shallows the shear pin on the winch snapped. We didn't have a spare.

A number of the native workers had gathered in the background to watch the performance. One of them was the farm's tractor driver. He hurried off and came back with the farm tractor and a number of heavy trek chains. Tim untied the winch's cable and replaced it with a chain.

The driver attached the other end of the chain to the tractor's trailer hitch. He revved the engine hard and lifted his foot off the clutch. Slowly he began pulling the hippo out of the water. The big and heavy carcass moved but it came out only a little bit further. Half in and half out of the water the hippo refused to budge another inch. The driver tried valiantly but all he succeeded in doing was bogging down the tractor in the damp riverbank soil.

There was nothing more we could do. We did not want to waste all that meat so the natives on the irrigation lands now had no option. They would just have to cut up the carcass where it was and remove it piece by piece from the water's edge.

Tim and I were both tired. Our arms, legs and faces were burning. We had been working all day long dragging the little boat up and down the rapids. Our bodies and our faces had been exposed to the hot sun all day long. Then there had been the recovery of the carcass from the deepest part of the pool. We were overcome with fatigue.

All I wanted to do was to get back to the cottage. At the forefront of my mind was the cold milk that Andries had promised us would be left in the fridge. But there was one more thing I tasked myself to do. I simply *had* to remove the hippo's fillets. Cold milk and fresh hippo steaks were on *my* menu for the evening!

All hunters know that the tender fillets of an animal are located *inside* the carcass. They are fastened onto the underside of the rear part of the spine. To get at them one first has to remove the animal's gut. This is quite easy to do, even with a hippo, on land. It is an almost impossible task when the hippo is lying in the water on a steep, slippery and muddy slope.

I had visions of us braaing thick slices of hippo fillets over the red-hot coals of a mopani wood fire. I was dead hungry. In those days I was *always* hungry. Both Tim and I had eaten nothing since our breakfast at Main Camp at the crack of dawn so those steaks would go down very well.

The light was fading fast but I was determined to have those fillets for

supper. I jumped into the water alongside the carcass and slit the belly open with my very new and very sharp hunting knife. It was tough going because the skin was thick and pliable but I managed it. The innards came tumbling out like huge and bloated white balloons. I pulled and cut at them until they were floating about in the water all around me. I sliced a large panel of tummy hide from the topside of the carcass and manoeuvred it past me into the deeper water behind me.

Finally I was able to delve into the now open carcass cavity and I began cutting away the fillets. The top one came away quickly. I passed it up to Ben who stood on the shoulder of the carcass.

Tim stood on the bank smoking, coughing, and watching impatiently.

I had just started cutting away the second fillet when the intestines tugged violently against my body. I stopped my cutting and looked down at the bloated gut tubes that were floating all around me. There was definitely some force pulling on them. Then suddenly they were zipping past me like an express train in top gear.

Some of the entrails were tangled around my legs so for a brief moment I was forcefully pulled away from the carcass together with the guts. I became part of the train of intestines that were now racing away towards the middle of the river. I kicked my feet free and fell face forwards in the water.

The hippo's carcass jerked heavily. The attaching tissues snapped. The gut was free. Then the whole smooth and oily caboodle was racing away past me into deeper water. One moment I had been surrounded by a mass of the floating guts, the next it was gone. I found myself floundering about in four feet of water ten feet from the riverbank.

Crocodiles!

I had forgotten all about the possibility of there being crocodiles in the big pool. Neither Tim nor I had seen any sign of crocodiles anywhere on the river all day long. But we had not been looking for them. Now I knew there *were* crocodiles in the pool. There was at least one!

I had flashes of memory that took me back to the Angwa. I was again back in the water collecting fish from the bottom of the river pool that I had blasted. I imagined the crocodile's tail again lashing me across the midrib. I almost felt the impact. I suffered the same bruising mental numbness. And I went through all the same moments of anguish, fear and panic.

I must be made of the right stuff for no sooner had the paralysis overcome me so did it explode away. It took just one flashing instant of time to come and to go. I reacted in a burst of energy that came from nowhere. I half jumped, half lunged and half swam to the now far too far away riverbank.

"HOLY SHIT," the blasphemy erupted from Tim's mouth before he knew it. He grabbed his rifle and rammed a cartridge into the chamber. By the time he was ready to defend me I had forced my way out of the water and was standing on the bank with him looking out into the river. Water poured off my sodden short trousers.

An eruption of loud exclamations ran through the phalanx of farm labourers who had come to watch. The cacophony of their voices was also reminiscent of the Angwa incident. I was lucky then. I had been lucky now. The experiences were not the same. The Angwa case was different. The crocodile on that occasion had been stunned by dynamite blasts. There was nothing wrong with *this* crocodile!

"Fucking Hell," Tim continued, alarmed and relieved at the same time. He was not one who cursed easily. He was alarmed at what could have been and he was relieved that nothing bad had been the outcome.

Nevertheless, whatever my memories of the incident might be now I must tell you that I was badly shaken at the time. I was seriously discomposed. For the second time in my life I understood that I was not immortal. I was not invincible. I had been flying daily on Cloud Nine for the last two months. It took this experience to bring me back to earth.

When would I ever learn?

My heart was pounding like a triple hammer mill. My eyes were standing open abnormally wide. The skin on my face felt like stretched parchment. And through my mind ran the terror and the realisation of the horror that could have been. My whole body was shaking.

In the middle of the river pool the bloated viscera was still floating. It was moving all the time being pulled first this way and then that way. Several crocodile tails plied the surface and every now and again a rolling crocodile's body twisted out of the water. There were three or four crocodiles now. Each one was tugging and pulling on the bloated innards trying to remove something that it could eat.

There but for the grace of God go I! The thought ran through my mind over and over again. It was a sentence that was going to whirl around inside

my head many, many times in the years ahead!

I climbed on top of the hippo's shoulder and I shook my body hard. It was my way of trying to physically shake off the incident. Inside my mind the experience was not going to be so easily discarded. It was to live close to me for several long months still to come. I woke often in the weeks ahead in the middle of the night, my body drenched in sweat, my mind occupied with an alternative scenario.

"Where's my knife, Ben?"

"I don't know," the tracker replied. *"You had it in your hand when the crocodiles came."*

Dammit, I thought. *I've dropped it in the water*. I was not about to go out and look for it on the muddy river bottom!

"Give me your penknife," I instructed the Bushman bluntly. I was cross. I was cross with myself. I was cross with the world. But I wanted that second fillet!

"Bloody fool," Tim attacked me in horror. *"Leave the damn fillet. Look what nearly happened to you!"*

My body was still trembling but I managed a smile. *"We've got* one*."*

"Yes," Tim said, *"and that's enough. Don't tempt fate."*

"The other one is right here," I objected, pointing down into the open carcass. *"I can see it plainly. It will be easy to cut out."*

Tim said no more. He looked away disgusted. He stood on the bank angrily shaking his head. He knew I was going to do this. He knew I was determined to get that second fillet.

Tim kept his rifle at the ready and turned his eyes to the surface of the river pool. He paid scant attention to the intestines contorting about on the water's surface. He was more importantly looking for signs of crocodile activity closer to the hippo carcass.

"Give me your damn penknife," I instructed Ben again, angrily this time. He was being obstinate! He did not want to give me his penknife. I think he was trying to protect me. He didn't want me to go back into the water. Gingerly he pulled the folded knife out of his pocket. I snatched it out of his hand.

I did not go back into the water. Instead, I lay down flat on top of the carcass and leant down into the big hole that I had cut. One minute later I stood up, grinning, with the second fillet in my hand.

We left the dead hippo in the gathering dusk and we walked back to the

cottage with *both* the hippo's fillets in Ben's hands.

During the night crocodiles ripped off huge chunks of flesh and they shifted the carcass about at the water's edge. They were unable to pull it back into deeper water because the farm labourers had secured it by cable and chain to a nearby tree trunk.

The following morning the natives removed what was left of the carcass piece by piece. So the meat did not go to waste. How they dismembered the carcass I do not know. I didn't care either.

Our short walk back to the cottage was marked by silence. Our minds were chock-a-block full. Japan carried both the rifles. Ben carried both the fillets, chunks of dark red meat that had nearly cost us dearly. Johnny Mlupeh walked along behind. None of us said a word. But we all knew that everybody's mind was occupied with exactly the same thought. It was a thought that revolved around *what could have happened*!

I had been lucky. Immensely lucky! I knew it. *But I had got the prized fillets*!

They were hardly compensation for the nerve-racking experience. But we had them. And we had them both. For me that was something of a compensating victory.

As we approached the cottage my mind became more and more occupied with thoughts of roasting the fillet steaks and of drinking lots and lots of cold milk. How I was looking forward to that milk!

We trudged into the cottage. Ben placed the meat on the drip surface of the aluminium sink. Then he and Japan got out the Tilley lamps and began preparing them for lighting.

"Care for a glass of ice-cold milk?" I offered Tim.

"I'd rather it was a stiff whisky," Tim intoned derisively. He smiled at me wryly for the first time since the incident. *"You were bloody lucky today,"* he continued sagely. *"Do you know* how *lucky?"*

I smiled softly to myself. I thought about what had happened and I replied quietly: *"I know. I know. I know how lucky I was."*

I was silent for a long moment thinking about what *had* happened. Thinking about what *could* have happened. Then I smiled directly at Tim. And I thought to myself*: But it hadn't happened! A*nd *that* is what was important.

"Regrettably we have no whisky" I said to Tim, returning to reality. *"But we do have milk. A whole two gallons of it in the fridge."*

Tim shook his head and smiled. *"Yes…."* He replied wryly. *"I'll have a glass of milk. And we'll toast your good health and your damn lucky whole piece of hide."*

I went to the fridge my stomach yearning to feel the cold smooth liquid sliding down my throat. My skin was hot from the beating it had received from the sun. My body was parched and dehydrated. Now was the time to balance out the deficiencies. Now was the time to satisfy the needs of our bodies *and* our souls.

I opened the fridge door. There stood the galvanised steel milk churn on the shelf. I pulled it out. It was heavy. I carried it to the sink and placed it alongside the hippo fillets. In the high cupboard on the opposite wall I found a number of glass tumblers. I extracted two and took them to the sink. The moment of truth had arrived. I opened the lid of the milk can. It was full to the brim. I picked it up and tried to pour some milk into one of the glasses. It poured slowly and heavily.

I put the churn back on the sink and dipped my finger into the white liquid. It was thick and viscous. *'Damn!"* I exploded.

"What's the matter?" Tim asked apprehensively.

"It's not milk," I lamented. *"It's bloody cream."*

Tim chortled. Then he laughed. I laughed, too. I joined him on the sofa and we both laughed our hearts out. The laughter let the tension out, tension that had been vibrantly taught and near to breaking point ever since the crocodile attack. Laughter was what we needed to get our souls back to some semblance of normality.

We never carried booze on hunting patrols. It was something that the game rangers of Hwange never did.

When I was on a vehicle patrol I normally carried some kind of concentrated fruit juice in my food box. Its purpose was to take away the monotonous taste of water at suppertime. Using a touch of fruit juice to mask the bland taste of water made us drink more fluid than we would otherwise have done. At sunset we always needed fluid, lots of it, to rehydrate our dried-out body tissues. Working in the hot sun all day long worked up a raging thirst at the end of the day. On this occasion I had brought along a large bottle of concentrated raspberry essence.

That night Tim and I ate rare fresh hippo steaks barbecued over hot mopani coals in the cottage garden. We toasted the hippos and the crocodiles of the Shangani River. We toasted old Lobengula the last King of the

Matabele who had passed by this way to his death not too far away from where we were located and not too many years before. We toasted them all with ice cold cream in tall glass tumblers flavoured with raspberry essence!

* * *

Tim and I attended the local Rhodesia Railway's annual Christmas party that year. It was held at the railway clubhouse in the village of Dett. We went at the invitation of the Dett Postmistress. All of us at Main Camp came to know Constance Wilkinson very well because one or another of us collected Main Camp's mailbag from her at least once a week.

Connie was a thin, up market, austere looking lady who stood out starkly from the blue-collar crowd that lived in Dett. She was the wife of the primary school headmaster, Jimmie Wilkinson.

Sometime during the evening I went over to Connie's table, one of many that ringed the dance floor that night, beer in hand. She introduced me to her husband and asked if I was having a good time. I *was* having a good time! The young game rangers of Main Camp did not have much opportunity to socialise.

I had not gone to Connie's table to exchange pleasantries. There was a young woman on the far side of the dance floor in a long white floral frock. She had caught my eye. There was something about her that attracted me. I wanted to know who she was. Connie knew everybody in Dett so I guessed she would know who the young lady was.

"Would you like to meet her?" Connie asked me with a twinkle in her eye.

"Yes…." I said slowly, keeping my eye on the subject. *"Yes. I would like to meet her."*

"BARBARA…." Connie called out across the dance floor.

The young lady looked up. She stared across the dance floor at us. Connie gestured with a waving hand indicating that she should come across to our table. The young woman got up and walked gracefully across the dance floor. She was tall and slim and she had a smooth fluid gait. Her pretty flowing white frock bounced about her legs.

"Barbara," Connie said when the young woman reached us, *"I would like you to meet Ron Thomson. Ron is a game ranger at Main Camp. Ron, this is my daughter Barbara."*

Like her mother Barbara Wilkinson stood out from the crowd. She was a

fully trained kindergarten schoolteacher and had just taken up a vacant post at the Dett primary school working under her father. The Department of Education had been having some difficulty finding a suitable teacher for the post as there was no accommodation for a single young lady in the village. When the authorities twigged onto the fact that Barbara was qualified for the post and that she could live with her parents, her fate was sealed. She was due to start teaching at the beginning of January.

When Connie Wilkinson introduced me to her daughter that evening she started a ball rolling. Babs and I courted from day one. Three years later we were married.

* * *

There were seventeen elephants on my personal score card when I was entrusted with going out on an elephant hunt without my experienced mentor. In addition I had *shared* several more with Tim. That meant both of us had had a hand in their killing.

Nowadays I compare this fact with the paucity of elephant hunting experience that most professional hunters have when they take their first overseas paying-client on an elephant hunt. This statement is not intended as a slight against today's professional hunters. It is an indictment on the national park authorities of Africa for not making elephant hunting experiences more available to our up and coming young professional hunters. It is, nevertheless, a fact worth recording at this point in my narrative. I had killed seventeen elephants without any fire power help from Tim before Bruce Austen deemed me experienced enough to go hunting elephants on my own!

Tim and I were paired together to tackle a large influx of elephants in the Tjolotjo TTL in early January 1961. I came away from that short ten-day patrol with an overall total personal score of fifteen bulls. This was followed by two crop raiding hunts which I *could* have conducted on my own but which Bruce insisted I should carry out under Tim's guidance. On those last two hunts Tim elected to be the tag along hunter.

I truly believed that I was ready to go solo after the last successful Tjolotjo hunt. But that was not to be. The waiting game was agony but my situation was not unique. Every other young game ranger who had served in Hwange had had to suffer the same period of training and waiting. Perhaps more. It was only after I arrived in Hwange that the elephant hunting opportunity door opened wide.

The long apprenticeship that the early Hwange game rangers were required to endure paid obvious dividends. Over many years Hwange's game ranger staff achieved a most enviable record of minimal elephant woundings. It is a record without comparison. Wounding dangerous game animals was simply not acceptable to the Senior Warden and it was a rare occasion that a wounding was reported.

I was eventually let off the leash towards the end of January 1961. Even then I still did not go alone. Tony Boyce accompanied me. We performed our solo debuts together.

Tony had been temporarily transferred to Main Camp for the first two months of 1961. The purpose was to allow him to obtain some elephant hunting experience. There was absolutely no opportunity to hunt elephants in the Robins area. All the elephant control action was happening in the Kalahari sand regions out of Main Camp.

Tony was placed under the tutelage of Harry Cantle. This forced Harry away from the servicing of his beloved Lister diesel engines and his bore hole pumps. For a few short weeks it gave Harry the opportunity to go out into the field again.

Harry told a lovely story about Tony's first elephant.

Harry and Tony followed two bull elephants through thick sinanga in the teak forest ten miles south of Ngamo. The elephants had spent a long time the night before in one of the local village gardens filling themselves up with maize and watermelons. They had left the lands late and had spent the rest of the night meandering through the teak forest quietly picking up titbits here and there. When the sun came up their movement pattern changed little. Their quiet wanderings were interspersed with periods when they stood dozing quietly. Then they ambled on. They clearly had no intention of moving very far. They obviously had their minds set on returning to the nearby village fields early the next evening.

The elephant's tummies were loose. Their faeces were diarrhoeal. They had left their sloppy stools splattered over the ground and vegetation all along their tracks. The lush food of the night before had obviously worked wonders on their digestive systems.

Harry and Tony pursued the crop-raiders all morning. Sumbe had been appointed Tony's tracker and that day he was the primary tracker. Harry's tracker, Johnny Mlupeh, played second fiddle. Towards midday they entered a particularly thick bit of forest. Their senses were alert.

Sumbe stopped abruptly. He held up his hand. He had heard something. He cocked his head and listened. When he turned to face Harry there was a grin etched all over it. He put a finger across his lips. Then he cupped a hand around his one ear and pointed ahead into the forest indicating that he wanted Harry to listen too.

Harry strained his ears. At first he heard nothing. He had no idea what he was supposed to be listening for. Then, way off in the distance, came the distinct sound of an elephant snoring. Harry's eyes met those of the tracker. They sniggered together in amusement. They both had the same idea about what was going to happen next.

"What's up?" Tony whispered the question. He did not want to be left out of what appeared to be a heavy joke. *"What's going on?"*

"The jumbos are just up ahead," Harry told him, his eyes all crinkled up in an infectious smile. *"If you listen you will hear them snoring."* *"Snoring?"* Tony looked perplexed.

"Listen," Harry instructed him.

Tony dropped his head, his face directed towards the ground. All three of the men listened intently. They all heard the soft, sonorous sound of *something*, some animal, snoring its head off. Soft as it was the sound was still *very* heavy. It could be nothing else *but* an elephant.

"There are two of them," Sumbe said erecting two fingers on his right hand. They had been following two elephant bulls!

"They are both there," Harry said to Tony. *"They are both up ahead and they are sound asleep. Are you ready to shoot your first elephant?"*

Tony's sweaty hands ran over the stock of his new rifle. It was a Holland and Holland .375 Magnum with the most beautiful walnut stock you have even seen. The weapon was unused. Almost untouched. It was Tony's pride and joy. It was also the subject of envy of everybody in Hwange. Even Bruce Austen cast covetous eyes on that rifle.

In response to Harry's question Tony nodded. The grin on his face was fixed. He was ready to shoot his first elephant.

Harry took out his ash bag and tested the wind. The puff of ash drifted from left to right. It was blowing directly across the tracks they were following. The wind was not something they had to worry about!

"Let's go then," Harry responded.

Harry looked at Sumbe and flicked the forefinger of his right hand forward.

The tracker turned but he abandoned the tracks immediately. Instead he made his way directly towards the sound of the snoring beasts. Why track when you know where your quarry is located!

Both were young bulls. They were lying flat on their sides on the slope of the same large termite mound. All around the sinanga was dense and in heavy leaf. Visibility was poor. Movement through the heavy cover was noisy. As the four hunters drew closer they walked slower and slower. They picked their way through the final brush with extra caution. Harry continuously tested the wind and he brought his team right up to the anthill from a directly downwind position.

The closer the hunters got the heavier became the sounds of the snoring. The elephants were clearly in a deep and untroubled sleep. They had absolutely no idea that their Nemeses were quite so close at hand.

The elephants were almost touching so close were they together. Harry made silent gestures to Tony who followed him with obvious trepidation. He brought his protégé right up alongside the nearest bull. Walking within touching distance the two game rangers made their way to the back of the elephant's head. Neither of the animals changed the rhythm of their breathing. They were dead to the world. They were soon to be dead to the world in another dimension.

Harry put the tip of his forefinger into his mouth and wet it with spittle. He pressed the wet fingertip up against the crest of the elephant's head. This left a wet spot on the dry dust. Harry stood back. He pushed and pulled Tony until he was in the exact right position. *Now shoot it*, Harry said silently with his lips. He pointed a forefinger at the wet mark and jabbed it quickly forward. The implication of the gesture was obvious.

Tony, quaking with buck fever, responded with surprise. Questioningly he looked at Harry and worked his trigger finger two or three times. Harry nodded. *Yes, dammit,* Harry thought to himself. *Shoot the bloody thing!*

Tony lined himself up with the wet dot on the back of the elephant's head. Harry readjusted Tony's position slightly with more pushing and shoving. Then, with eyebrows erect, and with facial gestures that spoke their own language, he nodded urging Tony to shoot.

Harry turned his head away and placed a fingertip into his one ear hole, the one closest to Tony's rifle. He was not about to expose himself unnecessarily to the heavy blast that he expected from Tony's rifle muzzle. But his eyes never left the sleeping beast.

The young game ranger aimed at the wet spot and, not knowing what next to expect, but having complete confidence in his senior mentor, he squeezed off the shot of his life.

The quietude of the forest was shattered with the loud cracking report of the rifle. A flock of crested francolins that had been fossicking about on the forest floor nearby took to the air with loud clattering wings and raucous screams. Smaller birds in the treetops above took off and flew in every direction. Tony quickly ejected the empty shell and rammed another round into the chamber.

The elephant hardly moved. Its body jerked once. Then it lifted its top back leg and starting kicking its foot vacantly in the air.

"Good shot," Harry stated briefly, succinctly.

The second elephant, rudely awakened by the unexpected shot, flung itself into an upright position on its brisket. A bemused sleepiness suffused its face. Then the eye nearest to Harry grew wide in alarm as it focussed on the game ranger standing right alongside him.

Recognising the danger the elephant immediately swung its bottom front leg out from under its body. It began lurching to its feet. That was as far as it got. Harry's bullet smashed into its brain. It flopped back onto its side dead as a doornail.

Both elephants now lay on their sides where they had been sleeping peacefully just moments before. Both their top hind legs were now kicking at the air. Both their bodies were jerking spasmodically in death. And between them, within touching distance of them both, the two game rangers grinned and shook hands.

Tony had killed his first elephant!

* * *

When Tony and I went out together on our first joint elephant hunt he had truly minimal experience. He had shot a few elephants with Harry. One or two he had killed cleanly himself in Harry's company. I suppose, if we didn't count the numbers, Tony and I were really in much the same boat. It would be more gracious to say that we were both within the same first novice phase of becoming elephant hunters.

So Bruce Austen had deemed that we had *enough* experience between us to be sent out together without an escort.

We were dispatched to kill a clever old crop-raiding elephant bull that lived on either side of the game reserve's boundary just outside Dett. At that

point the railway line demarcated the boundary. He had been raiding native maize lands and vegetable gardens over a wide area almost every night for several months. Every night, after spending the hours of darkness in the tribal lands, he slipped back across the railway line to sanctuary at the crack of dawn.

Tim and I, and also Harry and Tony separately, had made several attempts to kill the old elephant. We never found him outside the sanctuary during daylight hours. In fact, the efforts of the Main Camp staff to kill this old bull had become something of an Odyssey.

In those days even though we had stepped up our killing of elephants *outside* the park everywhere, it was still taboo to kill an elephant *inside* the game reserve. Both Ted Davison *and* Bruce Austen agreed that the game reserve *must* remain a sanctuary for the elephants. The elephants *must,* they said, have somewhere to go where they would be safe from man.

Consequently Tony and I spent many long and frustrating days following the old crop-raiding bull from the communal lands back to the railway line. He *never,* so it seemed, stayed on the wrong side of the line during daylight.

On several occasions Tony and I sat downwind of the wily old elephant, inside the game reserve. We had followed him across the railway line and found him at his siesta, and we waited for him to move in the late afternoon. We got tired of the frustrating tracking and we hoped that he might just cross back over the railway line during the last few minutes of daylight. If he did that, we surmised, we would have a short window of opportunity to kill him outside the sanctuary just before dark. He never obliged.

The clever old elephant paid many calls to the village of Juapi just eight miles east of Dett. This was the village where Tim and I, just a few months previously, had shot our second elephant together.

So it was that *Juapi* became the elephant's name.

Early one morning Tony and I again set out after old Juapi. He had caused havoc in one of the lands near the village of his name during the night, destroying perhaps thirty percent of the crop in a matter of hours. It wasn't what Juapi had eaten that was so annoying but what he had trampled, too.

Ben was my tracker on the hunt that day. Johnny Mlupe was Tony's tracker.

I had discovered that Ben possessed superb tracking skills. He was my allotted tracker during Tim's and my recent and very successful ten-day

patrol in the Tjolotjo area. On that occasion he worked in the shadow of the flambouyant and talkative Japan compared to whom he was introverted and taciturn. Nevertheless Ben had demonstrated to me that he was an above average tracker.

I used Ben alone, sometimes together with Mbuyotsi, on all the hunts that Tony and I undertook in pursuit of old Juapi. It did not take me long to determine that Ben was an infinitely better tracker than Mbuyotsi.

On our final hunt for old Juapi Ben immediately assumed the role of lead tracker. He quickly and efficiently unravelled the convoluted spoor in the lands and we followed the elephant into the nearby *gusu*. If we were to catch Juapi before he crossed the railway line we all knew that speed was of the essence.

We knew immediately the spoor was that of old Juapi for his trademark was a smooth right front footprint. We had no idea how this had come about. We presumed he had suffered an injury some time before which caused him to slide his front foot over the ground. Whatever the cause, the pad on Juapi's right front foot carried no tread at all. It was as smooth as plastic. Juapi's tracks were therefore very distinctive.

After leaving the cropland the old bull had taken his time during the night. He had fed on titbits in the forest here and there and he had taken a nap on the slope of a large termite mound. We could clearly see the checkered imprint of his hide in the damp soil and the long curved mark of his bottom tusk. There were plenty pumpkinseeds and watermelon pips in his dung.

We began following Juapi's tracks at nine o'clock in the morning. The spoor was then fully 12 hours old. At midday, after racing as fast as we could along the spoor all morning, the tracks eventually turned towards the game reserve. Once he turned Juapi's ambling gait changed. The clever old bull knew the ropes too well. Once he turned for sanctuary he made a beeline for the railway line.

Ben, Johnny Mlupeh, Tony and I, all together, examined the tracks carefully. The sign told us the old bull had turned for home *"skati loh kuku yena kalla"*, Ben informed me. *At the time the roosters started crowing!* Just before dawn!

We had gained nine hours on him in just three hours of tracking. But we were then still six or seven hours behind! And the railway line was now only

five miles away!

An hour later we were standing on the gleaming tracks watching old Juapi on the other side. He was standing quietly inside the edge of the teak forest, just across the fireguard track, fanning his ears in the shade of a big *mChibi* tree.

For half an hour we sat on the railway lines to rest our weary bones. We shared what little water remained in the josaks between the four of us. And we looked at old Juapi. He was so close. Temptingly close. All we had to do to complete our task was to walk over and put a single bullet into his brain. But that we could not do! That we had been expressly forbidden to do! Juapi, for the moment, was enjoying inviolable sanctuary.

So we sat on the steel tracks and we rested and we watched old Juapi standing in the shade of the big mChibi tree. His body swayed back and forth so we knew he was dosing quietly. It was hot. His ears flapped constantly, fanning his sweating body.

The heat from a high sun was burning into our shoulders. It was time to go.

We walked the long haul back to Dett along the railway tracks. We reached our destination at about three o'clock in the afternoon. We were tired, foot sore, stinking of sweat and covered in dust and muck. The backs of our fingers stank of elephant dung. Our socks were stiff with prickly *steekgras*. The spiky seeds were painfully boring into our ankle flesh.

I took my spike-filled socks off and stuffed them into the shoulder bag that Ben was carrying. The relief was indescribable.

We were back from the hunt. Once again we had been unsuccessful. It was a familiar feeling.

Our first port of call in Dett was the Wilkinson household. There Babs produced some refreshing hot sweet tea and a bucketful of cookies and biscuits. We were famished having had nothing to eat all day.

Babs drove me in her father's car back to Juapi village where I picked up the government Land Rover. We returned to Dett. Babs donned her glad rags and joined us in the Land Rover. She sat on the bench seat, between Tony and me, with one of her long legs on either side of the gearbox cover. We had previously arranged that she would accompany us back to Main Camp where Tim, Tony and I had invited her to dinner at single quarters. Tim had offered me his old Chev coupe-imp to transport her back to Dett.

We returned to Main Camp along the main dirt road that took us from

Dett village to the top end of the Dett Vlei. This was where the last leg of the gravelled tourist road into Main Camp began. Just after the sun had set we reached the point where Juapi had crossed the road that morning *en route* to his safe haven in the game reserve. It was then still light enough to see everything about us very clearly.

I was pointing out to Babs the route we had walked when Tony interrupted. He drew my attention to fresh elephant tracks in the gravel of the road. Even from inside the cab Juapi's one smooth front footprint was glaringly obvious.

I stopped right on top of the tracks and looked down at them out of the vehicle window. Juapi was returning to the fields for another feast whilst it was still light enough to hunt him! The old elephant had made his first mistake! My pulse began to quicken.

"Nanso ndhlovu, Nkosana!" There is an elephant, Sir! Ben, who had been dosing all the while on the open back of the Land Rover, had woken up when we stopped. His announcement and his head appearing through the side window of the Land Rover happened both at the same time.

Juapi was standing about a hundred yards away off the road. I recognised him immediately. He was greatly alarmed. He carried his head high and he peered down his nose at us imperiously. His ears were held half-cocked as they strained to catch every sound. He had heard the Land Rover and seen it stop.

The elephant knew we were there and his inclination must have been to run straight back to the sanctuary of the game reserve. But we were between him and the railway line. He was clearly undecided.

Before the old elephant could make up his mind I was out of the Land Rover. I grabbed my proffered rifle out of Ben's hands, forced a round into the chamber and began quietly sliding through the open scrubby bush towards our quarry. Tony was right on my heels.

Juapi turned and moved off hesitantly ahead of us. He was still clearly hankering to make a run for the game reserve. He was agitated but not frightened. As he walked along he cast his head from side to side. He was looking back over one shoulder then the other, checking out the brush behind him.

We took advantage of the noise the old bull made as he walked along. We moved when he moved. We stopped when he stopped. And every time we moved we narrowed the gap that separated us. We managed to get within

thirty yards of him before he became fully conscious of the danger. When he did so he swung onto us sideways. Holding his head up high he carefully scrutinised us with his amber left eye.

He was contemplating a charge. I could sense it from his attitude. Tim had taught me to get in as close as I could before shooting. I had learnt the reasons why and had taken the lesson to heart. I was no longer afraid of getting *very* close to the elephants I was hunting. I was now well beyond the stage that my heart automatically thumped and my eardrums pulsed when I was close to my quarry.

In consideration of the fact that it was getting dark I wanted to get in real close. Thirty yards was far too far away for me to confidently shoot this elephant. In that light the metal sights on my rifle were not very sharp. My soul told me that I *needed* to get in closer in this kind of fading light but I knew that would not be possible. Not this evening! The wily old bull knew we were there and he was keeping his distance.

"BAAHM." My 375 Magnum solid caught the elephant in the side of the head. The old bull staggered striving to keep his balance.

"BAAHM." Tony fired his beautiful .375 Magnum Holland and Holland. The old bull's front legs collapsed. In stumbling he turned away from us. Our only target was now his blunt rear end.

"BAAHM… BAAHM." Two bullets sought spine and hip joint.

The two head shots had no lasting effect. Their initial stunning impact quickly wore off. The two body shots had absolutely *no* effect.

Suddenly the stricken old bull made a remarkable recovery. Lifting himself from his knees he shook off the dizziness in his brain and he raced away from us in full and unimpeded flight.

"BAAHM." As Juapi turned I slammed a bullet into his body behind the shoulder.

"BAAHM." Tony's next bullet went heaven knows where. I heard the bullet impact but, like my own last shot, it too had no effect.

"BAAHM." The elephant ran on gathering speed. It showed no sign of an incapacitating injury.

"BAAHM." Another shot rang out. The distance increased between us. The big old bull had absorbed all eight of our bullets with seeming impunity.

Both our rifles were now empty. Dusk was gathering fast. Out in front of us old Juapi, full of holes, was making good his escape.

We dared not let the wounded elephant get out of our sight! I knew that

implicitly. Once out of our sight he would be out of our reach. Tony and I would then have to go to Bruce Austen, the ominous *Malindela,* and tell him that we had wounded an elephant *on our first solo hunt! That* was something that I did not relish. What an ignominious end *that* would be to our first solo elephant hunt! I am quite sure the same thing was running through Tony's mind at that moment. I felt especially responsible because I had marginally more experience than Tony. I knew Malindela would know and understand that fact, too.

I was suddenly driven by an innate imperative to bring the old bull down.

Both Tony and I clawed at our cartridge belts pulling cartridges out of their leather loops. With the bolt of my rifle standing open I pushed two shells into the open maw of the magazine.

Tony got himself into a hopeless jam. He had a round stuck so awkwardly in the magazine he could neither push it in deeper nor ram it into the breech. He seemingly could not pull it out with his fingers either. A handful of shiny brass cartridges cascaded into the sand at his feet.

I had got just two rounds into the magazine of my rifle. *"BAAHM… BAAHM."* The bullets thumped into the elephant's retreating hindquarters. I heard them *"WHAAK… WHAAK…"* as they hit flesh. The elephant ran on.

Ben was suddenly standing at my side. He fed me two cartridges from the pack of 20 in his left hand. I hurriedly forced them into the magazine and looked up quickly.

"Ghashle, Nkosana. Ghashle," Ben intoned. *Take it easy*, he told me. *Take it easy*. He could see I was getting myself into a panic.

The elephant was now over a hundred yards away. It was moving further away, fast, with every passing second. Darkness was visibly creeping over the land. It was now or never. If I didn't down the elephant with these last two bullets old Juapi would be gone into the night.

Ben offered me another two cartridges. I refused them. But I took his advice. I calmed my senses. I took my time. I quietly fed a cartridge from the magazine into the breech.

Juapi was now running directly away from me. The best target I had was his spine. It ran in a tall straight column right up his back between the two flat plains of his pelvis. The core of the target was just four inches wide but fully four feet long. In reality, even though the elephant was running fast, the target was static. I aimed carefully right in the middle of that narrow column.

I held my breath. I stilled my heaving chest. Immobile for an instant, with my sights directly on target, I squeezed the trigger.

"BAAHM." The recoil buffeted against my shoulder. The stock kicked up into my cheek. *"WHAAK."* I heard the bullet impact.

The old bull's back legs collapsed. They ceased to function the instant the bullet shattered the spinal column. The elephant threw its head high, casting its trunk to the heavens. It's crippled hind legs, both splaying out behind, brought the stricken animal to a sudden full stop. It thrashed about in obvious distress. It screamed horribly, in pain and in anguish. It was finished.

I noticed only then that there was blood spewing from the elephant's trunk. One of my earlier bullets had found the lungs. Even if he had run away into the night I knew *then* that old Juapi would not have made the next one hundred yards. The lung shot alone would have killed him.

I ran forward, stood right alongside the battered old bull and placed a merciful bullet into his brain. He fell over onto his side.

This time the dead elephant's top hind leg did not beat at the air. This time there was no liquid sound of a hip joint articulating. Juapi's back had been broken and both his hind legs were paralysed.

I lived the moment. Juapi was dead. I was relieved beyond description. I would now not have to take a tale of woe to Malindela. As darkness crept over the land that evening *that* fact was the biggest and most important part of my glowing sense of achievement.

Tony came up next to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. He had sorted out his jammed rifle. *"Well done,"* he intoned quietly. *"For a moment there I thought the old bugger was gone!"*

The legendary Juapi was dead. I had earned my stripes. I was now qualified to hunt elephants on my own. I was now, officially, a big game hunting game ranger.

TAILPIECE

KILLING old Juapi opened up a whole new world for me. It was a world that few other men have ever had the good fortune to experience. No other man will ever have the same hunting opportunities and conditions that I met with over the next several years. What followed in the next two decades is something that will never be repeated. Africa has changed. It will never be the same again.

As I stood looking down at the elephant I had just killed my mind would

have boggled had I understood the extent of the big game hunting experiences I was soon to enjoy. They then lay just around the corner.

The big game hunting tales that follow in the next five books of these my big game hunting memoirs will take the reader on an unbelievable journey. By comparison the stories told in this book are just a whetting of the appetite.

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Contact the author at magron@ripplesoft.co.za